RESEARCH SEMINAR: DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

Fall 2017

Political Science 320
Haverford College

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Course Description

This research seminar is intended to serve two functions for political science majors. First, it is a capstone seminar that gives students an opportunity to reflect upon the condition of democracy in America. Second, the seminar will prepare students to undertake a senior thesis on some aspect of power and politics in the United States.

We will begin by examining some of the most serious problems confronting contemporary American society and how those problems have affected contemporary politics. How have class divisions fueled a populist revolt among white, working-class citizens that culminated in the election of Donald Trump? Why has the Democratic Party, once the party of the working class, found it increasingly difficult to win the political support of the working class? We will then probe more deeply into the roots of economic and social inequality and consider why this problem has worsened in recent years. After studying class-based inequalities, we will turn our attention to racial hierarchies and assess their impact within American politics. Next, the seminar will zero in on the political system and why it struggles so much in responding to major societal problems. Some scholars emphasize deepening polarization among political elites and many citizens as the most significant challenge to American democracy. They contend that intensifying ideological and partisan conflict has inhibited rational discourse, careful deliberation, and the capacity to make sound public policy. But just how polarized is the U.S.? And even if Americans sharply disagree about how the country should be governed, is this necessarily problematic for a democracy? Other scholars argue that if democracy in America has declined, then it is citizens themselves who are at fault; too many, they charge, do not bother to pay attention to public affairs and thus fail to carry out their responsibilities as citizens. Others point to the misbehavior of powerful elites and the damage that they do to key political institutions as the source of governmental dysfunction. Finally, we will consider how changes in the media have affected American politics. The seminar concludes by reassessing the quality of both representative and participatory democracy in America.

As we evaluate the concept and practice of democracy in the U.S., we will also prepare for the senior thesis by studying how political scientists conduct empirical research. We will discuss how to think about research questions, carry out a literature review, construct hypotheses, define concepts, measure variables, and collect and analyze data. By the end of the course, students will have chosen a thesis topic and research question, written a comprehensive literature review, and prepared a research design to guide the empirical work that they will execute during the spring semester to complete their senior thesis.
Requirements

Class participation 30%
Thesis topic no grade
Annotated bibliography 10%
Literature review 40%
Thesis proposal no grade
Research design 20%

Texts

Ian Harvey Lopez, Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class (Oxford University Press 2014)
Joan C. Williams, White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America (Harvard Business Review 2017)

All other assigned readings will be available through Moodle.

Topics and Readings

Week 1

I. Introduction to Course

A. Course overview

B. Thinking about your thesis

Lisa A. Baglione, “Getting Started: Finding a Research Question” and “Making Sense of the Scholarly Answers to Your Research Question: Writing the Literature Review” in Writing a Research Paper in Political Science

Week 2

II. Challenges within American Society: Class Divisions

Joan C. Williams, White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America (entire book)
Week 3

III. Challenges within American Society: Class Divisions


Week 4

IV. Challenges within American Society: Class Divisions

Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids*, Chs. 4-6

Research Skills Workshop, Magill Library

Thesis Topic Due

Week 5

V. Challenges within American Society: Racial Divisions

Ian Harvey Lopez, *Dog Whistle Politics*, Introduction and Chs. 1-6 (skim Chs. 7-9; Conclusion)

Week 6

VI. Why the Political System Struggles to Respond to Societal Problems

A. Polarization

Michah Altman and Michael McDonald, “Redistricting and Polarization”
David Karol, “Party Activists, Interest Groups, and Polarization in American Politics”
Marc J. Hetherington and Jonathan D. Weiler, “Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics, Still?”

All of the above readings in *American Gridlock: The Sources, Character, and Impact of Political Polarization*, eds. James A. Thurber and Antoine Yoshinaka

Week 7

Fall Break
Week 8

B. Flawed Institutions/Flawed Citizenry


**Annotated Bibliography Due**

Week 9

C. Flawed Institutions/Flawed Citizenry


Week 10

D. Flawed Institutions

Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics*, Introduction, Chs. 1-10

Week 11

VII. The Media and American Politics


**Literature Review Due in Class**

Week 12

VIII. Thesis Research and Writing

A. Preparation of Research Design

Weeks 13-14

B. Research Design Workshops

Week 15

C. Presentation of Thesis Proposal

Research Design Due at End of Exam Period