Political Science 274
Political Choice and Strategy
Spring 2018

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Lecture Time and Location: Tuesday/Thursday 8:50–9:40, 115 Van Hise
Office Hours: Please see http://scottgehlbach.net/contact/
Course Website: Available at Learn@UW
Classlist: polisci274-1-s18@lists.wisc.edu

Overview

This course is an introduction to what has variously been called positive political theory, formal political theory, the rational-choice approach to politics, and much else. Whatever one calls it, the topic involves the *analysis* of *political choice* and *strategy*:

- **Analysis:** Analytical approaches to politics involve breaking an argument down into individual pieces and building up conclusions from those pieces. As a practical matter, this is often done with the use of mathematics (more on this below). It sounds basic, but many arguments that sound right have been shown to be wrong when put to the fire of analytical methods, and a great many surprising conclusions have been reached.

- **Politics:** There are many possible definitions. We borrow one from Shepsle, the author of one of the texts for this course: the study of politics is the study of group life. Thus, we are interested in elections and legislatures, but also in revolutionary movements, courts, non-profit organizations, and dormitory life.

- **Choice:** We are interested in models of political behavior that are premised on the idea that individuals make choices. We assume in particular that individuals are "rational," meaning that they have preferences over outcomes and take purposeful actions to achieve the best possible outcome. Further, as this is the study of politics, we are interested in how individual preferences translate (or not) into group choice, as through majority-rule voting. As we will see, group choice is more than just the simple "adding up" of individual preferences. In fact, at times preferences don't add up in any coherent way at all!

- **Strategy:** In politics, the optimal choice often depends on what one expects others to do. Political candidates, for example, take into consideration the platforms they expect their opponents to adopt when deciding what positions to take themselves. Many of the models we consider take this interaction seriously, assuming that individuals choose the best course of action given what they expects others to do. Models of this sort

are expressed in the language of game theory, which is the mathematical analysis of strategic decision making.

Although most of the arguments we will explore in this course have been carefully developed using the language of mathematics, we don't need much math to represent the basic ideas. I don't assume any background other than high-school algebra. That said, the reasoning in this course is mathematical, even if we're not using high-powered math. That means that those of you without a lot of experience in math-related subjects should expect to work hard to do well in this course. Your teaching assistant and I are here to help, and you should come by office hours (or schedule an appointment if you can't make the regular time) whenever you have questions.

Course credit

This class meets for three 50-minute class periods (two lectures, one discussion section) each week over the course of the semester. It carries the expectation that you will spend about two hours on course learning activities outside of class (e.g., reading, working on problem sets, studying for exams) for every class period. The remainder of this syllabus lists meeting times and articulates expectations for your work.

Course learning outcomes

If you give the assigned work the effort I expect, you will learn a lot in this course. By the end of the semester, you should be able to:

- Understand how individual preferences are aggregated into group preferences
- Analyze strategic behavior in democratic institutions
- Understand when and why people cooperate in pursuit of common goals

In short, you should have an understanding of politics that transcends the punditry that dominates our public discourse. In pursuit of these goals, you will develop a quantitative literacy that will open intellectual doors throughout your academic and professional career.

Grading

The final grade will be determined based on the following weighting of course requirements:

- Discussion section participation: 10 percent
- Problem sets: 20 percent
- Midterm exam: 30 percent
- Final exam: 40 percent

The midterm and final exams will cover both readings and lecture material; the final exam will be cumulative. The problem sets will include analytical problems of the sort that you will see on the exams. Taking these problems seriously is a very important part of learning the material in this course. In addition, each problem set will include a short essay question asking you to apply the same analytical methods to some question in politics. For each problem set, the problems will be worth two-thirds of the grade, the short essay one-third. *Deadlines for the problem sets are given below. You may either turn in your problem set in lecture the day it is due or leave it in your teaching assistant's mailbox in North Hall.*

If you feel that some assignment has been improperly graded, then you may request that it be regraded. Your request should be accompanied by a cover letter indicating the source of your concern. I will regrade the entire assignment in question, meaning that the revised grade may be higher or lower than what you originally received.

Reading

There are two required texts for this course:

- Kenneth A. Shepsle, *Analyzing Politics: Rationality, Behavior, and Institutions, Second Edition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010).
- Avinash K. Dixit, Susan Skeath, and David H. Reiley, Jr., *Games of Strategy, Fourth Edition* (W. W. Norton, 2014).

You may find copies at various online retailers in addition to campus bookstores. Other readings will be made available through the course website.

Academic Integrity

I have zero tolerance for academic misconduct, and I will respond to any incidents of cheating very severely. You may review the range of possible penalties at:

https://conduct.students.wisc.edu/academic-misconduct-sanctions/

I have a strong preference for penalties at the upper end of the scale (i.e., a failing grade in the course).

