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 one of the most serious problems confronting contemporary American society: increasing economic and social inequality. How and why has this problem worsened in recent years? We will then consider political responses to inequality and other societal issues. Why has the political system struggled so much in attempting to respond to the pressing needs of so many people? 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. We will then shift our attention to the status of traditionally marginalized groups within American society. How can we account for the persistence of racism and racial inequality notwithstanding the historic election and reelection of an African-American as president? To what extent are immigrants moving towards political assimilation and incorporation or encountering ongoing discrimination and exclusion? Next, we will analyze two critical issues pertaining to electoral democracy – the increasing role of money in campaigns and the impact of partisan gerrymandering. Finally, we will assess how changes in the media, particularly the rise of the internet and digital journalism, have affected the operation of government and the capacity of citizens to hold political leaders accountable. 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

Alan Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy* (Yale University Press 2010)
Ian Harvey Lopez, *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class* (Oxford University Press 2014)

All other assigned readings will be available through Blackboard.

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 “Addressing the Scholarly Debate: The Literature Review” in *Writing a Research Paper in Political Science*

II. Challenges within American Society

   Week 2


   Week 3

   B. Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids*, Chs. 4-6
III. Why the Political System Struggles to Respond to Societal Problems

Week 4

A. Polarization

Alan Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center*, Chs. 1-6, 8
Morris P. Fiorina, “A Disconnect in Political Positions” in *Disconnect: The Breakdown of Representation in American Politics*

Research Skills Workshop, Magill Library

Week 5

B. Faltering Citizenship

Thomas Frank, “What’s the Matter with America?” and “God, Meet Mammon” in *What’s the Matter with Kansas? Why Conservatives Won the Heart of America*
Suzanne Mettler, *The Submerged State*, Introduction and Chs. 1-6

Thesis Topic Due

Week 6

C. Flawed Institutions

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

Week 7

Fall Break

Week 8

IV. Race and Democracy

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

Annotated Bibliography Due
Week 9

V. Immigration and Political Incorporation


Laurencio Sanguino, “Selective Service: Indians, Poles, and Mexicans in Chicago” in S. Karthick Ramakrishnan and Irene Bloemraad, eds., *Civic Hopes and Political Realities: Immigrants, Community Organizations, and Political Engagement*

Week 10

VI. Elections and Democracy


Week 11

VII. Media and Politics


Week 12

VIII. Thesis Research and Writing

A. Preparation of Research Design


Literature Review Due
Weeks 13-14

B. Research Design Workshops

Week 15

C. Presentation of Thesis Proposal

Research Design Due at End of Exam Period