POLS 641 002: Political Institutions

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Office Hours: Tuesday 3:30-4:30 & Thursday 11-12
Class Hours: Tuesday, 1-3:30
Office: Ten Hoor Hall 314
Classroom: Ten Hoor Hall 348

Course Description

Political behaviors and outcomes are largely determined by actors’ incentives and their interactions with exogenous conditions or other strategic actors. An institution is a set of incentives and/or constraints to enable and/or control behavior. Institutions associate some decisions with benefits and others with costs, and they set rules of engagement that structure actors’ decisions. In other words, institutions alter behavior. Why, then, do people create institutions? Why do they design them in particular forms? What mechanisms are in a designer’s toolbox, and what effects can institutions have on political outcomes? Which institutions are most likely to endure?

This class will introduce students to the canonical political problems faced by actors across the gamut of interactions and examine (a) how institutions develop from a context of political interactions and (b) how institutions alter actors’ unconstrained behavior. Put differently, this course matches a standard set of political problems to their institutional “solutions,” examining institutional origins, design, and effects in the context of that general problem. The core political problems under study include coordination problems, commitment problems, principal-agent relationships, bargaining, voting, etc. Each class period will focus on a different problem and use scholarship from across the political science subfields to identify potential institutional solutions.

Prerequisites

There are no prerequisites for this course beyond graduate standing.

Learner-Centered Outcomes

By the end of this course, students should be able to:

- define and describe the core assumptions of the canonical interactions in political science, including coordination problems, commitment problems, principal-agent relationships/delegation, bargaining, and collective action
- characterize a wide variety of political interactions according to these common types of problems (e.g., state torture as a principal-agent problem, environmental cooperation as a collective action problem, legislative voting as bargaining, etc.)
- posit and compare explanations for institutional development/origins
• identify multiple institutional solutions for a given political objective
• connect institutional design to political outcomes
• be familiar with and insightfully reference a variety of theoretical and empirical methodologies
• use social scientific theories to explain patterns of behavior
• identify, interpret, and critique the assumptions, logical reasoning, empirical implications, methodology, and conclusions of social science research
• identify an interesting and unexplored political puzzle, motivate a research question using existing research, construct a theory to answer that question, and sketch a plausible research design
• develop and present a research presentation that succinctly conveys a research puzzle, theory, and research design

Assessment

Grades will be distributed in the following manner:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Literature summaries</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research presentation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<td>Final Exam</td>
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Participation *Attendance is required.* Students must participate in class discussions in order to succeed in this course. If you must miss more than one class meeting, I highly recommend that you drop the course. Students are expected to be prepared for class. This means not only reading the required materials but also taking the time and care to walk through the logic of individual arguments before coming to class to discuss them. Some readings contain methodological techniques that may be unfamiliar. It is not sufficient to skip this material, but it is acceptable if some of it is foreign or difficult. Bring questions to class, and we will wrestle with these concepts together. I expect students to be able to explain the assumptions and logic all theories and methods in the required readings and critically engage the relative merits and flaws of each piece.

Literature Summaries There are 11 weeks in which we cover scholarly material, and each week features a theme. Each student must complete TEN literature summaries, 1-3 pages each. For each reading, concisely but precisely describe the following:

1. the puzzle and resulting research question
2. the primary theoretical argument, central, foundational assumptions, and major hypothesis
3. the chief empirical test and results (if any)
4. one significant critique identified by the student

Use bullets, table, or paragraph form, delineated by reading (cite in full). Due at start of class on the day the readings are assigned. Note that, of the 11 meetings after Jan 25, you must turn in only 10 write-ups, giving you one freebie.

Fall 2011
Research Presentation and Introduction Students will identify a theoretical or empirical puzzle and address it with a novel theory. Students will write a concise introduction for a future research paper with clear and precise arguments. Students will submit a draft of this introduction to the professor on or before October 25. Students will then circulate a revised draft to the entire class before presenting the project in a 15-20 minute, conference-style presentation on either November 22 or 29. Finally, students will revise the introduction once more, including comments from the presentations, submitting the final draft of the introduction via email to the instructor by 5:00pm on the Friday after they present their project. More information will be distributed on this requirement.

Final Exam The final exam will take the format of a standard comprehensive exam in international relations at the University of Alabama. You will receive the exam in your email at 8am on the exam date and will have to return your answers to me in a document or pdf attached to an email by 5pm on the same day. The exam is open book, open note. You are not expected to include material outside of what we cover in this course, but doing so is acceptable. I will grade them according to the same standards with which we assess comprehensive exams. For each question answered, I will determine whether the student (a) correctly summarizes the literature and (b) synthesizes the material into a cohesive argument to an inadequate, adequate, or exceptional degree. Further, each question will be graded according to the scale Fail, Low Pass, Pass, or High Pass. The student must at least low pass all three questions in order to (low) pass the exam. The strongest exams will engage a variety of literature into a cohesive argument that directly answers the question in an innovative way, noting the lacunae in existing scholarship.

Course Policies

Late Papers: Assignments should be turned by the start of the class period on the day they are due, regardless of your presence in class. You may email assignments to me if you will be absent. I will accept late papers, but you will incur a penalty for each day that the assignment is late.

Missing Exams Missed exams in cases of illness or personal emergency can be accommodated only with proper documentation. Exams missed due to a university sponsored event or religious holiday may also accommodated, provided that the student informs me of the conflict at least two weeks in advance.

Blackboard Site: I maintain a Blackboard website for this course on e-learning, https://elearning.ua.edu/. Use this site liberally and often. I will post announcements and changes to the home page of the site—keep an eye out. If a change to the syllabus or requirements is posted in the announcements on this site, you are responsible for those changes.