Special accommodations

The University of Wisconsin–Madison, and I personally, support the right of all enrolled students to a full and equal educational opportunity. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Wisconsin State Statute (36.12), and UW-Madison policy (Faculty Document 1071) require that students with disabilities be reasonably accommodated in instruction and campus life. Reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities is a shared faculty and student responsibility. Please inform me by the end of the third week of the semester, or as

soon as possible after a disability has been incurred or recognized, if you need instructional accommodations. I will work either directly with you or in coordination with the McBurney Center to identify and provide reasonable instructional accommodations. Disability information, including instructional accommodations as part of a student's educational record, is confidential and protected under FERPA.

Electronic-device policy

I know from personal experience that laptops, tablets, and smartphones introduce enormous distractions that make it hard to learn and work. I want you to benefit from my experience. So that everyone in class can concentrate on what is often difficult material, all electronic devices must be stowed away during lecture and discussion section. If you have a reason to use an electronic device that has been authorized by the McBurney Center, please let us know so that we can make arrangements that will minimize disruptions to other students.

Conflicts

I will not give make-up examinations. I will normally provide extensions to deadlines for problem sets only in the event of an unanticipated emergency or illness, in which case you should provide appropriate documentation. If you anticipate being unavailable when a problem set is due, you should turn it in ahead of time.

Resources

Your first resource if you have a question about the class is the course website, where I will post this syllabus, handouts, problem sets, supplementary readings, and links to various resources. For certain questions, you will also find your classmates to be an important resource. You will find the classlist address above; I have set the classlist settings such that I will not see messages you send to others on the list. For any other matters, please turn to your teaching assistant or me, either in office hours (which will be appropriate in most cases) or by email (if there is some pressing issue). The material in this course is cumulative, so please do not hesitate to contact us if something is unclear.

Schedule

January 23: Course overview

> Shepsle, ch. 1

I   Social Choice Theory

January 25: Individual rationality

> Shepsle, ch. 2

January 30, February 1 and 6: General models of social choice, voting rules

 Shepsle, ch. 3, ch. 4, pp. 192–202

February 8 and 13: Spatial models

 Shepsle, pp. 91–110

 William H. Riker, *The Art of Political Manipulation* (New Haven, CT: Yale
  University Press, 1986), ch. 3 [available on course website]

February 15: Veto players

 William Roberts Clark, Matt Golder, and Sona Nadenichek Golder, *Principles
  of Comparative Politics: Third Edition* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2017),
  excerpt [available on course website]

Problem set 1 due February 20 by 5 pm

II Strategic Behavior in Democratic Institutions

February 20 and 22: Introduction to game theory, simultaneous-move games

 Dixit, Skeath, and Reiley, chs. 2, 4

February 27 and March 1: Electoral competition

 Shepsle, pp. 111–123

 Dixit, Skeath, and Reiley, pp. 613–619

March 6: Strategic voting

 Shepsle, pp. 170–174, 176–179

 William H. Riker, *The Art of Political Manipulation* (New Haven, CT: Yale
  University Press, 1986), ch. 7 [available on course website]

Problem set 2 due March 6 by 5 pm

March 8: Midterm review

March 13: MIDTERM EXAM

March 15 and 20: Sequential-move games

 Dixit, Skeath, and Reiley, ch. 3

March 22: Sophisticated voting

Shepsle, pp. 159–163, 174–176

William H. Riker, *The Art of Political Manipulation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), ch. 11 [available on course website] (Note: Riker refers in this chapter to "strategic voting." Following Shepsle, we will refer to strategic voting when voting is sequential—as in the Riker reading—as "sophisticated voting.")

April 3: Legislative institutions

Shepsle, pp. 123–138

April 5: Courts and judges

Shepsle, ch. 15

April 10: Parliamentary democracy

Shepsle, ch. 16

Problem set 3 due April 10 by 5 pm

III Cooperation, the Problem of the Commons, and Collective Action

April 12 and 17: Cooperation

Shepsle, ch. 8

Dixit, Skeath, and Reiley, ch. 10

April 19 and 24: The problem of the commons

Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), ch. 3 [available on course website] (Note: "CPR" refers to a common-pool resource.)

Dixit, Skeath, and Reiley, pp. 443–453

April 26 and May 1: Collective action

Shepsle, ch. 9

Dixit, Skeath, and Reiley, pp. 418–423

Problem set 4 due May 1 by 5 pm

May 3: Final review

No reading

May 8, 2:45 pm–4:45 pm: FINAL EXAM