“Just when we’re sure we’ve found the right answer, we realize we’ve been asking the wrong question.” – Carter Heyward

Course description and requirements:

This course surveys some of the most influential writings in our discipline with the goal of closely examining why we ask the questions we ask and why we tend to look for the types of evidence we often gather. In this spirit, I explicitly encourage students to explore a collection of scholarly literature paying at least as much attention to the theoretical and epistemological approaches used by the authors as they give to the substance of the authors’ specific findings and conclusions.

We begin the semester with a pair of readings from the enlightenment period. Two of the British empiricists – George Berkeley and David Hume – highlight the importance of great caution when identifying what we consider to be “facts” and when drawing causal inferences. We then skip ahead to the late 19th and early 20th centuries to sample from a period when much of the work in the study of politics (not quite political science yet) was characterized by the elaborate telling of insightful stories. Here we examine, among other pieces, writings by Woodrow Wilson and Frank Goodnow (first president of the American Political Science Association). During this period the study of politics was essentially still an off-shoot of the study of history. Political science came into its own as an intellectual discipline largely as a result of the rise of behavioralism during the 1930s and 1940s (not to be confused with B. F. Skinner and the school of behaviorism in psychology). In time, this focus on the overt behaviors of political actors would give rise to pluralism, which in turn was reigned in by its critics – among them, Olson and Schattschneider – during the early to mid-1960s. As a reaction to these criticisms, a hybrid of sorts – interest-group pluralism – was articulated by Theodore Lowi during the late 1960s. Also during this period came the gradual adoption by political scientists of some tools from microeconomics, leading to the application of rational choice theory to political behavior in a variety of settings, from Congress to citizens’ voting behavior. The rational choice approach has not been without its critics, particularly those grounded in social psychology. We sample from their works next, including pieces by Jon Elster, a rational choice theorist himself. Following this, we consider the problematic nature of democracy and how preferences are often shaped by the institutions within which political actors operate. Specifically we will examine the difficulty of fairly arriving at collective choices in non-consensual situations, as we peruse work by William Riker and other more contemporary writers within the school of “new institutionalism.” One of the more interesting recent developments from this work is scholarship that examines the intersection of political ideas (beliefs, culture, values) and institutions. This recent turn, growing out of historical institutionalism, problematizes rational choice theory in its own way as it questions whether ideas shape institutional design, or vice versa, or both. Lastly, we take a look
back over the ground we have covered as we read some scholarly commentaries on the
implications of adopting one mode of theorizing instead of another and what such decisions
mean for the advancement of our discipline.

Before taking this class, students will find it helpful (but not required) to take at least one 200- or
300-level course in political science. Non-political scientists are very welcome! Students must
commit themselves to a significant weekly reading load. Our meetings will be spent in
discussions of the texts. **THIS IS NOT A LECTURE COURSE.** Being prepared to discuss and
critique the readings is imperative to your, and our collective, success. Each student will co-lead
the group discussion a few times during the semester. Students will also write three short papers
during the term critiquing a small collection of readings. There will be a final exam at semester’s
end.

Ten percent of the overall grade is determined by the thoroughness and thoughtfulness of your
turns at group discussion co-leadership. Beyond taking your turns at helping to guide our
conversations, overall participation in our discussions will be worth 10% of your final course
grade. Part of class participation will consist of turning in two written questions about the
readings each week. I’ll say more about this as the semester goes along. Three reflection papers,
collectively worth 60% of the course grade, will be due through the term. We will agree on due
dates once the semester is underway. These papers should critique a set of assigned readings. For
each you are to compare, contrast, synthesize, and critique 3 pieces of writing by 3 different
authors from the syllabus that speak to a common theme. You should spend minimal time
summarizing the readings (I already know what they say; you don’t have to tell me), and you
should focus primarily on your critique of the arguments and/or evidence offered by the authors.
Each paper should be between 5 and 6 pages long, double-spaced. Each of your three papers
must address a unique collection of readings and must not overlap with your earlier papers. A
final exam worth 20% of the course grade will be given during the final exam period. About two
weeks prior to this, I will hand out a list of study questions designed to give you an idea of the
types of questions I may ask on the exam. These questions should serve as a guide for your exam
preparation and should not be assumed to be the actual question(s) you will face on exam day.
**Failing to read and take copious notes throughout the term and/or waiting until the end of the
term to prepare for the final exam will almost surely lead to a disaster on final exam day.**
Regular attendance is important. Each unexcused absence beyond the first one will result in a 2
percentage point penalty to your overall course grade. Responsibility for talking with me about
class sessions you miss rests with you.

