

## **PSC 316: Politics of Political Choice**

Fall 2009  
Tuesday and Thursday, 8:00 – 9:20 AM  
6 Clemens Hall

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Office hours: Tuesday 9:30 – 11:00 AM, Wednesday 1:00 – 2:30 PM, and by appointment

### ***Course Description***

This course considers the principles and practice of politics. We are socialized based on democratic theory to believe that certain ideals are upheld when political choices are made. These range from voters making informed, issue-oriented decisions to elected politicians enacting policies in pursuit of national interests to government officials implementing those policies to maximize the public good.

Politics in practice, however, conflicts with these ideals. In general, political outcomes are the results of decisions by strategic, goal-oriented actors who promote their interests by choosing the best responses to the expected behavior of other strategic, goal-oriented actors. When these actors have competing interests, political outcomes are shaped by institutions and uncertainty as well as the actors' preferences over the set of possible outcomes. Political scientists refer to this approach to understanding politics as rational choice, which incorporates concepts from public choice and game theory.

A central theme of this course is the contrast between the principles and practice of politics and thereby students are introduced to the core theoretical arguments from the rational choice perspective. In turn, some of the course readings present rational choice explanations for empirical regularities in political outcomes. The other readings either address the principles of politics or present scientific studies that reveal systematic patterns in political behavior based on theories that share the rational choice perspective of treating voters, elected politicians, and government officials as goal-oriented actors.

While I will lecture at times, class meetings will generally be run as seminars where students are expected to actively participate in class discussion. The focus of this discussion will be the assigned readings and any tangential but relevant topics that arise. Students are strongly encouraged to regularly read a newspaper to stay informed about current events, especially those relating to American politics.

### ***Required Text***

Kernell, Samuel, and Steven Smith (eds). 2009. *Principles and Practice of American Politics: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (4<sup>th</sup> edition). CQ Press: ISBN 978-1604264630.

### ***Additional Readings***

Photocopies of starred readings will be distributed in class. The remaining readings, which are journal articles, can be accessed through the “**Electronic Journals**” interface on the UB libraries’ homepage as follows:

1. Connected to the internet
2. Go to **<http://ublib.buffalo.edu>**
3. Open (put your cursor over) the “Find Library Materials” pull-down menu in the top-left corner of the web-page
4. Click on **Electronic Journals**
5. Search for the journal cited for the reading
6. Select one of the listed databases that covers the publication date of the reading
7. Either select the issue/volume in which the reading appears or search the journal using the author or title of the reading

### ***Grading***

The coursework (and your grade) will consist of class participation (20%), three essays (30%), a short presentation (10%), and a group project (40%).

Your class participation grade will depend on participation in class discussions, which will focus on the assigned readings but may involve related topics and current events. In turn, you are expected to have completed the readings prior to the class session for which they are assigned. I will consider the quality and quantity of participation when evaluating student performance. In turn, failing to attend class will lower your class participation grade. Students should inform me as soon as possible if they have to miss class for a legitimate reason. Excused absences will not lower your class participation grade.

The first essay assignment (1-2 pages, 5%) requires the student to identify and discuss an example of political commentary (broadly defined) in popular music. The second essay assignment (3-5 pages, 10%) is an editorial-style argument about why John McCain lost the 2008 presidential election. The central basis for this essay should be the student’s opinion even though this can be informed by independent research. For the third essay assignment (4-6 pages, 15%), the student will propose a general campaign strategy for the prospective presidential candidate of one of the major parties in the 2012 election. The student is expected to develop an original strategy even though the justification for this strategy should be informed by the course readings and independent research. The due dates for the essays are listed in the *Class Schedule* below.

Each student will give a short presentation in class (3-5 minutes long). The presentation will be a persuasion speech in which the student defends a position on an issue relevant to political science. Students will choose among a list of topics distributed two weeks prior to the presentations, which will be held on October 20<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>.

