I. Course Description

This course provides an introduction to the classic and contemporary scientific literature on American politics and government. This core seminar serves as a broad introduction to political science research in American politics, laying a foundation for your comprehensive exam, future courses you will teach, and any research you may choose to do in the field. It is my goal to introduce you to a wide range of theoretical and methodological perspectives via an examination of some of the “classics” along with the most recent empirical work in our field. With respect to what we read, we will pay close attention to theoretical arguments, methodological choices, and findings. I expect that most students have already had some exposure to the literature in American politics, but I understand that there may be great variety in the depth of your exposure. In general, this course is designed to help graduate students become introduced to the breadth of this literature, to know the state-of-the-literature on a variety of topics (described below), and to help you transition from being primarily a consumer of the literature to a producer of the literature.

While any seminar of this kind can but scratch the surface of our enormous, diverse, and still-evolving field, we will cover a variety of topics in the Political Science subfield of American politics. Yet, this course is designed to be a survey course, such that our introduction to each topic will be somewhat brief. Advanced courses are offered (or could be) on every topic we touch, so you can think of this class as being just the tip of the iceberg. For many of you, this type of introduction provides an excellent way to sample the types of questions, methodologies, and research being conducted in the subfields of American politics, and this may help you to choose your own course of research and area of specialty. Broadly, we will cover both institutions and behavior—the two major subfields in American politics. This means we will touch upon topics such as Congress, Bureaucracy, Presidency, and Courts. But we will also cover Public Opinion, Elections, Campaigns, Political Parties, Political Organizations, and perhaps some other specialized topics that the class chooses to cover as a group.

II. Course Goals

There are two primary goals for this course. First, students should gain a working familiarity with the literature in American Politics. One could not hope to understand the complete literature in only a semester, but this introduction will provide you with a foundation on which you can begin to build more specialized knowledge. Students planning to research and teach in American politics should gain a fundamental grasp of the substance of research in this vast field.

Students who do not expect to further study American politics will find the theoretical and methodological lessons are foundational to studying other subfields of political and social science. Second, students will practice and improve their critical thinking, writing, and research skills in this class. Students will have a heavy reading load, which is necessary to begin to dissect the voluminous literature.
in this field. Students will also actively engage with one another in research, presentations, and writing assignments.

**III. Seminar Organization and Requirements.** Each seminar will center on a critical analysis of the assigned readings. Most of our class time will typically be spent in group discussion, although I will usually offer some commentary on the week’s readings (e.g., placing the readings in context of previous research or research not represented on the syllabus, etc.). Also, at the end of each class I will introduce the next week’s readings by briefly describing them, suggesting issues for you to think about, etc.

Seminar grades will be based on several considerations—class participation, a research paper, and weekly reaction papers and literature presentation.

**For each week's readings, you should be prepared to discuss the following questions:**

- What are the major theoretical perspectives that structure research in a given area? What are the major strengths and weaknesses of each perspective and how do they compare with other perspectives considered in the course?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the methodological strategies used to investigate the subject? What methodologies, broadly conceived (e.g., basic issues of design, measurement, etc.) are most appropriate, given the subject of inquiry? To what degree are substantive conclusions dependent on the methods employed?
- What suggestions would you make for improving research in a given area of study? What theories, methods and substantive foci deserve more attention in future research?
- What are the major implications of the findings for public policy, policy-makers, and democratic theory?
- How should this material be presented to undergraduates?

**Class Discussions / Presentations.** (20%) Each week, one (or two) student(s) will be responsible for presenting the required readings. The student presenter should circulate discussion questions to the rest of the class by Monday at 5:00 p.m. the evening before the scheduled class period. The presenter will provide a brief oral summary of the readings and help to start discussion about the day’s topics. The presenter should note points of interest, confusion, or controversy in the readings and provide a thoughtful criticism.

**Reaction Papers.** (30%) Each student is expected to write short (2 pages max.) reaction papers for each week’s assigned readings. These reaction papers should provide a focused discussion of some aspect of the readings (e.g. major strengths/problems, the overall themes you think we should consider for the week, etc.) for the day rather than a summary of them, and should be designed to facilitate and help direct the class discussion. The reaction papers should also offer a research question based on the literature you have read with a few thoughts regarding the data you’d need and what your hypotheses might be. Before coming to class, you should read your classmates’ memos and think about their comments to facilitate discussion. The papers should be double spaced with 12 point font, and emailed to the entire class (including the instructor) by Monday no later than 5 p.m. the evening before the scheduled class period. If you miss the deadline, make up memos are not accepted under any circumstances.

