This seminar provides a survey of contemporary research topics in American democracy. The purpose is to familiarize students with especially active areas of contemporary scholarly debate, where theoretical or empirical issues are unsettled or are evolving rapidly, or where new paradigms challenge traditional perspectives. The seminar is in some respects opposite to a survey course focusing on classics or seminal works, though a few of those will appear in our reading. Much of the literature we will read is recent, and we will consider topics in some depth including debates among scholars over specific claims. Students are expected to have prior preparation in PS 215 or its equivalent. The seminar will cover four topics, as follows.

A. Changing character of citizenship. For decades, one of the primary normative concerns in the study of American politics has been declining and unequal political participation, especially in the case of voting. This declinist concern has been challenged by research suggesting that citizenship norms and practices are changing rather than simply declining. We will consider this debate about how to interpret the character and quality of citizenship in the US.

B. Biology and politics. Since the late 2000’s, a highly controversial new body of work has emerged suggesting several ways in which human biology may be associated with political behavior and attitudes, especially though genetic pathways. A sometimes emotionally heated debate has taken in the pages of the discipline’s elite journals about factual findings as well as the theoretical value of pursuing this line of research. We will read some of the key pieces in this debate.

C. Political advertising & commentary. One of the most prominent features of electoral politics in the US is political advertising. It may come as a surprise that research on the persuasive effects of advertising and its consequences for turnout has long produced conflicting findings, especially around questions of negative advertising. We will consider current debates over advertising and turnout. We will also read literature on incivility and the coarsening of politics through political commentary.

D. Institutions and policy change. For two decades, questions about legislative productivity, gridlock, divided control, and policy output have been pursued and debated empirically using some key traditional tools, including rational choice models and OLS regression. We will review some of this work and then consider a model of stochastic, non-linear change in institutions involving punctuated equilibrium. This model also has origins in biology and challenges common ways that many scholars think about causation.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. Regular participation in discussion is required and contributes 25% of the grade.
2. Analytic responses to discussion questions for the reading are due each week and contribute 35% of the course grade.

Discussion questions for each week’s reading will be available in advance. These questions will structure our weekly discussions and provide a focus for short weekly writing assignments of approximately 500 words -- roughly one single-spaced page. The weekly analyses are due by Noon on Tuesday, the day before class. They should be posted on GauchoSpace for everyone to see. They will be graded Not Pass, Pass, or Pass+. The expected grade each week for good work is Pass, with Pass+ reserved for exceptional work.

3. Final project: 40% of seminar grade. Due Dec 10.
The final project requirement can be fulfilled in more than one way, depending on the student’s intellectual interests and needs.

   Traditional Seminar Paper (Deep Option). Write a paper pursuing one of topics in this class in further depth. For instance, you might explore the application of changing citizenship norms to a particular problem of interest, develop a comparison of alternative models of policy change and complexity, or provide an assessment of the sources of disagreement in the literature on political advertising. Students pursuing this option should develop and demonstrate a deeper knowledge about the specific problem than provided only in the required reading.

   AP Exam Prep (Wide Option). Write a paper that situates one of the topics from this seminar in the broader literatures on American politics. If you pursue this option, you should develop a broad perspective on how the assigned reading fits into the study of American politics by drawing on literature from outside the class.

Books for Purchase

Articles & Chapters
Required articles and book chapters are available in electronic form on GauchoSpace.

Note also that articles and books labeled “Further Reading” are not required, but are intended as a guide for students interested in pursuing a topic beyond the scope of the weekly discussions. These typically contain a mix of classic literature and new work.
SCHEDULE OF READING

Week 1. Oct. 2 - Introduction
No required reading. However, you may wish to obtain and peruse a copy of Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* if you are not already familiar with his argument. His very long book is not required for this course but is an important optional further reading for next week. Note that the reading for Week 9 is heavy with a book and four articles, so you may wish to get a head start on Mayhew’s *Divided We Govern*, which is an easy read. And, for the last week of class we are reading Jones & Baumgartner’s *The Politics of Attention*. Many students find this book quite challenging and therefore time consuming. You may wish to start on it early.

In preparation for discussion this week, be prepared to discuss the following sets of questions:

Which theory or research finding about American politics that you have learned in previous classes do you find to be the most convincing or airtight? What are the reasons that you are convinced? Focus on this second part of the question.

What theory or finding is the least so, and why? What evidence would be required to persuade you?

Consider the following problem that arises in all disciplines: a tension between the drive to refine and improve existing theories so they are stronger and more powerful, and on the other hand the impetus to discard theories in favor of new ideas that entail radically different assumptions and approaches. What are the conditions when one might be preferable to the other? How in practice do you think this tension is worked out in political science?

A. Changing Character of Citizenship

Week 2. Oct. 9 - The Declinist Story of Citizenship


*Further Reading*


Week 3. Oct. 16 – The Transformational Tradition


**Further Reading**


B. Biology and Politics

Week 4. Oct. 23 - The Case for Biological Contributions to Political Attitudes & Behavior


**Further Reading**


Week 5. Oct. 30 – Critics and Reaction to the Biological Perspective


Further Reading

C. Political Advertising & Commentary

Week 6. Nov. 6 – The Negative Advertising Debate


**Further Reading**


---

**Week 7. Nov. 13 – Advertising Effects in General**


**Further Reading**


**Week 8. Nov. 20 – Effects of Incivility and Hostility in Political Communication**


**Further reading**


D. Institutions and Policy Change

Week 9. Nov. 27 – Traditional Conceptualizations of Legislative Productivity and “Gridlock”


Further Reading


Week 10: Dec. 4 - Non-linearity, Punctuated Equilibria, and Complex Models of Change
Jones, B., & Baumgartner, F. (2012). From there to here: Punctuated equilibrium to the general punctuation thesis to a theory of government information processing. Policy Studies Journal, 40(1), 1-19. [This is an introduction to a special issue of the journal dedicated to the topic of punctuated equilibrium.]


Further Reading


