Instructor: Dr. Jennifer Nicoll Victor  
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Office: Robinson A 232  
Office Hours: Wednesdays 2:00-3:00pm & Thursdays 2:00pm - 3:00pm—and often just before class 6:30-7:15, or by appointment

I. Course Description

This course provides an introduction to the classic and contemporary scientific literature on American politics and government. This course is designed for both Master’s-level and Ph.D.-level students, with varying expectations for each. Master’s students will get acquainted with the main findings in the various subfields of American politics and demonstrate their ability to read, criticize, and articulate the research in this field. I expect PhD students in this course are planning to teach and conduct original research in American politics. 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.

We will cover a variety of topics in the Political Science subfield of American politics. 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. Course Components

Course requirements are specific to students’ degree programs.

Master’s Degree Student Course Requirements

Class Presentation & Participation (15%) 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 prior to the start of class (no later than Wednesday at 5:00pm). 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.

Reading Summaries (25%) Each week each Master’s student will submit a 1 page document that contains a brief summary of 3 of the week’s required readings. Students may choose which readings to summarize. Each summary must include the following subheadings:

- **Research Question** – state the main question the research seeks to answer
- **Theory** – state the author’s unique idea that potentially explains the phenomenon of question, or that answers the question of the research.
- **Hypotheses** – restate the author’s primary expectation.
- **Test** – describe the means by which the author tests the main hypothesis. What method is used?
- **Results** – describe the main finding of the test and the concluding inference the author draws to answer the research question.

Each of the 5 subheadings should be answered as succinctly as possible; in one sentence if possible. All three summaries should fit on one page. There are 11 class meetings, and each student must write 8 summary memos (meaning you get 3 optional bye-weeks, to be selected at your choosing).

Essays (60%) Each Master’s student will write **four** essays (5-10 pages) on one of the “*Key Questions*” listed in each week’s readings below. Students may choose a question on which to write. Students must use parenthetical citations with a complete bibliography at the end of the paper. Here is an example citation in this sentence (Victor 2015, 2). Or you might want to say that Victor argues for use of parenthetical citations, commonly called APSA- or Chicago-style (2015, 32). Resources for citation style are on Blackboard. Students must write an original essay that answers the question prompt, uses proper citations, and has excellent structure, grammar, and spelling. Essays should have a single thesis or argument and be well supported by relevant literature. Essays are due on: **February 19, March 19, April 9, and May 7**
PhD Student Course Requirements

Class Presentation & Participation (15%) 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 prior to the start of class (no later than Wednesday at 5:00pm). 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.

Weekly Reaction Papers (35%) Each week each PhD student must write a one page memo that provides a reaction to the week’s readings. Students may choose to write about one, some, or all of the week’s readings. The memos should not be thought of as summaries or book reports; rather, in addition to providing some summary, students should feel free to pose questions, raise criticisms, or explain how a piece fits into the broader literature. There are 11 class meetings, and each student must write 8 reaction memos (meaning you get 3 optional bye-weeks, to be selected at your choosing).

Research Design (50%) Each PhD student is responsible for writing one research design paper, approximately 12-18 pages in length. Think of this as a journal or conference quality research paper, without doing the actual research. Your paper must pose a unique and appropriate political science research question that is properly motivated, use the literature of the field to develop theoretical expectations about a relationship, and pose a suggested course of collecting and analyzing data that would allow a researcher to evaluate the question. In your conclusion you can speculate about findings, but you do not need to perform the research. These papers will be completed in three stages. First, you will complete a 1-page introduction that states a thesis, or research question, and provides a basic outline of your paper (10% of paper and paper grade) (due March 5). Second, you will write a literature review (60% of paper; 30% of grade) (due April 9). Third, you will hand in your completed project (100% of paper; 60% of grade) (due May 7). Late assignments will result in a reduced score.

IV. Logistics

Incompletes. I am not inclined to offer incomplete grades. I strongly advise you to organize yourself to complete the coursework in a timely fashion. I am open to helping you with your assignments, of course, and will do my best to help you develop projects of a reasonable scale. Students rarely start the semester planning to take an incomplete, but it is easy to get behind. Know that I will not be comfortable offering incomplete grades.

Cheating, Plagiarism, and Academic Integrity. Students in this course will be expected to comply with the George Mason University Honor Code (see http://honorcode.gmu.edu/). Any student engaged in any academic misconduct will receive an F on the offending exam or assignment. Egregious violations will result in an F grade for the course and will be reported to the appropriate Dean’s office. These violations include cheating on an exam, using someone else’s work as your own, and plagiarizing the written word. Plagiarism (using someone else’s words or ideas without providing credit or citation) is a serious offense. If you have any questions at all about what constitutes cheating, plagiarism, or academic misconduct, please ask the instructor.
Students with Disabilities. If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, please let me (the instructor) know and contact the Disability Resource Center (DRC) at (703) 993-2474. All discussions with me regarding disabilities are confidential.

