American Political Behavior: Citizen Preferences, Behavior & Representation
University of Texas, El Paso
Spring 2020
Seminar: Mondays, 6:00-8:50pm (MST)
Course Zoom Link: https://utep-edu.zoom.us/j/5752108162

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Office: Benedict Hall 107
Office Hours: Mondays, 2:00-4:00pm (MST) & by appointment
Office Hours Link: https://utep-edu.zoom.us/j/5752108162
Course GitPage & Resources: https://calgara.github.io/pol5310s2021.html
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Course Objective: How do we study political behavior in the United States & what are the implications of this research on the quality of political representation in America?

This course offers an introduction to the systematic and meticulous study of American political behavior and, ultimately, how this influences the degree of political representation provided by political elites. The political behavior field is constructed broadly within the American politics subfield, with the political behavior literature encompassing the underpinning of political decision-making, opinion formation, in addition to more “concrete” expressions of political behavior such as voting and political activism. In this course, we concentrate on this literature and also assess the implications of citizen political behavior on the quality of political representation provided by their elected elites.

Building on the scientific foundation of political science, this course is designed to provide an understanding into what shapes political behavior (i.e., partisanship, ideological preferences, democratic participation) and what how these behavioral considerations influence responsiveness by our American political institutions. The main question motivating the course is a simple, yet complex one: what factors influence the political behavior of citizens and what are the implications of this behavior for how elites provide descriptive and ideological representation? Recognizing the pivotal model of representation in the American political system is predicated on the ability of citizens to translate their preferences and behavior to ensure democratic responsiveness from the American political elites, the motivating question of the course hinges on understanding the following concepts:

- How do political sciences study and measure differing dimensions of political behavior in the study of American politics? How do we make a distinction between “attitudes” and “behavior” in the study of American politics? How do we define both of these distinctions in the study of American politics?
• Now that we have discussed how political scientists traditionally study political behavior, we now turn to the “meat of the course.” How well are citizens able to form opinions about politics, particularly with respect to partisanship and ideological preferences on the role of government in society? Is there a potential danger to the consistent finding in the literature that citizens know relatively little about “hard political issues” such as political ideology? Moreover, does this concern hold when assessing variation in which types of citizens participate in politics?

• Lastly, we consider the implications of political behavior on the degree of representation provided by citizen’s elected elites. Do elites accurately represent the views of the majority of citizens they are tasked with representing? How do we know if this is or not the case? Moreover, would this degree of legislative representation be more equitable if citizens participated more in politics?

These thematic questions may seem daunting, but this course will give you the necessary framework to perform careful political and social science analysis to gain leverage on these questions. This course will provide not only an understanding of how to study the specific mechanisms by which political behavior manifests itself in American political life and how this behavior influences the nature of political representation in the political system. This course will engage with primary sources of political science literature that will inform us how to engage in careful social science analysis. This course emphasizes the tools you need to assess political behaviors, practices, and institutional representation based on theory and evidence. Welcome to the class!

Course Logistics & Requirements

This section of the syllabus serves as a guide for course expectations (both for me and for you) and logistical information such as grade breakdown and course texts.

Course Texts, Materials, & Announcements: There is no assigned textbook for this course. The Course GitPage contains all relevant readings in the interactive syllabus. Please note that we will not be using Blackboard for any component of this course.

Grade Breakdown & Schedule:

• 30% Class Discussion Participation
• 70% Weekly Response Papers

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Class Discussion Participation (30%): As a graduate-level substantive seminar, this course requires students to attend class and be active in our collective course discussion. Ideally, I would be speaking very little during most of our seminars. As such, students are expected to shoulder the burden of driving discussions in this course. This means that students need to read the assigned materials every week and be ready to talk about the substantive topics/work discussed in that week’s readings. This largely entails:

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the theoretical model presented in each individual reading for this week? Do these theories “make sense” given what we know from our ongoing discussion about political behavior?

2. What empirical methods and research designs are used to evaluate the theory-driven hypotheses presented in this work? What data sources do these authors rely on to test their hypotheses?

3. What do these readings tell us about political behavior and politics in general? What are the limitations of these studies that the authors may have missed and what could be a worthwhile avenue for future work in this area?

