Theories of (or Approaches to) American Politics

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Mondays and Wednesdays 12:00 - 1:15 pm, 793 Kimball Tower

“Models are to be used but not to be believed.”—Henri Theil
“Everybody has a story.”—Robert Fogel

Course Objectives

This course is designed to serve as an intermediate introduction to theories in the field of American Politics. Students who apply themselves will how to do the following.

Identify the major research traditions that structure the study of politics.

Apply theories of politics to explain current practices in American politics.

Analyze, think, and write critically about political theories and situations.

The course fulfills the General Education Arts, Letters, and Sciences (Social Sciences) requirement, fulfilling the following objectives.

Demonstrate an understanding of the basic scientific principles which undergird the scientific process, including the strengths and weaknesses of this process.

Appreciate the excitement of discovery that has accompanied important scientific developments.

Demonstrate how scientific methodology can be used to analyze real-world science-related problems.

Evaluate scientific data and claims in order to make rational decisions on public-policy science issues that affect their community.

Express their thoughts (in oral, graphical, and written formats) on scientific topics clearly, including appropriate use of basic scientific vocabulary and effective interpretation of quantitative data.

Reflect rationally upon the interface between science and religion.

Bear in mind these objectives are the designs of others. Students are not “taught” principles, they learn them. The best students, therefore, have their own objectives.

The course will be conducted primarily as a seminar. This means students need to have carefully read the material before each class period (hence the quizzes—see below) and come prepared to contribute some opinions on the reading each week.

These opinions should, at least some of the time, be critical of the readings. This course will expose students to a wide variety of approaches to American politics that are not always compatible or consistent with one another. It is the nature of political science to have a diversity of models, theories and approaches. The job of the student is to learn what is useful about all of them and to discard what is not useful.
Office Hours and Consultations

Office hours are on Mondays and Wednesdays from 3:15 - 4:15 p.m., and by appointment.1

Prerequisites

Political Science 200 is the only prerequisite for majors,2 though Political Science 110 is desirable. The logic for this requirement is that you need to have acquired some of the rudimentary knowledge about theory provided in PL SC 200. Without that you may find this course very difficult.

Course Texts

This course follows two textbooks. The first, Analyzing Politics by Kenneth Shepsle, focuses on a rational choice tour of political science topics (Shepsle, 2010). The second, America's New Democracy, by Fiorina et al., is a more standard introductory treatment of American Politics (Fiorina et al., 2010). We will be using both.

The majority of readings though will come online. In most cases these can be found via www.jstor.org, accessible in most campus locations. In cases where that is not the case I will briefly post readings online and announce them.

Course Outline

Course Introduction (August 27)

Why use theories? What possible good can they serve and how do they help us understand the world around us? The tack this course takes is to suggest that good theories are like maps (good ones anyway). They accomplish specific goals and help us make sense of the political world around us.

The Nature of Scientific Theory and Social Science3 (September 5)

Riker (1977) and Kramer (1986) provide an introduction to the nature of a science of politics. Riker’s views are hardly uncontroversial. Indeed some would dispute not only how well his views represent political science theory, but whether or not his views are philosophically sound. Whatever shortcomings may exist, however, are offset by the fact that much of today’s political science aspires (at least in principle) to ideas laid out in these articles, but especially the piece by William Riker.

A Rationality Model? (September 10)

Whether or not to treat politicos and the public as rational actors is a very controversial proposition. Shepsle (2010), chapters 1 and 2 lay out the beginnings of a case for doing so, but the case is not airtight. Shapiro (2002) believes that the empirical support for a rational choice model of political science just is not there.

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1I strongly encourage you to take advantage of these hours.
2I am prepared to waive the requirement for non-majors that can demonstrate some of the same skills covered in PL SC 200.
3There will be no class on Wednesday, August 29 because I, and most of my colleagues (rather limiting the substitute pool) will be in New Orleans for the annual Political Science meetings. In lieu of a regular class a semi-make-up session will be held later in the semester at my home.
Recommended: Lowi (1992) makes a far more political case than does Shapiro. He argues that political science is really the product of the regime under which we live and that the current regime, wedded to economic language, employs rational choice for political purposes.

The Pluralists and Group Choice (September 12)

The foundation of American politics is probably pluralism and the competing demands of various groups and interests in society. The core of this kind of work is based on the study of public opinion Fiorina et al. (2010, chapter five). However, the school of thought is much older than the modern practice of survey research. The study of how the public makes decisions was most prominently written about over two hundred years ago by James Madison in the Federalist Papers. Madison (1788) offers the best and older case for looking at how a diverse society can balance interests. The problem with this line of thought is that group choice turns out to be far more complicated that Madison realized. Shepsle (2010, chapters 3 and 4) provides an updated discussion of those thorny problems.