Final course grades will be assigned on the following basis: 90-100% = A/A-; 80-89% =
B+/B/B-; 70-79% = C+/C/C-; 60-69% = D; below 60% = F. Taking a grade of incomplete in this
course is very strongly discouraged. Under no circumstances will a student be granted a grade of
incomplete without discussing the matter with me well in advance of the end of the semester.

This course carries general education credit in intellectual traditions.
Course readings:

The following texts are highly recommended for purchase and are at the university bookstore:

- George Berkeley – *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (Hackett Publishing Co.)
- David Hume – *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Hackett Publishing Co.)
- Donald Green and Ian Shapiro – *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory* (Yale U. Press,)
- Gabriel Almond – *A Discipline Divided: Schools and Sects in Political Science* (Sage Publications)

The following texts are optional but recommended for purchase. These are important to acquire if you plan on graduate study or if you care about the quality of your personal library. These books are also on library reserve.

- Thomas Kuhn – *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 3rd ed.* (Univ. of Chicago Press)

The remainder of the readings are available via the library’s reserve system. {password: think}

**WEEKLY SCHEDULE OF READINGS**

Week 1: Course introduction and overview

Week 2: Two Enlightenment Period empiricists
   George Berkeley – *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710); editor’s introduction and Berkeley’s text through paragraph 57 (p. 45)
   David Hume – *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748); editor’s introduction and sections 1 – 5, 7 & 12

Week 3: Political science as storytelling (Pt. I)
   Woodrow Wilson – *Congressional Government* ([1885] Meridian Books, 1956); W. Lippmann’s introduction, chapters 2 (House of Reps 1), 4 (Senate), 6 (conclusion)
   Frank Goodnow – “The work of the American Political Science Association,” first presidential address to the Association (1903); and “The Charter of the City of New York,” *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 17, #1 (March 1902) [both available via J-STOR]

Week 4: Political science as storytelling (Pt. II)
   Walter Lippmann – *Public Opinion* (Macmillan, 1922); chapters 1 (skim), 2-5, 16-20, 25, 27 & 28
   John Dewey – *The Public and Its Problems*, (Holt & Co., 1927), chapters 1, 4 & 5
Week 5: The rise of behavioralism in political science
David Easton – *A Framework for Political Analysis* (Prentice-Hall, 1965); chapters 1, 2, 7 & 8

Week 6: The pluralists

Week 7: Critiques of pluralism
E. E. Schattschneider – *The Semi-Sovereign People: A Realist’s View of Democracy in America* (Dryden Press, 1960); chapters 1, 2, 4, 6 & 8
Mancur Olson – *The Logic of Collective Action* (Harvard U. Press, 1964); chapters 1, 2, 5 & 6

Week 8: Interest group pluralism
Theodore Lowi – *The End of Liberalism, 2nd ed.* (W.W. Norton, 1979); chapters 2, 3, 5 (pp. 92-113, 124-126)
Theodore Lowi – *The End of Liberalism, 2nd ed.;* chapters 8, 10 & 11

Week 9: The rational choice revolution
Anthony Downs – *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (HarperCollins, 1957); chapters 1-3, 8, 14 & 15

Week 10: Critics of the rational choice revolution
Jon Elster – *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*; chapters 2-4, 6, 8, 11 & 13
Green and Shapiro – *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory*; chapters 1-5 & 8
Gabriel Almond – *A Discipline Divided: Schools and Sects in Political Science*; chapter 4

Week 11: The problem of thinking about democracy and collective choice
William Riker – *Liberalism against Populism* (Freeman, 1982); chapters 2, 3, 5 & 10

Week 12: The new institutionalism

Week 13: Institutions, ideas, and explanations of political change

Week 14: Conclusions
Thomas Kuhn – The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 3rd ed.; chapters 2, 3, 9, 11, 12
Gabriel Almond – A Discipline Divided: Schools and Sects in Political Science; chapter 1