Grading. In this course, I will use a grading scale that is typical of Ph.D.-level courses that includes a four-part scale. You can think of the scale as being: high-pass, pass, low-pass, or fail. The grade scale and its interpretation is the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Excellent work; high pass.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>Good work; pass.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>Work needs some improvement; low-pass. If you plan to take Ph.D.-level exams in American politics, you need to do some additional review of the material presented in this course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B or lower</td>
<td>Your work has not been adequate Ph.D.-level work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PhD students can think of their letter grades as a means of communicating their position in the degree program and as subtle advice about whether or not an academic career path is advisable. Master’s students will also be graded on this scale, but the interpretation of letter grades is more about a reflection of the quality of the work, and less of a message to the student about career paths.

V. Required Texts

The reading load for this course is intense. We will read about a book a week, in addition to a handful of articles. It is vital that you keep up with the readings. One of the most important skills you will learn as a graduate student (most important in terms of being successful in graduate school) is how to efficiently digest a large volume of readings. I know that you will not be able to read every word that is assigned; but you will need to learn how to quickly glean the most important points from each reading. While I cannot require it, I strongly encourage you to take notes on everything you read. Good organization and careful note taking will increase your retention of the material, improve your ability to recall information, lead to superior classroom discussions, and reduce your research and study time at later points. Taking notes may mean it takes longer to get through some material, but the (long term) benefits of doing so, far exceed the (short term) costs. As a minor guide to digesting volumes of information in an efficient way, use the following questions to help focus your attention about each piece of research:

1.) What is the main question the author is asking?
2.) What motivates the question/why is the author asking the question?
3.) What is the primary expectation, hypothesis, or claim the author seeks to test?
4.) On what theory or logic is the expectation based?
5.) What methods of investigation has the author used to evaluate the claim?
6.) What are the primary findings? Were the expectations met?
7.) How does this research advance, or contribute to, our knowledge of this topic?
In addition to the following required texts, a series of articles (both required and recommended) are listed in the detailed weekly description below. I strongly recommend that students use bibliographic software to access, document, and catalog the items they read. While there are many such software options around, I recommend using Zotero, a free add-in for your web-browser. It works with most browsers but is designed to work in Firefox and you’ll get the most functionality from it if you use it with Firefox. Information and tutorials on Zotero are available here (http://infoguides.gmu.edu/politics/zotero). As a first assignment, I ask that students explore this software and use download all the readings into Zotero. You may notice that I have not provided links in the syllabus to the readings. All the readings are available through web access at Mason’s library. I recommend using Jstor.org or Google Scholar (http://scholar.google.com/) to find the articles listed below. You’ll need to be logged into a secure Mason portal, either from a campus IP, or through a remote Mason VPN connection (https://sslvpn01.gmu.edu/dana-na/auth/url_default/welcome.cgi). From the library homepage you can search for Jstor, which will give you most of the articles, except those published in the last few years. For recent articles, first log into a Mason connection, then follow a google scholar link that takes you directly to the source journal. We will go over these strategies in class (note the visit from Dr. Helen McManus, Political Science librarian on February 5). Using bibliographic software will make your life easier—never fret about formatting a bibliography ever again! For graduate students who expect to take field exams, this approach is essential.

**Required Books**


**VI. Course Schedule and Reading Assignments**

Notes: - Books are highlighted in bold typeface.
Recommended Readings” are intended to help guide students’ continued scholarship in the subfield and to provide additional suggested readings for students studying for PhD qualifying examinations.

- “Key questions” are broad questions addressed by the literature in the field. Students should have a sense of some answers to these questions after reading the assignments for each week and can provide guidance for class discussions and students’ writing assignments.

Thursday, January 22
INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

Key Questions:
- Is Political Science a “science?”
- What can the tools of science do to help us understand the political and social world?
- What is beyond the reach of understanding using social science tools?
- What are some key and burning questions that we should expect political science to help us understand in the future?

Required Readings:

Thursday, January 29
WHY GOVERNMENT?

Key Questions
- Describe the dominant theories and paradigms that explain the purpose of government.
- How relevant are Dahl’s insights to the modern world?
- What are the basic properties and assumptions of the Downsian spatial model?

Required Readings:
The Federalist Papers, No. 10 & No. 51

Thursday, February 5
*In Class Guest: Dr. Helen McManus (9:00pm)

REPRESENTATION

Key Questions:
- How does having a minority legislator affect the representation of minority constituents?
- What are some of the ways Americans have tried to increase the representation of minorities?
- Do Black and White legislators propose different kinds of legislation?
- What explains difference in legislative efficacy between male and female legislators?
- Do Blacks experience more political efficacy when represented by a Black?

**Required Readings:**


**Recommended Readings:**


Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. The Concept of Representation.

Thursday, February 12

IDEOLOGY

**Key Questions:**
- Can you define ideology?
- What are some ways we try to measure ideology? What are the costs and benefits of each?
- What is the relationship between ideology and party identification?

