Political Science 201
Political Choice and Strategy

115 Ingram Hall, Mondays/Wednesdays 2:30 to 3:45 p.m.

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Office Hours: Mondays and Wednesdays, 11:00 a.m. – noon, 201 La Follette
Mondays and Wednesdays, 4:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m., 215 North Hall
Appointments for other times welcome.

Overview: Political institutions provide mechanisms for societies to make authoritative allocations of values. Politics involves the interaction of people who seek to use and to modify the mechanisms to further their goals. How do political institutions translate the preferences of individuals into social choices? What strategies can individuals employ to affect social choices? These are fundamentally important questions for political scientists and they are the focus of this course.

To answer these questions we will explore a set of conceptual tools based on the assumption that people are instrumentally rational: that is, they have preferences over possible outcomes and they take purposeful actions directed at achieving those outcomes that they prefer more to those that they prefer. We start with simple models of individual choice: choice in the face of exogenous risk (decision analysis) and choice involving strategic risk (game theory) resulting from the dependence of outcomes on the strategies chosen by other rational actors as well. We next consider the problems of social choice: What are the properties of commonly used decision mechanisms such as majority rule and plurality voting? How can they be manipulated through strategic or sophisticated voting and agenda manipulation? Finally, we consider the problems of collective action: Under what circumstances will individuals contribute effort and other resources to promote group interests? How can institutions be designed to facilitate collective action? How can leaders induce or inhibit collective action?

Most of the material in the course will involve simple models and illustrations. The sections introducing decision analysis and game theory, which occur mainly at the beginning of the course, will involve some algebra and probability theory. I do not assume any prior college-level study in mathematics, but I do assume a willingness to learn the few concepts that we will need. I urge you to see me in office hours if you have any difficulty understanding the concepts as they are introduced.

Basis for Evaluation: I will assess your performance in the course as follows (contribution to final grade in parentheses):

Midterm examination (30 percent). The examination will cover required readings and course concepts. It will be held in class on October 24.
Final examination (40 percent). The final examination will be cumulative and given as scheduled at 7:45 a.m. on December 20.

Two short papers (20 percent). Throughout the syllabus are discussion topics associated with readings. Everyone should do one paper on the discussion topic related to the case study of campaign finance reform. Please do a second paper on one other discussion topic. Papers should be (two to three double-spaced pages). Each paper is due before the class in which the reading is discussed.

Class participation (10 percent). Although most of the classes will involve lectures, I encourage you to participate by asking questions and offering answers to questions that I pose. You should be prepared to offer answers to homework problems I will occasionally assign. I encourage you to be ready to discuss readings in class, and I expect you to be ready to discuss the readings related to your short papers.

Readings: Copies of all the readings will be available in the College Library. In addition, you should purchase the following two books:


Copies of books listed on the syllabus will be placed on reserve. I will rely on several books as sources of case material for lectures and class discussion. You may wish to purchase one or more of the following books for convenience:


(In the course we will discuss collective action problems. Can you find a way to coordinate with other students to share access to the supplemental books you purchase?)
Tentative Schedule

Course overview (September 5)

Part I: Individual Choice

Individual Rationality (September 10)

Shepsle and Bonchek, Chapters 1 and 2

Non-strategic choice: Decision Analysis (September 12, 17)

a. Elements of decision theory

b. Expected utility

Read handout before class.

Strategic choice: Single-play games (September 19, 24, 26)

a. Basic elements of game theory (normal form)

Shepsle and Bonchek, pp. 197-206

b. Common games in normal form

c. Introduction to extensive form

Part II: Social Choice

Social values: Efficiency, distributional values, procedural values (October 1)

Arrow's Possibility Theorem (October 3)

Shepsle and Bonchek, Chapters 3 and 4

Common voting rules: strategic and sophisticated voting and agenda manipulation (October 8, 10, 15)

a. Voting systems: majority, plurality, approval, Borda counts

b. Amendment procedures

Shepsle and Bonchek, Chapter 6
Discussion topic: In class we will be looking at three cases from William H. Riker, *The Art of Political Manipulation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986): Pliny the Younger on Parliamentary Law (Chapter 7); Chauncy Depew and the Seventeenth Amendment (Chapter 2); and Exploiting the Powell Amendment (Chapter 11). Review one of these cases. What were the basic elements of the strategies employed? Could the strategies have been countered?

Spatial models (October 17, 22)

a. Black’s Median Voter Theorem

b. McKelvey’s Chaos Theorem

c. Structurally induced equilibria

Shepsle and Bonchek, Chapter 5

Midterm (October 24)

Parties as responses to social choice problems (October 29)

Aldrich, Chapter 2

Discussion topic: In Chapter 3, Aldrich argues that the first American parties formed as a response to unstable majorities in the First Congress. In Chapter 5, Aldrich considers the emergence of the Republican Party. Review the logic of Aldrich’s argument in one of these chapters, and discuss the sort of evidence that he uses to support the argument.

Heresthetics and Rhetoric (October 31 and November 5)


Discussion topic: McLean considers the repeal of the corn laws in Chapter 2 and the Anglo-Irish treaty negotiations of 1921 in Chapter 5. For one of these cases, consider the role of rhetoric in carrying out a successful heresthetic.

Contemporary Application: Campaign Finance Reform (November 7 and 12)

Dwyre and Farrar-Myers, entire.

Discussion topic (required): Draw on the account given by Dwyre and Farrar-Myers of legislative maneuvers over campaign finance reform legislation, or on subsequent maneuvers, to
explicate some aspect of legislative strategy.

Courts: Judges as Strategic Actors (November 14)


Election Strategies (November 19)

a. Downsian models of elections

b. Rule Choice, Implementation, and Corruption


Part III: Collective Action

The logic of collective action (November 21, 26)

a. Olson’s Logic of Collective Action.

b. Common property and public goods

Shepsle and Bonchek, Chapters 8, 9, and 10

The problem of cooperation (November 28, 3)

a. Institutions as repeated games

b. Credibility and commitment

c. Public versus private preferences


Recommended: Avinash Dixit and Barry Nalebuff, Thinking Strategically (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), Chapter 6, Credible Commitments

Organizational design and leadership (December 5, 10)

the question of why the Wehrmacht continued to fight effectively even after the strategic situation appeared hopeless. What aspects of the organization of the Wehrmacht contributed to cohesion? Can you make any generalizations about such factors?

Discussion topic: Consider Hernando de Soto, The Other Path (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), Chapter 2: Informal Housing. Imagine that you have been asked by your friends to advise them about how to organize for an act of civil disobedience. What lessons might you draw from the land invasions de Soto describes?

Review (December 12)