Academic Honor Code: Students are assumed to have read and agreed with the Code of Academic Conduct, found at URL: http://catalogs.ua.edu/catalog08/502000.html. The following is taken verbatim from that site: “All students in attendance at The University of Alabama are expected to be honorable and to observe standards of conduct appropriate to a community of scholars. The University of Alabama expects from its students a higher standard of conduct than the minimum required to avoid discipline. Each student is expected to read the Academic Honor Pledge. The pledge reads as follows:

I promise or affirm that I will not at any time be involved with cheating, plagiarism, fabrication, or misrepresentation while enrolled as a student at The University of Alabama. I have read the Academic Honor Code, which explains disciplinary procedures
that will result from the aforementioned. I understand that violation of this code will result in penalties as severe as indefinite suspension from the University.”

**Special Needs:** If you are registered with the Office of Disability Services, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible to discuss any course accommodations that may be necessary. If you have a disability, but have not contacted the Office of Disability Services, please call 348-4285 or visit 133-B Martha Parham Hall East to register for services. Students who may need course adaptations because of a disability are welcome to make an appointment to see me during office hours. Students with disabilities must be registered with the Office of Disability Services, 133-B Martha Parham Hall East, before receiving academic adjustments. Student responsibilities are listed on the ODS website: http://ods.ua.edu/

**Severe Weather Protocol:** In the case of a tornado warning (tornado has been sighted or detected by radar; sirens activated), all university activities are automatically suspended, including all classes and laboratories. If you are in a building, please move immediately to the lowest level and toward the center of the building away from windows (interior classrooms, offices, or corridors) and remain there until the tornado warning has expired. Classes in session when the tornado warning is issued can resume immediately after the warning has expired at the discretion of the instructor. Classes that have not yet begun will resume 30 minutes after the tornado warning has expired provided at least half of the class period remains.

UA is a residential campus with many students living on or near campus. In general classes will remain in session until the National Weather Service issues safety warnings for the city of Tuscaloosa. Clearly, some students and faculty commute from adjacent counties. These counties may experience weather related problems not encountered in Tuscaloosa. Individuals should follow the advice of the National Weather Service for that area taking the necessary precautions to ensure personal safety. Whenever the National Weather Service and the Emergency Management Agency issue a warning, people in the path of the storm should take immediate life saving actions.

When West Alabama is under a severe weather advisory, conditions can change rapidly. It is imperative to get to where you can receive information from the National Weather Service and to follow the instructions provided. Personal safety should dictate the actions that faculty, staff and students take. The Office of Public Relations will disseminate the latest information regarding conditions on campus in the following ways:

- Weather advisory posted on the UA homepage
- Weather advisory sent out through Connect-ED—faculty, staff and students (sign up at myBama)
- Weather advisory broadcast over WVUA at 90.7 FM
- Weather advisory broadcast over Alabama Public Radio (WUAL) at 91.5 FM
- Weather advisory broadcast over WVUA 7. WVUA 7 Storm Watch provides a free service you can subscribe to that allows you to receive weather warnings for Tuscaloosa via e-mail, pager or cell phone. Check http://www.wvua7.com/stormwatch.html for details.
Schedule

The following books are available for purchase at the SupeStore or your preferred book vendor.


Other book chapters will be available through the course eLearning website. Students are responsible for obtaining all journal articles through the library’s database collection.

**August 30: Approaches to the Course**

How do incentives influence actors’ decisions? Rational choice, utility theory: interests, interactions, institutions.

- Syllabus

**September 6: Approaches to Institutions**

What are institutions? Identify different approaches to studying institutions.

September 13: Coordination

Explain the structure of simple coordination games: Stag Hunt, Bach/Stravinsky. Multiple equilibria. How does coordination of expectations lead to self-enforcing institutions? If coordination is self-enforcing, what is the role of institutions? What is the purpose of constitutions? Focal points.


September 20: Collective Action

Prisoner’s Dilemma. Individual incentives to defect from the collective good. Public versus private goods. Olson’s Logic of Collective Action. What are the different types of institutional arrangements that incentivize individual participation? The rebel’s dilemma, voter’s paradox.


September 27: Commitment


- Chapter from Gambetta 2009.
October 4: Principal-Agent Relations/Delegation


October 11: Voting

Preference aggregation in the absence of rules. Imposing voting structure: median voter theorem, the effect of electoral rules. Redistribution: do parties appeal to the median voter, their core constituents, or to pivotal votes? Strategic versus sincere voting.


October 18: Bargaining

Another method of preference aggregation. How do institutions affect political outcomes and collective decision-making? Agenda control, outside and inside options, patience.


**October 25: Private Ordering/Norms**

Solving social dilemmas without formal institutions. The Coase Theorem.

- *First draft of introduction due by start of class*


**November 1: More on Institutional Design**

What mechanisms can institutions use to facilitate compliance? The effects of transparency, rigidity versus flexibility, barriers to consensus as constraint.


**November 8: Endogenous Institutions**

To what extent are political institutions a reflection of underlying social processes? How can institutions affect their own outcomes?


**November 15: Institutional Endurance**

Why do some institutions endure while others fail?


**November 22**

Presentations. Read the introductions of those who will present on this day. These should be circulated to all students and the professor by 11:59pm, Sunday, November 20th.

**November 29**

Presentations. Read the introductions of those who will present on this day. These should be circulated to all students and the professor by 11:59pm, Sunday, November 27th.

**December 12-16**

Final Exam week.