Response Papers (70%): Beginning in the second week of the course, students are responsible for turning in a reaction paper. These response papers are to be no more than two page single-spaced and are due at 5pm Sunday, the day prior to our class meeting over email.¹ The purpose of this assignment is to teach students how to develop a single thesis argument in clear and concise form. While students should complete a response paper each week, I will count only the top 12 reading responses towards their final grade. These response papers must engage the readings in some form and are flexible with respect to content. These response papers may:

* Provide an alternative research idea in response to that week’s readings or a single article

* Bring forth an alternative theoretical explanation than what is claimed in that week’s readings or a single article

* Critique the theory or research methods of a given article or theme of readings using other scholarly arguments

These are some ideas for how to frame the response papers and students have great flexibility. However, the response papers must explicitly concern the readings of the week in some fashion and the best papers will address one issue or question from the current readings, as well as connect them to previous readings. This assignment is due the day prior to the course meetings is due to the fact that I will rely on this assignment to structure our class discussions for that week. I strongly recommend using the How to Read Social Science Research Articles guide that I created to synthesize the literature and prepare your argument responding to this work. Please note that these papers are NOT summaries of the readings and should critically engage the reading material. Response papers that are merely summaries

¹Specifically, these response papers should be drafted in templates with standard one-inch margins and 12pt. font.
of the readings will be heavily penalized.

**Academic Dishonesty & Ethics:** This course is about developing critical thought and developing personalized skill-sets necessary to examine politics in a systematic and rigorous way. Thus, it is important to develop your own arguments and work to hone in analytical skills. Academic dishonesty is not only a serious breach of ethics in the university community, but it is also detrimental to your scholarly growth. Ethics breaches, such as cheating and plagiarism, will be referred to the Office of Student Conduct & Conflict Resolution. Students may refer to the University’s Academic Integrity principles for further clarification or may contact the instructor for any specific questions.

**Course Resources:** If accommodations are needed for you to succeed in this course, please speak with me and we will work together to make sure you are accommodated. If you are unsure if you need accommodations, please visit the UTEP CASS site. On another note, I highly recommend taking advantage of the great campus resources offered by the UTEP Academic Advising Center for strategies on how to succeed not only in this course but throughout your tenure here.

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**Successful Strategies for the Systematic Study of Politics**

This section of the syllabus provides successful strategies on how to succeed in this course.

**Note on Reading Scholarly Articles:** Many of the readings of this course will be academic in nature. I understand that, as an introductory seminar, these works may contain empirical analysis that may seem daunting and confusing to read (i.e., lots of equations & statistics). The only expectation from you is to read the article carefully before seminar, attempt to understand the article’s main argument (this includes what political phenomena does the article’s argument seek to explain), how the article’s findings fit with the theory presented, and what the implications of the author’s empirical findings are for a given week’s thematic orientation. I will provide a checklist document that outlines how to read these works for content and using the content in seminar discussion on the first day.

**Expectations:** Students can expect me to come prepared to seminar. This entails that students can expect me to give a strong effort to convey the given seminar’s course concepts and the implications these concepts have for the main questions highlighted in the course description. This seminar will be taught in a **dynamic** fashion which will require full participation from everyone in the seminar. As such, most lectures will incorporate activities designed to stimulate student involvement and gauge comprehension of the material. It is critical that everyone (including me) is **prepared** to discuss the seminar’s assigned reading for the week and come ready to discuss the concepts in a scholarly fashion.

**Coming Prepared:** Each seminar will introduce **new** theories that, in one way or another, will provide different conceptions of the political behavior of individual citizens and the mass public. It is critical that you (and I) do the assigned readings before the class. Useful
class discussion is conditional on both of us doing the readings, being familiar with the reading’s argument/main points, and engaging the theories presented during that week. After understanding these different theories of democracy, we will evaluate whether the American political system as constructed works well or is in need of valuable reform. The better we prepare, the better we can assess our democracy.

**Keeping an Open-Mind & Importance of Questions:** It is critical to challenge partisan predispositions and other biases we may hold, even if that means confronting powerful myths that can bias our perceptions and assessments. Assessing whether our democracy functions well requires **questioning everything**, both of the theories themselves and my interpretation of them. Intellectual curiosity and asking questions is both a strong and desirable virtue. Asking questions and engaging in a conversation by sharing your ideas and thoughts help strengthen our assessments.
Course Road-Map

This section of the syllabus outlines the course schedule & readings\(^2\). The course will be divided into distinct thematic modules for a given week. Understanding of these modules will help us collectively assess how political scientists study, both in terms of shaping political behavior but also the policy representation provide by elected elites. It is imperative that you treat each section as a part of a framework by which we assess the role of race in shaping the contemporary American political system. Each section objective articulates the role of the section within the analytical framework guiding our assessment of American political behavior.

Please note that the forthcoming course schedule & reading modules are tentative and may be change as required. I will update the syllabus and course GitPage to reflect changes as the semester progresses.

1. Module 1 (1/25/2021): **Course Overview & Defining the “Institutional Parameters” in the American Democratic System.** We briefly discuss the theoretical logical underpinning the American political system and the fundamental role of citizens in our polity. This week serves as an overview into the parameters of our political system and how institutions may, in theory, play a role in shaping citizen political behavior and institutional responsiveness. We tie in this articulation of our democratic institutions with why the study of political behavior and public opinion is so critically important in political science.