Recommended: Madison is hardly the end of pluralist school. It flourished among political scientists from the turn of the twentieth century up through mid-twentieth century. Murray S. Stedman (1953) and Golembiewski (1960) review David Truman’s (1951) book, The Governmental Process, probably the classic tome on pluralist school of political science. Since it is a forerunner to modern rational choice theory these works are worth some attention.

Spatial Models (September 17)

The modern way of understanding group choice is to think in terms of spatial models. Indeed this is becoming one of the workhorse tools of political science. Though a full treatment of this kind of work is beyond our scope here, Shepsle (2010, chapter five) provides a substantial introduction to the topic. The chapter is difficult, but students should try to get as much out of it as they can. Simple spatial model questions will be reviewed in class and covered on the examination.

Sociological Approaches to Voting (September 19)

James Madison said that “a dependence upon the people” is the primary check on government and so no discussion of American politics would be complete without an analysis of individual participation and voting (Fiorina et al., 2010, chapter seven). Today, you probably take modern analysis of voters for granted. Television programs break down voting patterns or opinion by all sorts of demographics from age to occupation and beyond. This type of analysis is relatively recent however (when considering the long history of the republic). Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee (1954, chapter six) offer one of the best early presentations of this kind of analysis. Their mode is essentially sociological theory and group orientation, but their influence stretches far beyond that field.

Psychological Approaches to Voting (September 24)

Partisanship is taken for granted today. Analysis of any political public opinion data (and often data that is not obviously political) comes with a partisan breakdown. Because it has become ubiquitous we sometimes forget that the roots of partisanship, as a theory, are in psychology. Campbell et al. (1960, chapter six) originated the concept (shortly after the work of Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee) studying the 1952 and 1956 elections. Despite that antiquity the book holds up very well and is arguably the most influential book ever written in modern American political science.
Sophisticated Voting (September 26)

It may seem obvious that we merely vote “based on our preferences” or “our beliefs,” but anyone who has ever been in a legislature of any kind (or even just a small group voting on alternatives) realizes quickly that voting is hardly the straightforward proposition that we might believe. Shepsle (2010, chapter six) explains the difficulties of straightforward voting.

Electoral Systems and Responsibility (October 1)

Fiorina et al. (2010, chapter eight) provide an introduction to the basic literature on campaigns and elections. However, the American system of elections is hardly the only one out there. Shepsle (2010, chapter seven) reviews the many different types of systems and some of their consequences. Understanding how the American system has functioned is the work of not one but several courses. Despite the scope of the task V.O. Key does provide a very influential introduction to what elections accomplish in the American system. (Key, 1955, 1959)

Recommended: V.O. Key collected all of his ideas into a book published at the end of his life (?). Though it is too long for our purposes it is an excellent statement of his views on how elections act as a check on government.

Cultural Approaches and American Exceptionalism (October 3)

There is an old saying that politics trumps the law and culture trumps politics. There is little doubt that the cultural underpinnings of a society constrain political possibilities, something just as true in the American context (Fiorina et al., 2010, chapter four) as it is in other places. Hartz (1955) provides the classic argument on how culture shapes American politics. For a more updated discussion of how it could matter we leave the confines of the United States and study it in Italy Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti (1993).

Cooperation and Collective Action (October 8)

To get anything done in a democracy requires cooperation, a far greater social science problem than can be simply seen in the American politics literature (Shepsle, 2010, chapter eight, pp. 231-252 and chapter nine). Students should bear in mind that cooperation—to gain control of the government—is the beginning of political parties, something that E.E. Schattschneider said was essential for democracy. Consequently, students should read a bit about political parties and think about how they create (or inhibit) cooperation (Fiorina et al., 2010, chapter nine)

Providing Public Goods (October 10)

Economists tend to be the ones that discuss public goods. However, it is always the job of politicians to provide them so it is worth carefully considering what political science teaches us about collective goods and their provision (Shepsle, 2010, chapter ten).

Midterm Examination (October 15)

This will be given in class (or another specified location). More details on the format will be made available shortly before the examination.

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4 Don’t worry. It connects back to the American scene.
Institutions and Foundings (October 17)

The American constitution is the foundation for the republic and is semi-properly considered the beginning of American politics (Fiorina et al., 2010, chapter two). Studying that beginning is properly the work of more than a single course. Roche (1961, chapter ten) provides the barest of introductions and provides a simple theory of how the Constitution came into being.

Understanding Legislatures (October 22)

There is nothing more essential than the legislature. It is properly (across most systems of government, but definitely in the American system) considered the first branch of government (Fiorina et al., 2010, chapter ten). Shepsle (2010, chapter twelve) provides a fairly detailed introduction to the basics of a rational choice presentation of a legislature. In many respects that has become the dominant way of thinking about legislatures. However, it is far from the only way Schickler (N.d., chapter one) provides an approach to the institution that is grounded in historical analysis.