**Research Paper.** Half (50%) of your grade will be based on a research paper (15-20 double-spaced pages) on a topic of your choice that will be due on the last day of class. At a minimum, this paper must include a critical literature review and an accompanying research design. More ambitiously, you should think of this assignment as an opportunity to craft a piece of original research which states and tests hypotheses. Ultimately, this paper can be a blueprint for a thesis, dissertation prospectus, or should lead to
a conference paper or journal submission. Students will also present a short synopsis of their research on the final day of the seminar. The topic should be discussed with, and approved by, the instructor before you begin work on it. Your paper proposal is due October 17th and the final paper is due December 5th. See Guidelines for Research Design Paper.

Professional Development
I also strongly recommend you do two other things this semester to begin to be part of the profession. First, I suggest that you join the American Political Science Association at http://www.apsanet.org. Membership will get you three journals (APSR, Perspectives on Politics, and PS), access to the services offered by APSA (such as their job listings), and will keep you up-to-date on goings on in the profession. Second, I recommend you attend several research talks in the department over the semester. These may include job talks, invited talks by prominent researchers, or talks by faculty and other graduate students in our department. These talks will give you a chance to see current research in American politics and other subfields of political science.

Course Policies.

1. **Late assignments**: Late assignments will not be accepted except under the most extraordinary circumstances, and will be scored zero.

2. **Incomplete Requests**: Such petitions will be granted only in extraordinary circumstances. The instructor reserves the right to ask for documentation to verify the problem preventing completion of the course by the normal deadlines. If the student does not present documentation from a university office or official, the matter will be left to the instructor’s discretion.

3. **Accommodations for Students with Disabilities**: A student who believes that reasonable accommodations with respect to course work or other academic requirements may be appropriate in consideration of a disability must (1) provide the required verification of the disability to the Disabilities Resource Centre (2) meet with the Disabilities Resource Centre to determine appropriate accommodations, and (3) inform the faculty in charge of the academic activity of the need for accommodation. Students are encouraged to inform the faculty of their requests for accommodations as early as possible in the semester, but must make the requests in a timely enough manner for accommodations to be appropriately considered and reviewed by the university. Students who make requests for reasonable accommodations are expected to follow the policies and procedures of the Disabilities Resource Centre in this process, including but not limited to the Student Handbook. A wide range of services can be obtained by students with disabilities, including housing, transportation, adaptation of printed materials, and advocacy with faculty and staff. Students with disabilities who need such services or want more information should contact the Disabilities Resource Centre at 815-753-1303 or drc@niu.edu The DRC is located on the 4th floor of the Health Services Building.

Books
These are the required books for this class; you will read all or large portions of each.


** Reading Schedule (subject to change) **

**Tuesday, August 29**

**INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE**

**Tuesday, September 5**

**POLITICAL SCIENCE IN PRACTICE**

**Required Readings:**

**Methodological and Theoretical Approaches to American Politics**
Recommended Reading:

Tuesday, September 12

Required Readings:
- De Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America*. Volume I, Chapters 3, 4, 8

Recommended Reading:
Tuesday, September 19  
**POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

**Required Readings:**

**Recommended Readings**

Tuesday, September 26  
**ELECTIONS & CAMPAIGNS**

**Required Readings:**
Tuesday, September 26 (cont’d.)

ELECTIONS & CAMPAIGNS

Recommended Readings


Tuesday, October 3

VOTING

Required Readings:


Recommended Readings:

Tuesday, October 3 (cont’d.)

VOTING

Recommended Readings:


Tuesday, October 10

PUBLIC OPINION

Required Readings

Public Opinion

Recommended Readings:


Political Parties

Required Readings

Political Parties

Recommended Readings:


Polarization

Required Readings:

Tuesday, October 24 (cont’d.)

POLARIZATION

**Required Readings:**

**Recommended Readings:**
Required Readings:

Recommended Readings:
Tuesday, October 31 (cont’d.)

LOBBYING AND GROUPS

Recommended Readings:


Tuesday, November 7

CONGRESS

Required Readings


Recommended Readings:

Tuesday, November 7 (cont’d.)

CONGRESS

Recommended Readings

Tuesday, November 7 (cont’d.)

CONGRESS

Recommended Readings


Tuesday, November 14

REPRESENTATION

Required Readings:


Recommended Readings:

**Tuesday, November 14 (cont’d.)**

**REPRESENTATION**

**Recommended Readings:**

Tuesday, November 21
THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH & THE BUREAUCRACY

Required Readings:

Recommended Readings:
Tuesday, November 21 (cont’d.)
THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH & THE BUREAUCRACY

Recommended Readings:


Tuesday, November 28
THE JUDICIAL BRANCH

Required Readings:

Recommended Readings:

Tuesday, December 5
FINAL CLASS
STUDENT PRESENTATIONS OF FINAL PAPERS
Guidelines for Research Design Paper  
POLS 600, American Politics Core Graduate Seminar

The purpose of this assignment is twofold: (1) to allow you to explore a given topic of your choice in more depth than is otherwise possible in a seminar, and (2) to help you hone your research skills in making the transition from a consumer of knowledge to a producer of knowledge. Try to think of the paper, not as just another written assignment, but as an opportunity to make the course more relevant to your interests, and to develop a research paper that will eventually result in a conference paper, a publication in a scholarly journal, or a dissertation topic.

