American Political Behavior
Mondays 1-4 in Pond 236

Mass political behavior scholars seek to understand (a) the opinions and political actions taken by average citizens and (b) to understand variation - why most individuals differ from the “average” citizen. The study of American Political Behavior necessarily requires an understanding of universal tendencies that occur in all societies but recognizes that the political consequences of universal tendencies will depend on unique political institutions, political history, and the mix of groups and interests that define political conflict in the United States at a specific time.

It is possible to design a course like this in which the modifier “American” is central (by focusing heavily on the nature of the two major parties, the impact of campaign finance, federalism and voting rules, for example). But that will not be our emphasis in the fifteen weeks available to us. Rather, the modifier “American” will more frequently be implicit. The empirical works we will read, especially after the fourth week, will focus on US citizens but all of the theories can be applied (in sensible ways) to research in any country (or across countries).

I have set up the course to explore two broad questions.

1. What is political behavior? To explore political behavior, we need to find out what people know; what they like and dislike about politicians, policies and political institutions; and what people actually do (do they read the newspaper, vote, email their senator, or engage in protest behavior?). Students will be introduced to this wide range of behaviors during the course. In doing so, we will also get a formal introduction to the large sample surveys and the most common measures used in contemporary behavioral work.

2. Why do people behave the way they do? Does behavior depend on personal characteristics, like education or income? Does political behavior depend on citizens’ social environments (family, neighborhood or workplace), the groups with which they form close bonds (religious communities, ethnic groups), government and economic performance, or the information environment shaped by political campaigns and the mass media? Theoretical accounts of political behavior utilize more general theories from disciplines such as psychology, economics and sociology. Leading examples of these theoretical approaches will be introduced throughout the semester.

Course Requirements

Weekly Papers and Participation (50%): Each week, students will complete the assigned readings and submit a critical assessment of the week’s readings. Papers are due 9 PM on the evening before the class and will be assigned a letter grade that also accounts for class participation. Papers are to be submitted via Angel.

Paper format: I expect that most weekly papers will be 2½ - 4 pages (double spaced, 12 point font, reasonable margins). Each week, devote a portion of your paper to answering each of the following questions:
1. What are the most fundamental questions being asked by the authors this week? Pay attention to whether these are descriptive questions (“how much…” or “when…”), explanatory questions (“why…”), or questions of mechanism/causality (“how does…”).

2. What are the major theoretical concepts (“parallel publics,” “instrumental self interest,” “efficacy,” “costs of voting,” etc.) in the paper?

3. What is good about this reading? Of course, there can be differences of opinion about the merits of a particular paper or book. But virtually all the readings I have assigned are widely cited and influential, or they are newer works published in the most prestigious journals and presses. So the authors must have done something right! Try do identify what is clever, innovative and important in each work.

4. Do you find the empirical arguments persuasive? Here, you need to pay attention to the research design (how well to measures and models correspond to the theory), quality and appropriateness of data, etc. Remember, evidence can be persuasive even when the methodology is not perfect – so do not exaggerate the consequences of specific deficiencies in research design (nobody’s perfect).

These questions will guide much of our in-class discussion so the papers are expected to be thoughtful but not (of course) the final word on these questions. Indeed, I expect you to also have questions. These can be raised in class or in your papers (you may wish to highlight - e.g., bold type - questions that you would specifically like us to address in class).

There is no exam in this class. Thus the papers count for a lot and late/missing papers will have escalating penalties:

You may miss one paper during the course of the semester without penalty (assuming the occasional illness or personal emergency). As many as two late papers will be accepted up to 24 hours after class (1 PM Tuesdays) and will have a penalty of one minor grade. After two late papers all others are considered missing. If you miss more than one paper, you may petition to take a closed book final exam covering weeks in which papers were not turned in (this is an option for students missing several classes due to an extended illness; this is not intended to bail out students who simply don’t keep up).

Grading: Weekly papers that are thoughtful, reflect completion of the assigned reading, and are submitted on time shall typically receive a grade of B+/A-. Papers whose analyses are superficial or overly narrow (focusing on just one of several assigned articles or chapters) will receive lower grades; those that show greater depth and sophistication shall receive higher grades.

Major Research Paper (50%): The final project is a research paper that explores a major theme in the field of American political behavior. Topics that touch only tangentially upon course material can be undertaken but only after consultation and prior approval from me. You need written permission from me and from the other relevant instructor if you wish to submit related papers in two different courses.
The research paper can have any of three possible formats:

1. An empirical journal article. The “traditional” or “textbook” format of research question, background literature, hypotheses, data, methods, results, discussion is appropriate and might be the most straightforward for students writing their first empirical paper. However, it is not necessary to adhere strictly to this format as long as all of these components are included.

Students may use any source of high quality data on political participation, voting or public opinion. Examples include the National Election Studies, General Social Survey, Current Population Survey, network exit polls, and replication data sets made available by other researchers.

2. A research proposal. Here the model would be an NSF dissertation improvement grant proposal that poses a pressing research question and outlines a research design likely to shed light on the question. Some preliminary data analysis or codebook consultation will usually be appropriate in order to justify the feasibility of the study.

3. Review essay. Here the model would be essays appearing in the Annual Review of Political Science (though your paper would be shorter and more focused). This paper would review the literature and would be organized thematically (rather than chronologically).