Recommended: Though somewhat beyond the scope of our course there are some other papers that students might find interesting (perhaps even for a group presentation) Matthews (1959) presents a sociological theory of a legislature rooted in norms and customs. Jr. (1962) is similarly sociological in his approach, but offers a different vision for a legislature.

The Reform Tradition: Political Parties (October 24)

In the late 1940s the American Political Science Association commissioned a report on the state of government. This report was largely authored by E.E. Schattschneider, one of the great political scientists of the mid-twentieth century (though it is credited to the committee at large and not to him alone). The people of that time viewed their problems with government very differently than we do today. The document (only a portion of which is assigned) argues for the need to have much clearer political parties that work against one another in opposition and competition for the public good (Committee on Political Parties, 1951, “Summary of Conclusions and Proposals” and “The Need for Greater Party Responsibility”). Not everyone agreed. For instance, Ranney (1951) responded to report by arguing that it was an inappropriate plan for the American system. The debate may seem old, but it echoes in our modern arguments about political polarization.

Bureaucracy (October 29)

Some of the most visible government action are not cabinet meetings or great debates on the floor of the Senate. Bureaucracy is the heart of execution (Fiorina et al., 2010, chapter twelve, pp. 295-313). It is a part of government that responds to both the legislature and the executive in complicated ways. Shepsle (2010, chapter 13) provides us with some nice theory about how bureaucracies work.

Political Leadership in an Environment of Pluralism (October 31)

Before turning direction to the presidency, we pause to think briefly about political leadership. Shepsle (2010, chapter 14) reveals that leadership is only half of the problem in politics. Good leadership must be based on a theory and the practice of “followership.” Another way of thinking about leadership is to consider a question posed by Robert Dahl in the late 1950s: “Who governs?” (Dahl, 1961).

A Psychological Approach to the Presidency (November 5)

Fiorina et al. (2010, chapter eleven) provides background on the basics of the office, but the presidency is inherently less amenable to theories than are the other parts of government. Because America has very few
presidents it is much more difficult to develop a clear theory of them. One approach, offered by Barber (1992, chapters one and two), is to think about the psychological makeup of the individual president.

A Historical Approach to the Presidency (November 7)

Another approach to presidents employs history. Skowronek (1997) believes that presidents come into power in a particular moment and time and that their circumstances determine much of their policy, their successes and their failures. More than other subjects in the course students will see the difficulty in developing clear theories about presidents, but since their importance is unquestioned the effort proceeds.

The Judiciary (November 12)

Courts are the final branch of government Fiorina et al. (2010, chapter thirteen, pp. 328-352). Some legal theories would suggest that the law must be approached very differently from other political bodies, but Shepsle (2010, chapter 15) presents a self-consciously “political theory” where judges see themselves and their power as part of a political system.

The Reform Tradition: Institutions (November 14)

As should be obvious by now, much of political science is not simply a positive description of events or institutions or political behavior—though that is usually our focus. Even when that is the goal, reform and change is always a motivation. Sundquist (1986), coming after Watergate and in a period of declining trust in government prepared a book on how American government could be reformed. Both his normative theories and the positive theories that undergird his analysis are worth consideration.

Group Presentations (November 19, 26, 28 & December 3)

In some of the final sessions of the course we will spend time on group presentations. It is not enough to have read and discussed political science; it is better to have prepared to explain it to others. Six groups will each present some work explaining the theoretical stance of the work and how it contributes to our knowledge of political science. This work can cover many different subjects such as the study of political competition in a democracy (Downs, 1957); political partisanship (Fiorina, 1977); interest groups (Teske, 1997); congressional leadership (Cooper and Brady, 1981) and procedure (Cooper and Young, 1989); women in politics (Fox and Lawless, 2004); voting using heuristics (Lupia, 1994); framing in elections (Druckman, 2004) or religion in politics (Campbell and Monson, 2008). That list is not meant to be comprehensive. Many other works are possible. The group need only gain approval for the specific work.

Final Comments (December 5)

What have we learned? Are theories useful? If so, how? If not, why not?

Grade Policy

The course evaluation has six basic elements.