Think about the assignment as writing a slightly more detailed version of the first half of a journal article or an NSF proposal requesting for funding for your research. In other words, you have limited space to convince me (or a panel of reviewers at NSF, or a journal editor and three anonymous reviewers) of the importance of your research, your ability to complete it, its contribution to the literature, theoretical motivation, conceptual development, and the rationale behind your design for carrying out your research.

- The paper is due the last day of class, when students will make brief presentations. The paper should be doubled spaced with one-inch margins. Do not use fonts that are smaller than 12 point.
- Your paper proposal is due October 17. Write a brief, two-page, typed proposal which describes your thesis and outlines the subject in as much detail (a rough outline of potential research questions, the relevant literature, how the topic fits with the course materials, and so on) as possible so that I can provide you with useful feedback before you start writing.
- For your proposal and final paper, you might want to follow the suggested outline below:

1) Introduction
   a) Thesis: What is the central research question that you are investigating? Some statement like, “The primary purpose of this paper is to...” (Or, the purpose of this paper is twofold…). The thesis of the research should be stated early in the paper—the first few paragraphs, the first page or two.
   b) Include in your introduction a brief statement describing the importance of the topic and the thesis. What are the political, theoretical, and normative implications of your research? How does your research improve upon the existing literature? What contribution will the proposed research make to the literature? What new, exciting directions will you take the literature? Like a journalist, you need to convince the reader that the paper is worthy of careful consideration.
   c) Plan of the paper: In a brief paragraph, give an overview of your arguments and how the paper will be organized.

2) Past Research (review of the literature). Please be especially vigilant about keeping the review relevant to the central thesis of the paper, which should be the central organizing theme of your paper. I don’t want a bibliographic essay, but an evaluation of relevant prior research on the topic that will describe how you intend to improve upon existing studies.
   a) Strengths and weaknesses of prior research (see page 1 of the syllabus for ideas here); you might discuss one or more of the following:
      i) How existing research has overlooked or given inadequate attention to your topic, for whatever reason.
      ii) You might critique existing studies on a number of grounds, including inadequate measures, inappropriate design, fuzzy concepts, lack of theory, contradictory findings, puzzles in the literature that need to be solved, and so on. You’re obviously going to focus on those problems that you intend to correct in your research.
b) Describe briefly how you propose to correct the above problems.

3) **Expectations:** What do you expect to find? What are your expectations? Your expectations or hypotheses will flow from theory and prior research.

4) **Design, Measures, Data:** The actual design or your proposed research. What basic decisions are you making about your research design and how do you justify them?
   a) What general type of research design is most appropriate for your study? Survey research, field research, panel design, time-series, experimental, or some other way of collecting observations?
   b) Define important concepts and describe how you plan to operationalize (measure) important variables.
   c) What type of observations, at what level of analysis, how they should be made, and so forth?

5) **Conclusions:** Reflect back on your thesis and the contribution of your proposed research.

The first step in your assignment was the selection of your research topic.

The next step is to identify and review the relevant literature on your topic. To conduct your literature review, you should first identify work that has been done on your topic by social scientists. A good way to begin is to use JSTOR, an archive of scholarly journals (http://www.jstor.org/), to identify recent articles on your topic.

The literature review should flow into your specific research question. You should place the research question in the context of the literature that you reviewed. Some questions that might guide your effort are:

- After your review of the existing literature, what outstanding question do you have that you could answer?
- Why is this question interesting?
- How will the answer to the question further our collective knowledge in the field?
- How will the answer to the question help policymakers or scholars understand the effectiveness of various techniques?

Once you have established your research question, you are ready to describe how you intend to answer that question. Begin by clearly stating your hypothesis (or hypotheses) and describe how your hypothesis is related to theories in the literature you reviewed.

Your task for the rest of the paper is to describe how you will evaluate your hypothesis against data. You are NOT required to actually complete the data analysis you describe in your research design, but you should think through the hard questions involved with any data collection project.

First, choose a particular method of analysis (experiments, case study, comparative case study, or large-N) and describe why you have chosen that particular methodology. Think about which method is most appropriate for your research question. You may decide that you need to employ multiple methods.
Next, describe the data collection process, paying special attention to questions of case selection and measurement. Some questions you might consider are:

- How have other scholars defined your variables of interest? How have they measured those variables?
- How should you select your cases for analysis?
- How will you control for threats to internal and external validity?
- What problems might you encounter in your data collection effort? How might you overcome those problems?

Finally, describe how you would analyze your data. Think about the analyses you would need to perform in order to:

- Know whether your explanation is wrong (to disconfirm your hypotheses);
- Make a compelling case that your argument is right, and
- Dismiss the major alternative plausible hypotheses.