   - Madison, James. 1787. “Federalist 10.” In United States Congress Resources
   - Madison, James (or Alexander Hamilton). 1788. “Federalist 51.” In United States Congress Resources
   - Green, Amelia Hoover. 2013. “How to Read Political Science: A Guide in Four Steps.” Note: This is a primer on how to read social science literature, particularly for students without previous experience with applied quantitative methods.

2. Module 2 (2/1/2021): **Classical Studies of Partisanship.** In this module, we discuss the classical works assessing perhaps the most important variable in the study of American political behavior, partisanship. This section, we look at classical studies developing theories explaining partisan preferences held by American voters and discuss why partisanship is so ingrained in the political psyche of Americans.


\(^2\)Each seminar readings will be uploaded before seminar on the Course GitPage.

3. Module 3 (2/8/2021): **Contemporary Studies of Partisanship.** In this module, we discuss the contemporary works assessing perhaps the most important variable in the study of American political behavior, partisanship. Leveraging new data and methods, we discuss recent insights in how partisanship changes over time (if at all) and whether partisanship causes changes in preferences (or the other way around). Moreover, we will also discuss if partisanship is “increasing in strength” as a predictor variable over time.


4. Module 4 (2/22/2021): **An Ideological Mass Public?** In this module, we discuss work assessing if Americans are capable of “ideological thinking” and whether this degree of political sophistication is required for citizens to make rational decisions.


5. Module 5 (3/1/2021): **Turnout and Participation, Do Citizens Participate?** In this module, we discuss what factors motivate the propensity of participating in politics among voters. Specifically, what factors motivate the propensity of individuals to turnout to vote and what role do campaigns play (or not play) in driving voters to the polls?
6. Module 6 (3/8/2021): Do Citizens Use Ideological Preferences to Vote? In this module, we discuss whether citizens are able to use their ideological preferences to hold electoral candidates accountable. To do this, we assess the spatial model of electoral choice, its assumptions and whether citizens are up to the task of voting in spatial terms.


No-Seminar Due to Spring Break: March 15, 2021

7. Module 7 (3/22/2021): Does White Racial Resentment Shape Political Behavior? & Does Sexism and Sexist Attitudes Shape Political Behavior? In this section, we assess the role of racial resentment in shaping the political identity and behavior of white Americans. We explore the extent to which partisan preferences closely align with racial resentment attitudes among whites, is there a fundamental change? Moreover, we explore to what extent racial resentment is a heuristic for electoral choice among white Americans and whether this is a salient determinant of choice during the age of Trump. In this section, we build off the previous literature on racial resentment and assess whether sexism plays a significant role in political behavior. Specifically, we assess the role of political behavior within the context of electoral choice and candidate evaluations.


8. Module 8 (3/29/2021): Are “regular” Americans and Elites Polarized? In this section, we begin by assessing whether the mass public are polarized on ideological grounds at levels comparable to elites (i.e., members of Congress). We assess whether citizens are able to think ideologically and are becoming more polarized over time. This is a huge debate in the literature and this section should uncover more questions than answers. Note that the first two articles by Abramowitz & Saunders and Fiorina et al. set the stage of the debate.


9. Module 10 (4/5/2021): Are Americans Able to Effectively Evaluate their Collective National Institutions? In this module, we assess the critical question of whether citizens are able to assess the job performance of their collective institutions, such as the presidency, U.S. Congress, Supreme Court, state legislatures, and Governors. We will also discuss the implications of this literature on the broader question of collective accountability.


10. Module 11 (4/12/2021): Are Americans Ideologically Represented by their Elites?

In this module, we assess the critical question of whether citizens are ideologically represented by their elected elites. In particular, we assess whether Madisonian dyadic representation exists between the mass public and their elected legislators exists. If Americans are not represented, what are the implications of this for political behavior and the nature of our democratic institutions? Do Americans know the intricacies of elite representation, such as the complex rules underpinning ideological representation by the U.S. Senate?


In this module, we ask how do political scientists traditionally view the role of descriptive representation in the American context? Is there variation in representation across the race of legislators? Are minority candidates successfully able to mobilize members of their racial group when they run for elected office?

12. Module 13 (4/26/2021): Does the Party System Respond to Changes in the Political Preferences of the Electorate? We explore the role societal cleavages play in shaping the electoral coalitions of the two major parties. Why are the two parties thought of as a collection of organized interests and what does this mean for groups (i.e., racial & religious) securing policy representation from their elected elites? Why are the elections of 1964 and 1980 considered “critical junctures” in terms of racial and religious realignment within the two parties?


13. Module 14 (5/3/2021): How are the Standing Models of Political Behavior Being Applied to the Ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic? Lastly, we consider the rapid research being produced to assess the ongoing behavioral dynamics of COVID-19 pandemic. We will look at papers looking at the role of race, trust, scientific knowledge in shaping attitudes about COVID-19 policies. We will also assess work assessing attitudes surrounding the prevalence of taking the vaccine in the mass public.

