RPOS250: Current Policy Debates Viewed Through a Social Science Lens

Fall 2016

Meets: MWF 11:30AM - 12:25PM

Room: BA 130

A-E graded.

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Course Description

One reason we’re interested in politics is we want to see better solutions come out of the policy and political process. Toward that end, we need to understand current debates on important political/policy topics, and we also need to better understand the types of research and evidence on which our information about those topics is based. With respect to a number of current political topics, this course will first get a sense of relevant debates and controversies on the issue. Second for each issue, we will examine a number of perspectives—of citizens, of politicos and of academic political scientists. With respect to the latter, we will pay particular attention to the ways political scientists ask and answer questions/conduct research. In the end you will become more informed on a set of current issues/political topics; think more systematically about arguments other people are making; have a better sense of how political scientists do research; and mostly be able to make stronger arguments/policy recommendations of your own. The course satisfies the university’s general education requirements for writing, oral discourse and information literacy.

Learning Objectives

1. To have a better understanding of some key policy and political issues of our time, appreciating the arguments and debates on all sides.
2. Through assessing the quality of the arguments other people (ordinary citizens, politicians, and academic political scientists) are making, to become more conscious of how you develop your own arguments.
3. To particularly get a sense of how political scientists go about doing research and making arguments.
4. To become a more careful and critical reader/evaluator of other people’s work.
5. In the end and based on a variety of perspectives, to develop reasoned recommendations of your own about policy solutions.
6. Develop your own research and writing skills.
7. Have fun! Yes it might sound intimidating, you’re learning and practicing new skills. You’re being asked to practice “critical thinking.” It’s not all that bad, and doing “serious” things doesn’t have to mean you can’t enjoy the process.

Note:
We will pick several policy/political topics of interest to the class and spend about two weeks on each. Over the time period, we will consider several different perspectives on each topic; in the end you will be asked to formulate your own arguments for particular policy solutions, and you will be asked to do so writing in different formats (writing a blog; writing to a particular interest group; preparing testimony to Congress etc.)

**Required Readings**

There is no single required text for the class. …But of course there is reading! A collection of articles is available on Blackboard, and for the most part you can expect at least one reading for each class. Additionally, there will be several classes where you will be asked to bring in readings that will contribute to class discussion.

**Course Requirements**

As you can see below, the class is structured so that you have many and varied chances to succeed; your final grade depends on your consistency of effort more so than your performance on one particular activity. Additionally since you will be developing skills, you can expect that your work will get better and come easier as the course proceeds.

1. 4 short writing assignments; approximately 3 pages each selected from 5-6 topics which we will be discussing throughout the semester; 15% each.
2. Final paper; 20%.
3. Attendance, class participation, quizzes, and really short writing assignments; 20%.

**Course Policies**

Attendance: It matters. You are allowed one unexcused absence. Any other absence must be excused by the instructor before the absence or excused afterwards based on a medical note.
Plagiarism: The strength of the university depends on academic and personal integrity. In this course, you must be honest and truthful. Plagiarism is the use of someone else's work, words, or ideas as if they were your own without giving the original author credit by citing him or her. If you have any questions about plagiarism, please contact me before submitting assignments for grading and/or reference the undergraduate bulletin at: [http://www.albany.edu/undergraduate_bulletin/regulations.html](http://www.albany.edu/undergraduate_bulletin/regulations.html)

It is required by the University that I report any violations; should this be your first violation, the report simply sits in a file. A record of several violations will result in disciplinary actions. In terms of class, violations of academic integrity will minimally result in failing the specific assignment.

Students with Disabilities: If you need any class accommodations due to a disability, please utilize university resources as needed, and please let me know well in advance of any assignments requiring accommodation(s). It is a function of the University to provide such accommodations as needed.

**Course Schedule and Readings**

*all readings available on Blackboard

*dates subject to change depending on our interests and needs

8/29. Introduction

**Issue 1: Income Inequality Viewed from an Equality Perspective: The Importance of Defining Terms and Thinking About the Significance of the Issue**

We will begin by looking at the facts of increasing income inequality in the U.S., an issue which has been important in the presidential campaign and an issue President Obama has labeled as the “defining” issue of our time. As this is the first issue we are discussing, we particularly need to think about defining terms and discussing why the topic is important. Thus we will first consider the topic of income inequality in the broader perspective of equality/inequality. We will then examine causes and particularly the consequences of modern day trends. Based on what we have read, you will be asked to formulate and justify your own policy solutions. Based on what you know what do we do?

8/31. Feulner and Tracy: *The American Spirit* (2012); Ch. 17 (Capitalism)

9/2. No class; American Political Science Association Meetings; you will have a short writing assignment

9/5. Labor Day

9/12. Presentation about Information Literacy: before-class activity to be announced.


9/16. Free-for-all discussion; everyone will be asked to bring in two relevant articles (from different sources).


9/21. Wrap up on income inequality. Reading T.B.D.

9/23. First paper due.

More to come!