For the group project, groups of 3-4 students will run campaigns in simulated 2012 presidential elections. Each group will compete against another group in the class, running campaigns for competing Democratic and Republican presidential candidates. Depending on the class size, there will be 3-6 simulated election campaigns running at once. The groups or campaign teams will be organized on October 22<sup>nd</sup>. Students can either form their own group or be assigned to a group based on their partisan preference. At this time, the instructor will provide each group with “background” information relevant to their election campaign. This information will include the campaign’s budget for television ads, a summary of major current events, the latest polling results, and an overview of the policies implemented during the first term of the Obama administration. The presidential candidate will be assigned to Republican campaign teams, while Democratic teams will run the reelection campaign of President Obama.

The work associated with the group project is divided into three parts. The first part (10%) will be a campaign strategy for the first two months of the post-convention campaign (i.e., August and September). This campaign strategy will include the candidate's policy positions, travel schedule, issue emphasis in speeches, and spending decisions on television ads. The general logic of this strategy should be based on what has been learned in the course and from independent research, while the specifics should respond to the provided background information and any relevant state-level demographic data and election results. Following the submission of the post-convention campaign strategy (which is due on November 5<sup>th</sup>), updated polling results and television ad budget will be provided to the competing campaign teams in each simulated election. The occurrence of any major news events will also be announced.

The second part of the group project (15%) will be composed of weekly campaign strategies for the next four weeks of the campaign (i.e., October) to be submitted on November 17<sup>th</sup>, November 24<sup>th</sup>, December 3<sup>rd</sup>, and December 10<sup>th</sup>. These campaign strategies will include the candidate's travel schedule, issue emphasis in speeches, and spending decisions on television ads. Following the submission of each campaign strategy, updated polling results and television ad budget will be provided to the competing campaign teams along with announcements of any major news events.

The third part of the group project (15%) will be a 1-minute television ad designed to be aired during the last week of the campaign. The expectation is that the ad will be presented as a storyboard but more technologically savvy groups are welcome to prepare a video that can be played using standard software (e.g., Windows Media Player). The television ad is due on December 18<sup>th</sup>.

Additional, more-detailed instructions about each part of the group project will be disseminated in class.

Listed below are suggested on-line sources of political information and commentary for the second and third essays, the class presentation, and the group project.

Public opinion and elections: [realclearpolitics.com](http://realclearpolitics.com) and [pollster.com](http://pollster.com)

Conservative and liberal perspectives (respectively): [weeklystandard.com](http://weeklystandard.com) and [thenation.com](http://thenation.com)

Relatively nonpartisan research on issues and public policy: [factcheck.org](http://factcheck.org)

Students who do not want to participate in a group project can take a final exam instead. The final exam will be comprehensive and administered on the University-scheduled date (TBA) during final exam week (December 14-21).

**Late work:** Unless stated otherwise, an assignment is late if not submitted by the end of class on the due date. Late work will be accepted until 4 PM of the day one week after the due date. Late work will be penalized by 10% if it is submitted by 4 PM of the day following the due date and by 25% otherwise.

**UBlearns:** I will use Blackboard on UBlearns to provide on-line student access to course materials.

During the semester, materials will be added that are relevant to seminar topics and course assignments.

**Students registered for PSC 316 are automatically granted access to the course in UBlearns.**

**Academic misconduct:** Academic misconduct will not be tolerated in this course. A student with a documented case of plagiarism, cheating, or another form of academic dishonesty will receive the grade of "F" for the course and might face other disciplinary action under University regulations. Students should consult the undergraduate catalog for details regarding what constitutes academic dishonesty: <http://undergrad-catalog.buffalo.edu/policies/course/integrity.shtml>

**Classroom etiquette:** Please arrive to class on time and with your cell phone off or on vibrate. Repeated tardiness or interruptions (e.g. a ringing cell phone) may adversely affect your participation grade. While

animated debate may naturally occur, students should express their personal opinions in a professional and respectful manner. Abusive and hateful language will not be tolerated.