**Required Readings:**


**Recommended Readings:**


Thursday, February 19—NO CLASS TONIGHT

**Friday, February 20—Capital Hill Day**

**CAPITOL HILL DAY**

9:00am – 1:00pm
2168 Rayburn House Office Building
Gold Room

Speakers TBA

Thursday, February 26

POLARIZATION
Key Questions:
- Is American having a culture war?
- Can both of the following be true: American political parties are highly polarized and there is little evidence of ideological polarization in the American electorate?
- What are the different ways of defining polarization?
- What are the different groups/categories of people in American politics that may be polarized?
- What are the differences in evidence and methodology that lead scholars in this subfield to reach different conclusion? Which approach(es) have a stronger inferential link to the conclusions drawn by the author(s)?

Required Readings:

Recommended Readings:

Thursday, March 5
POLITICAL PARTIES
Key Questions:
- Do parties help explain our ideological beliefs? Or do our ideological beliefs help explain our parties?
- Why do we have parties? Are they necessary? What benefits do they serve? What costs do they impose?
- How do citizens organize parties? How does the make-up of a party change over time?

Required Readings

Recommended Readings:

Thursday, March 12—No Class Tonight—SPRING BREAK

Thursday, March 19
CONGRESS
Key Questions:
- What motivates members of Congress?
- Are citizens too ignorant to be responsible voters?
- Why do members of Congress vote the way they do? What are the factors that contribute to legislative decision making?
- Are term limits a reasonable solution to what ails legislatures and representation?

Required Readings


**Recommended Readings:**


Miller, Gary J. and Joe A. Oppenheimer. 1982. “*Universalism in Experimental Committees.*” *The American Political Science Review* 76(3) : 561-574


Thursday, March 26
PUBLIC OPINION AND VOTING

Key Questions:
- What are the consequences of Americans’ relatively low voter turnout rates?
- How stable are individual political opinions?
- How stable are aggregate political opinions?
- Do people have consistent political attitudes or are they affected by campaigns, messaging, elites, etc.?
- If people always have the same attitudes, why all the fuss over campaigns? If people are susceptible to messaging, then is democracy in peril, existing only at the whims of the latest fads and loudest screamers?

Required Readings

Recommended Readings:

**Thursday, April 2**

**ELECTIONS & VOTING**

**Key Questions:**
- Why are incumbents so advantaged?
- What are the sources of incumbency advantages? What are its consequences?
- Why do people vote?
- What theoretical paradigm best explains a citizens decision to vote (or not)?
- What reforms can governments make that will increase voter turnout?

**Required Readings:**


**Recommended Readings**


Thursday, April 9
THE JUDICIAL BRANCH

Key Questions:
- What are the three primary, competing models of legislative decision making?
- From what source does our justice system earn its legitimacy?
- Why don’t we see more judicial nominees rejected by the Senate?
- What determines whether the Supreme Court will hear a case?
- Are judges and justices truly objective? Is justice blind to bias? Can it be?

Required Readings:


Recommended Readings:


**Thursday, April 16**—NO CLASS (Midwest Political Science Association Meetings in Chicago)

**Thursday, April 23**

**THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH & THE BUREAUCRACY**

**Key Questions:**
- What makes the presidency powerful?
- When are presidents influenced by public whims?
- When and why does Congress engage in bureaucratic oversight?
- When and why do presidents take unilateral action?

**Required Readings:**


**Recommended Readings:**


Thursday, April 30

 Lesbian and Groups

Key Questions:
- Can campaign contributors “buy” favored legislation?
- What are the positive and negative roles that lobbyists and organized interests play in the policy making process?
- Why do people organize into groups? Is it inevitable? Unnatural?
- Do legislators need lobbyists?

Required Readings:


Recommended Readings:

Thursday, May 7
FINAL CLASS
STUDENT PRESENTATIONS OF FINAL PAPERS

VIII. Important Online Resources

CONGRESS
GOVT 510: American Government/Politics
Spring 2015

U.S. Senate  http://www.senate.gov
Library of Congress  http://www.loc.gov
THOMAS- Legislative Information  http://thomas.loc.gov
Federal Digital System (congressional hearings, Federal Register, Congressional Record, etc.)  http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/
CRS Reports  http://opencrs.com/
Congressional Budget Office  http://www.cbo.gov/
Congressional Universe (Lexis-Nexis)  http://web.lexis-nexis.com/congcomp
Legistorm  http://www.legistorm.com/index/about.html
Lobbying Disclosure  http://sopr.senate.gov/
MoneyLine  http://moneyline.cq.com/pml/home.do
Center for Responsive Politics  http://www.opensecrets.org/
The Redistricting Game  http://www.redistrictinggame.com/index.php

REFERENCE/RESEARCH
Mason Library PoliSci Page  http://infoguides.gmu.edu/politics
APSA Citation Guide  http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/DocAPSA.html
Vote View (Poole & Rosenthal scores)  http://www.voteview.com
Congressional Bills Project  http://www.congressionalbills.org/

NEWS
CongressDaily AM/PM  http://nationaljournal.com/pubs/congressdaily/
The Hill  http://www.thehill.com/
Los Angeles Times  http://www.latimes.com
C-SPAN  http://www.c-span.org/
NPR  http://www.npr.org/