Field Seminar in the American Political System

The Field Seminar in the American Political System overviews central debates, conceptualizations and methodological concerns of scholars in American politics. We begin in Part I to highlight enduring debates and conceptualizations. We start with controversies at the time of the American founding and ratification of the Constitution to highlight the issues and trade-offs reflected in the role of government and the form of our political system. In subsequent weeks, we will examine foundational conceptualizations and debates including those about political power, participation, and race/ethnicity as well as introduce students to alternative frameworks/methodologies that have been used to study these debates.

In Part II of the class, we will be moving toward a consideration of the workings of the current day political system and assessing the ways the discipline of political science has enhanced our understanding of its workings. We will overview a broad range of topics including governmental institutions, the linkage institutions of parties, groups and the media, and most particularly throughout the course the ways citizens can (and can’t) make a difference—how citizen preferences do (or don’t) get translated through institutions into public policy.

Thus, if Part I is roughly concerned with enduring debates within the political system, along with normative questions about how our institutions are supposed to operate, Part II focuses on how things actually have worked as well as the role of the citizen and the ways in which citizens influence (or fail to influence) government. To broaden our understanding, we will also include comparative perspectives.

Throughout, students will get a sense of the intellectual and methodological range of the field of American politics as well as exposure to both classic and contemporary readings. In conjunction, it is also a purpose of the course to introduce students to the work and interests of the members of the Political Science department at the University at Albany.

Course Objectives

- To assess founding debates as to the role of government and the workings of the system the framers put forward
- To introduce central and enduring concepts key to understanding the field of American politics, including power, participation, representation and the role of institutions.
- To critically analyze political science explanations of how the current system actually works
- To illustrate the intellectual and methodological range of the American politics subfield
- To familiarize you with the American politics faculty at the University at Albany
Required Readings (Books available at Mary Jane Books (Corner of Western and Quail)).

- Joseph Zimmerman, *Contemporary American Federalism: the Growth of National Power*

*Expect a couple of additional books.

Optional Readings (These are classics for those of you who want to buy them; the chapters we will read for class are available on blackboard or online.)

- John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness*

*Article packet on blackboard.

Course Requirements

1. Mid-term exam, 20%
2. Final exam, 20%
3. Weekly discussion Questions, 1-2 pages, 15%*
4. Two literature reviews, approximately 8 pages each. For any two of the topics under study, you will be selecting/critiquing articles and/or book chapters highlighting controversies covered in the most recent scholarship. Your papers may also cover topics related but not directly considered in class. Details described later. Papers will be due a week after the relevant class discussion. 30%; 15% each
5. Attendance, participation, 15%. (Please notify me prior to class if you are unable to attend; the strong expectation is you will be present, and there will be times you may be asked to be given a small project prior to class, examine the contents of a journal, bring in a news article.)

*Discussion questions.
In a couple of solid paragraphs, raise and explain a central controversy, debate or key point of interest highlighted in the week’s reading. End with one or two discussion questions which follow from your discussion above and which you think it is important for the class to consider. Please turn in by email to sfriedman2@albany.edu before the seminar begins. You get two buys.

Students with Disabilities: If you need any class accommodations due to a disability, please utilize University resources as needed, and please let the professor know well in advance of any assignments requiring accommodation(s). It is a function of the University to provide such accommodations as needed.
**Plagiarism and Academic Honesty:**
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. Plagiarism violations will result in disciplinary action.

Additionally, it goes without saying that students are expected to meet the broader standards of academic honesty expected of students at a major university.

See link on University policy: [http://www.albany.edu/eas/104/penalty.htm](http://www.albany.edu/eas/104/penalty.htm)
See also the UAlbany Library “Plagiarism 101” Tutorial: [http://library/albany.edu/usered/tut.html](http://library/albany.edu/usered/tut.html)

**Course Outline**
*Articles/book chapters available on blackboard or online.*
**Class schedule and readings subject to small changes depending on student interest, progress, unforeseen events.**

**Part I Enduring Conceptualizations and Debates**

1/23. Introduction

1/30. Controversy: The consequences of Increasing Inequality?
* PS: Political Science and Politics Symposium on Income Inequality and American Political Science, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Jan., 2006). See Black Board for complete list of articles. Skim these—which do you find most relevant/interesting?
* Alfred Stepan and Juan J. Linz, “Comparative Perspectives on Inequality and the Quality of Democracy in the United States,” Perspectives on Politics 9:4 (December 2011), pp. 841-856

2/6. Federalists and Anti-federalists
*Federalist Papers, Contents + Nos. 1, 5, 6, 10, 14, 23, 47, 48, 51, 68, 70,78.
Herbert Storing, What the Anti-federalists were for.
*"Brutus" excerpts from The Anti-Federalist.

2/13. An American political culture?
Read the first three and one more
*Hartz, Louis, “The Concept of a Liberal Society”

2/20. no class

2/27. Power in American Politics
*Robert Dahl, Who Governs*, chapters
* John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness*, chapters

3/6. Political Participation: Perspectives and Methodologies
*TBD*

3/13. Contemporary problem and Midterm due prior to break (we will work out exact logistics)
*TBD*

3/27. Race and Ethnicity (Prof Cruz)
*Jose Cruz, “Pluralism and Ethnicity in New York City Politics: The Case of Puerto Ricans”
*Desmond S. King, Rogers M. Smith, “Racial Orders in American Political Development”
*Ernest J. Wilson III, “Why Political Scientists Don't Study Black Politics, but Historians and Sociologists Do”

4/3. Federalism (Prof Zimmerman)
4/10. Congress
*Sally Friedman, *Dilemmas of Representation* (State University of New York 2007) ch. 1-2, 4-5.

4/17. Presidency (Prof Miroff)

4/24. Public Opinion (Prof Hildreth)
*TBD*

5/1. *TBD*

5/8. *TBD*

5/15. Final exam due.