**Students with disabilities policy:** The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal statute that provides comprehensive civil rights protection for persons with disabilities. This legislation requires that all students with disabilities be guaranteed a learning environment that provides for reasonable accommodation of their disabilities. If you have a disability requiring accommodation, please notify me immediately.

### *Class Schedule*

September 1: Introduction

September 3: **No Class (American PSA Conference)**

September 8 & 10: Liberal and Populist Interpretations of Voting

\*Riker, *Liberalism against Populism*, chapters 1 & 2.

### **September 10: First Essay**

September 15 & 17: Rational Abstention and Rational Ignorance

Riker, William, and Peter Ordeshook. 1968. A Theory of the Calculus of Voting. *American Political Science Review* 62: 25-41.

Aldrich, John H. 1993. Rational Choice and Turnout. *American Journal of Political Science* 37: 246-78.

Jackman, Robert W. 1993. Rationality and Political Participation. *American Journal of Political Science* 37: 279-90.

Ferejohn, John A., and Morris P. Fiorina. 1974. The Paradox of Not Voting: A Decision Theoretic Analysis. *American Political Science Review* 68: 525-36.

September 22 & 24: Public Goods and Collective Action

Kernell and Smith, chapter 1

### **September 24: Second Essay**

September 29 & October 1: Institutions as Political Choices

Kernell and Smith, sections 2.1, 3.1, & 3.3.

Schofield, Norman. 2002. Evolution of the Constitution. *British Journal of Political Science* 32: 1-20.

October 6 & 8: Spatial Models of Elections

\*Shepsle and Bonchek, *Analyzing Politics*, pp. 82-115.

Riker, William. 1980. Implications from the Disequilibrium of Majority Rule for the Study of Institutions. *American Political Science Review* 74: 432-446.

### **October 8: Third Essay**

October 13 & 15: Public Opinion & Voter Sophistication

Kernell and Smith, chapter 10

Bartels, Larry M. 1996. Uninformed Votes: Information Effects in Presidential Elections. *American Journal of Political Science* 40: 194-230.

### **October 20 & 22: Class Presentations**

October 27 & 29: Influence of News Media and the President on Public Attitudes  
Kernell and Smith, sections 7.1, 7.3, 7.4, 14.1, & 14.3

November 3 & 5: Issues and Voting

Kernell and Smith, sections 11.1, 4.1, 4.2, & 5.5

Carmines, Edward G., and James A. Stimson. 1980. The Two Faces of Issue Voting. *American Political Science Review* 74: 78-91.

Campbell, James E. 1983. The Electoral Consequences of Issue Ambiguity. *Political Behavior* 5(3): 277-91.

Abramowitz, Alan I. 1995. It's Abortion, Stupid: Policy Voting in the 1992 Presidential Election. *Journal of Politics* 57: 176-86.

November 10: Campaigns and Elections

Kernell and Smith, sections 11.3 & 11.4

Campbell, James E. 2001. When Have Presidential Campaigns Decided Election Outcomes? *American Politics Research* 29(5): 437-60.

### **November 5: Group Project Part I (by 4:00 PM)**

November 12 & 17: Political Parties

Kernell and Smith, section 11.2 & chapter 12

November 19 & 24: Interest Groups

Kernell and Smith, chapter 13

Roberts, Brian E. 1990. A Dead Senator Tells No Lies: Seniority and the Distribution of Federal Benefits. *American Journal of Political Science* 34: 31-58.

### **November 26: Fall Break**

December 1 & 3: Congress

Kernell and Smith, chapter 6

\*Shepsle and Bonchek, *Analyzing Politics*, pp. 115-136.

December 8 & 10: The Bureaucracy

Kernell and Smith, chapter 8

Niskanen, William A. 1968. The Peculiar Economics of Bureaucracy. *American Economic Review* 58: 293-305.

Palmer, Harvey D., and Ronald J. Vogel. 1995. Political Opportunity for Federal Appointment: The Case of Departing Members of the U.S. House of Representatives, 1961-1992. *Journal of Politics* 57: 677-95.

### **December 18: Group Project Part III (by 4:00 PM)**