- Class participation / quizzes .................................................. 50 points
- Hypothesis papers ................................................................. 50 points
- Midterm examination ............................................................. 75 points
- Group presentation ............................................................... 100 points
- Research proposal ................................................................. 100 points
- Final examination ................................................................. 100 points
Participation and Quizzes: There will be six quizzes randomly distributed throughout the class sessions. These quizzes will be simple and short (five questions). They cannot be made up nor can they be taken early. The lowest score will be dropped. A related component of the grade is participation. This class is small (approximately thirty students) by design; the small size permits increased class participation. Each class session will be a mixture of lecture and discussion. Students who do a good job of participating in the discussions on a regular basis will receive a large number of participation points. Students whose participation is not of the same quality will receive proportionally fewer points. Quantity of comments is not the only (or even the strongest) consideration. Thoughtful comments will receive the greatest reward. Some students are not as comfortable participating in class. That is why the two components are linked. A perfect score on the quizzes with relatively little participation will still earn a very high score on this component. Missing a few quizzes, but with excellent participation will also score well. Skipped quizzes and little participation will mean a relatively low grade on this score.\footnote{To be as clear as possible, I will assign the total points based on your quiz scores and my assessment of your participation at the end of the course. Students interested in their grade may inquire before the end of the semester.}

Hypothesis Papers: Students should submit at least five one page reactions to the outside readings in the class (not for Fiorina et al. or for Shepsle). The purpose of this paper is decidedly not to summarize the readings.\footnote{You may assume I am familiar enough with the reading that it needs no introduction.} The short note should simply explain one testable hypothesis provoked by reading the paper. The student’s work should explain the question being tested, why this theory implies or suggests that hypothesis and how it could, at least in principle, be tested. Students may submit as many of these as they wish (one per day) until they have received the score they like. Each assignment is worth ten points. They will be graded strictly, but a perfect score in this area is obviously possible.

Midterm examination: The midterm examination will be held in class or in another room. It will consist entirely of short answer questions (a paragraph or two) and perhaps a slightly longer essay. On the examination students may use any personal notes, but not the original text. Summarizing texts and locating the main points is an important skill and it is one practiced in this course.

Group Presentations: On November 19 the class will shift to a series of group presentations from the students.\footnote{In mid-October, I will assign students to groups in preparation for this assignment.} Each group will present a political science article covering a topic related to classwork. The most important part of the presentation will be explanation of the theory, though students are expected to briefly summarize empirical results in the paper as well. This assignment is worth a total of 100 points. Twenty points will be assigned by the students who watch the presentation. Thirty points will be assigned by your fellow-group members. And fifty points will be assigned by Prof. Pope. Additional details will become available as the semester progresses.

Research proposal: Each student is expected to submit a ten to fifteen page research proposal that accomplishes the following three goals.

- Explain a key problem studied by political scientists.
- Review solutions to that problem in the political science literature.
- Evaluate the success of political science reasoning applied to that problem

The specific topic of the paper is left up to the student (although a list of possible suggestions, including relevant papers, will be posted later in the semester, along with more details on the assignment). The paper is due under my door no later than Thursday, December 6 at 5:00 pm. Additional details about the assignment will be posted to the website approximately two weeks into the semester.

Final examination: The final examination will be held in class or in another room. It will be very similar to the midterm examination and given under similar conditions.
Academic Integrity

Academic honesty is at the heart of academic life and the honor code at this university. Some students who would never think of a violation of the Word of Wisdom will not hesitate to cheat on an exam or plagiarize a paper. See the section of the BYU homepage devoted to the honor code for details on the academic honesty policy. Assume that clear cases of dishonesty will result in a failing grade in the course.

Disabilities

Brigham Young University and its faculty are committed to providing a learning atmosphere that reasonably accommodates qualified persons with disabilities. If you have any disability that may impair your ability to complete this course successfully, you are responsible for making your needs known to us and seeking available assistance from the university in a timely manner. In addition to notifying us, you must contact the University Accessibility Center (UAC) at 422-7065, 1520 WSC. The UAC reviews requests for reasonable academic accommodations for all students who have qualified documented disabilities, and any accommodations for this class must be coordinated with the UAC office. See http://uac.byu.edu/ for more information.

Harassment

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits sex discrimination against any participant in an educational program or activity that receives federal funds. The act is intended to eliminate sex discrimination in education. Title IX covers discrimination in programs, admissions, activities, and student-to-student sexual harassment. BYU’s policy against discrimination and sexual harassment extends not only to employees of the university but to students as well. If you encounter sexual harassment or discrimination, please talk to a faculty member; contact the Equal Employment Office in D-282 ASB or by telephone at 422-5895 or 367-5689 (24-hours); or contact the Honor Code Office at 422-2847.

Important Dates

- Add deadline ............................................. September 10
- Midterm examination ...................................... October 15
- Withdrawal Deadline ................................ November 5
- Discontinuance deadline ................................. November 20
- Last day of instruction & research proposal due .......... December 6
- Final examination ....................................... December 11

References


8 Please see: http://www.byu.edu/hr/directory/equal-employment-opportunity for many more details.


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http://scholar.byu.edu/jc榜样/classes/pl-sc-310-theories-american-politics