There is no hard and fast page requirement; however, I would expect that most A or A- papers would include 14-18 pages of text in addition to supporting tables, references, etc. Note also that we will have two weeks at the end of the semester with no assigned reading. Although the paper should be well-along before this span, this period should afford you the opportunity to carefully read (and re-read) dozens of articles and chapters and master a narrow body of literature.

Books recommended for purchase:


There will be journal articles assigned most weeks. Most are available at JSTOR or other full text sites accessible through the library. Articles and chapters that are not readily available through PSU resources will be available on the class ANGEL page.
Proposed Weekly Outline (items with asterisks are optional)

PART I: WHAT WE STUDY - OVERVIEW AND HISTORICAL TRENDS

1. January 7\textsuperscript{th}: Overview of the field; overview of the seminar
2. January 14\textsuperscript{th}: Public Opinion and Political Knowledge
   e. *Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro. 1992. The Rational Public (especially chapters 1-4, and 7-10 – although I recommend a skim of chapters 5-6 on foreign policy, which have substantial contemporary relevance).

Important Note: We will be trying out an experimental format for the two weeks from January 15\textsuperscript{th} to January 28\textsuperscript{th}. We will be collectively reading a recent piece of popular social science, Johnathan Haidt’s The Righteous Mind. As we have no class on January 21\textsuperscript{st}, we will have an ongoing dialog via blog entry. The Haidt (pronounced “hite”) book has three parts and for each you will post an entry, read and comment on the entries of your classmates. Entries will be on the following schedule:

Your blog entry on part 1: no later than noon, Saturday January 19\textsuperscript{th}.
Your comments on at least two classmate entries, no later than midnight January 21\textsuperscript{st}.
Your blog entry on part 2: no later than noon Friday January 25\textsuperscript{th}.
Your comments on at least two classmate blog entries, no later than noon January 27\textsuperscript{th}.
Your blog entry on part 3 and the conclusion: no later than midnight, January 27\textsuperscript{th}.
Read your classmates’ final blog entries before class (comments welcome, but not required)

A person can only be added to a blog if they have logged in at least once to the blogs system. In order for you to contribute, you must log in to http://blogs.psu.edu.

4. January 28th: The Righteous Mind

We will discuss each of the three parts of the book, with special attention on the implications for theories of political behavior, and for empirical strategies to test theories (including comparative theory testing when theories are in conflict).

PART II: EXPLANATORY PERSPECTIVES AND THEORIES

5. February 4th: Social Cleavages – sex, class, race and religion


6. February 11th: Economic Self Interest and Rational Action

a. Rationality and Turnout:

b. Instrumental Self-Interest and Policy Preferences:

c. Pocketbook Voting:

d. “Correct voting”:


7. February 18th: Ideology


8. February 25th: Party Identification [Possible change of time, to be discussed in class]


9. March 4th: NO CLASS – PSU SPRING BREAK

a. *Email me a 2-10 sentence paragraph describing your intended final paper by Thursday, March 7th.*
10. March 11th: Spatial Contexts
   a. Neighborhoods & geography

   b. Churches:

   c. Information environments:

11. March 18th: Social Networks
   a. Discussants & Networks
b. Limits of social networks


13. April 1st: Political Psychology: Biology, Personality, Cognition, and Affect


14. April 8th: To be determined (based on interests expressed in class)…

15. April 15th: No class. I will hold office hours during regularly scheduled class time to discuss your term projects. Your weekly paper this week is a 1-3 page outline of your anticipated paper, with a working bibliography attached (in addition to the 1-3 pages). Students will sign up for 20 minute appointments.

16. April 22nd. No class. Work on papers.

17. April 29th: Papers due at 4:00 PM. No exceptions.
Academic Dishonesty

The Department of Political Science, along with the College of the Liberal Arts and the University, takes violations of academic dishonesty seriously. Observing basic honesty in one's work, words, ideas, and actions is a principle to which all members of the community are required to subscribe.

All course work by students is to be done on an individual basis unless an instructor clearly states that an alternative is acceptable. Any reference materials used in the preparation of any assignment must be explicitly cited. In an examination setting, unless the instructor gives explicit prior instructions to the contrary, whether the examination is in-class or take-home, violations of academic integrity shall consist of any attempt to receive assistance from written or printed aids, or from any person or papers or electronic devices, or of any attempt to give assistance, whether the one so doing has completed his or her own work or not.

Other violations include, but are not limited to, any attempt to gain an unfair advantage in regard to an examination, such as tampering with a graded exam or claiming another's work to be one's own. Violations shall also consist of obtaining or attempting to obtain, previous to any examinations, copies of the examination papers or the questions to appear thereon, or to obtain any illegal knowledge of these questions. Lying to the instructor or purposely misleading any Penn State administrator shall also constitute a violation of academic integrity.

In cases of a violation of academic integrity it is the policy of the Department of Political Science to impose appropriate penalties that are consistent with University guidelines.

Disabilities

The Pennsylvania State University encourages qualified people with disabilities to participate in its programs and activities and is committed to the policy that all people shall have equal access to programs, facilities, and admissions without regard to personal characteristics not related to ability, performance, or qualifications as determined by University policy or by state or federal authorities. If you anticipate needing any type of accommodation in this course or have questions about physical access, please tell the instructor as soon as possible. Reasonable accommodations will be made for all students with disabilities, but it is the student's responsibility to inform the instructor early in the term. Do not wait until just before an exam to decide you want to inform the instructor of a learning disability; any accommodations for disabilities must be arranged well in advance.