RPOS 334 American Political Parties and Groups

Instructor: Shannon Scotece                                  Meeting Time: TTH 8:45-10:05 a.m.
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Office Hours: Thursdays 10:15-11:15 a.m. in Humanities B16; by appointment
Political Science Undergraduate Contact Office Phone: (518) 442-3112

Course Description
This course will examine the roles political parties and interest groups play in campaigns, elections, and the policymaking process. There will be a particular focus on how these organizations influence the political behavior of citizens through mobilization and the cultivation of grassroots activism. We will discuss the evolution of parties and interest groups over time, considering whether they continue to be important institutions in our political system. This course will also touch upon recent developments, such as the ways the Internet has changed how parties and interest groups influence government officials and communicate with voters.

Course Objectives
Although you may not realize it, politics affects almost every area of your life, and while most Americans are cynical about government, it is essential that you understand how the choices that have such a significant impact on you are made. Through this course, you will learn about the structure, functions and activities of the institutions that shape important policies and the outcomes of elections: political parties and interest groups.

Learning Objectives
1. Identify the general roles and functions of political organizations in the policymaking and electoral processes
2. Recognize the way these intermediaries connect citizens with other institutions of government and stimulate political interest and participation
3. Thinking critically about the importance of collective action in shaping political outcomes

Course Requirements
1. Complete all assigned readings

You must finish the readings before you come to class so you can participate in the discussion and understand the material presented in lecture.

2. Participation

Participation in class through discussions, questions, and in-class work is a crucial element to a successful course. Class may be interrupted so that we may further discuss something from lecture, a reading, a media event, or a student question. I also reserve the right to call upon students at random.

3. Final Exam

There will be one cumulative final exam, which will consist of multiple choice, short answer/identification and essay-type questions. All of the information in the course readings, plus anything discussed in class, may appear on the exams.
4. Assignments

The assignments for this class include one 8-10 page research paper, six discussion questions, and one interest group profile.

The possible research paper topics are described at the end of this syllabus, and primarily involve Internet research on current topics related to the political parties. You will choose the one topic that interests you, and complete the paper by the given due date. Late papers will be penalized.

The interest group profile will be based on a handout posted on Blackboard that will require you to create a brief sketch of the goals, issues, and electoral/policy activities of an interest group of your choice.

Each student will compose a total of SIX discussion questions that respond to and reflect upon a day’s readings. You will sign up to submit two questions on three different days, and the questions are to be posted on the “Discussions” section of Blackboard by 8 a.m. on the days for which you signed up. A handout detailing how you should write your discussion questions is posted on Blackboard.

Course Policies

1. Students with disabilities. If you have a documented disability and anticipate needing accommodations in this course, please make arrangements to meet with me soon. Please request that the Disabilities Resource Center send a letter verifying your disability.

2. Late papers. All assignments are due at the beginning of class, except for the discussion questions which must be posted before class begins. If you have to submit any assignment after the due date, you will be penalized one-third letter grade for every day that it is late. Exceptions to this policy will be made only if the student can provide a documented excuse.

3. Makeup Work and Exams. No make-up opportunities for in-class work will be available. A makeup essay final will only be allowed with an excuse from the Office of Undergraduate Education (LC 30). If a student misses the final exam and does not produce a valid excuse from this office in a timely manner, he or she will fail the course. No exceptions. Since you know the date of the final ahead of time, there will be no early exams given. Please make your winter travel plans accordingly.

3. Attendance. Attendance will be taken during each class meeting. Your participation grade includes attendance, so being repeatedly absent or late during class will negatively impact your participation grade. Missing class will also hurt your performance on assignments and the final exam, further affecting your final course grade. However, increasing your participation in class through thoughtful comments and questions can help to offset absences.

*****You are responsible for any lecture material if you do not attend.

5. Respect. It is important to show consideration for your fellow students during discussions. I will do my best to include all students who wish to participate in the class dialogue so that a variety of opinions are expressed. Remember that we are here to learn and investigate different arguments and perspectives, so although you may not agree with everything that is said in class, it is essential that you respect others’ views. Personal attacks and any offensive language, such as sexist or racist remarks, will not be tolerated.

6. Electronic Devices. Laptop computers may be used during class for the purpose of note-taking only. Use of cell phones during class for any reason is not permitted. This includes sending or receiving text messages. Failure to comply with these provisions will negatively impact participation grades. Also, if I see you texting on a cell phone, or using laptop in class for surfing the Internet, I will call on you.
7. Email. The best way to reach me is through email. **When sending emails to me, you must include your name.** I will not respond to informal or disrespectful emails.

**Emailing Assignments.** Only assignments submitted early will be accepted through email, but students must accept the consequences if the email or attachment does not go through in time. You MUST hand in hard copies in order to receive a grade. Hard copies of early/late assignments can be submitted to me during class, or to the Political Science Contact Office (Humanities B16, open M-TH 9-3pm, F 9-1pm).

The final grade will be based on the following:

1) Parties Paper  25%
2) Interest Group Profile  20%
3) Discussion Questions  15%
4) Final Exam  30%
5) Class Participation  10%
   (includes attendance and in-class work)

**Academic Integrity**

Any form of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated in this course. If you are found to have copied another student’s answers on a quiz or committed plagiarism, you may be subjected to one or all of the following penalties: failing the assignment/exam, failing the course, and being referred to the Dean for disciplinary action. Plagiarism is defined in the SUNY Albany Student Handbook as follows: “Plagiarism includes paraphrasing or summarizing without acknowledgment submission of another student’s work as one’s own, the purchase of prepared research completed papers or projects and the unacknowledged use of research sources gathered by someone else”. Please note that ignorance of what constitutes plagiarism is not a valid excuse for this academic violation.

If the ideas are not your own, they need to be attributed to the author(s) from which you received your information. Please contact me with any questions you have about citations.

**Course Texts**

These books are available at the UAlbany Bookstore, and can also be found on Amazon.com, Chegg.com, etc.


COURSE TOPICS AND READINGS

* Syllabus subject to change at the instructor’s discretion

WEEK 1
8/31  Introduction to Course/Syllabus
9/2  What are parties, and what roles do they serve?
   *Hershey, Ch. 1

WEEK 2
9/7  History of Political Organizations: Views of the Founding Fathers
    *Readings posted on Blackboard: Madison, Federalist #10; George Washington’s Farewell Address
9/9  *No class

WEEK 3
9/14  Why a Two-Party System?
    *Hershey, Ch. 2
9/16  Party Organizations
    *Hershey, Ch. 4

WEEK 4
9/21  Party in Government (Congress, the Presidency, and the Judiciary)
    *Hershey, Ch. 13
9/23  Parties in the Electorate: Who Participates?
    *Hershey, Ch. 6

WEEK 5
9/28  Realignment and Shifting Coalitions
    *Hershey, Ch. 7
9/30  Is there a “Culture War”?
    *Readings posted on Blackboard

WEEK 6
10/5  Do Parties Increase Voter Turnout?
    *Hershey, Ch. 8
10/7  Parties and Elections - Primaries and Nominee Selection
    *Hershey, Ch. 9, boxes on pg. 178 & 184

WEEK 7
10/12  Parties and Elections - General Election
    *Hershey, Ch. 11
10/14  Parties and Youth Mobilization
    *Reading posted on Blackboard: Daniel M. Shea and John C. Green, “Local Parties and Mobilizing the Vote: The Case of Young Citizens”

WEEK 8
10/19  Parties and the Media
10/21  Responsible Parties?
    *Hershey, Ch. 15; pgs. 309-312
WEEK 9
10/26  Parties and Public Policy
        *No Reading
        *Parties Paper Due at 8:45 a.m.
10/28  Theories of Interest Group Formation and Mobilization
        Berry and Wilcox: Ch. 1, pgs. 1-11; Chapters 3, pgs. 34-46

WEEK 10
11/2   Interest Group Strategy: Advocacy and Lobbying
        Berry and Wilcox: Chapter 8
11/4   Interest Groups and Public Opinion
        Berry and Wilcox: Chapter 7

WEEK 11
11/9   Interest Groups and Elections
        Berry and Wilcox: Chapter 5
11/11  Interest Group Profiles Due, in-class discussion on group profiles

WEEK 12
11/15  Netroots”: The Internet and Political Groups
        *Readings posted on Blackboard
11/18  Organized Religious Interests: The Case of Religious Lobbyists
        *Readings posted on Blackboard

WEEK 13
11/23  Interest Groups and Policymaking
        *No Reading
11/25  *No class

WEEK 14
11/30  Special Topic: The Dark Side of Civic Engagement
        *Readings posted on Blackboard
12/2   Whose Interests do Interest Groups Serve?
        Berry and Wilcox: Chapter 10

WEEK 15
12/7   Course Wrap-up

FINAL EXAM: Tuesday, December 14th
3:30-5:30 p.m., SS 256
**Parties Paper Assignments**: Choose one out of four paper topics described below, and submit an 8-10 page paper on **Tuesday, October 26th**. All papers should be typed, double-spaced, in 12-point font, and have one-inch margins. You must include a works cited page. You can use any citation style, as long as it is consistent. Plagiarism will not be tolerated.

1. **Party Differences**
   Pick two public policy issues of interest to you, such as abortion, tax cuts, health care, or climate change. First, examine the websites and platforms of the two major parties and write a paper that outlines 1) the key differences between the two parties’ policy positions and 2) the proposals that each party has put forth to address the issues. Second, look through newspaper/magazine articles and determine what actions the parties have taken on behalf of these issues (sponsoring/endorsing bills, holding congressional hearings, releasing reports, etc). Do these issues seem to be priorities for the parties? Also, do the parties appear to be internally divided over these issues?

   Based on their issue positions, do the parties offer the voters a clear choice?

2. **Public Opinion and the Parties**
   Citizens’ views of the parties tend to change based on various circumstances in the political environment. For this assignment, analyze public opinion polls on political parties and party leaders, and interpret the results. Are people supportive of the way the parties have handled recent issues (ex. health care reform, the economy, immigration)? What are the approval ratings of prominent party leaders/actors, and how does this reflect on the party? Does the public generally favor one party over the other going into the 2010 midterm elections?

   Based on these trends, is there evidence that the electorate would embrace a third party in America? Could third parties start gaining support to become viable venues for political expression?

3. **Predictions of Party Performances in the Midterm Elections**
   Review newspaper/magazine articles, blogs, and videos of pundits/journalists to find the “advice” being given to the two major parties on the upcoming mid-term elections. What kinds of strategies are being suggested to help the Democrats retain their majorities in Congress, and ultimately the presidency in 2012? What is being said about how the Republicans should approach “taking back” Congress, and what are some predictions of the changes we will see if there is a shift in party control? Feel free to discuss how the current political environment surrounding the midterm elections of 2010 compare to past years that led to big changes in Congress (2006, 1994, etc).

   Looking at the advice and predictions you found, which one would you suggest to the parties, or do you have your own recommendations? Be sure to defend your ideas against those offered by the political observers discussed in your paper.

4. **Topic of your choice**
   Is there an issue related to parties or interest groups that you would like to learn more about? You can create your own topic, and do research in order to answer an important political question. ALL TOPICS MUST BE APPROVED BY ME AT LEAST TWO WEEKS BEFORE THE DUE DATE.