POL 613: Seminar in State Politics and Policy  
Spring, 2004 Wednesday: 2:30-5:00  

Robert Brown (Deupree 301; 915-5901)  
e-mail: psrbrown@olemiss.edu  
Office Hours: 8:30-9:30, Tuesday and Thursday, and by appointment

Introduction

This course provides an overview of the major lines of inquiry into the processes of American state politics and policy. We will focus on the states as political entities with their peculiar political settings and policy challenges, and also comparatively in evaluating a variety of theoretical propositions about the states and about policy processes more generally. Of particular interest will be influence of the states within a national political setting.

The structure of the course at first emphasizes politics – the input side of the policy process. This includes the federal setting of the states as political systems, the major actors in the environments of the states, and then the primary institutions of state governments. Then we shift to a primary focus on public policy. We will assess some theories of the policy process in general, and then delve into a number of major policy areas in more depth.

Student Responsibilities

As with all graduate seminars, this one will be premised on extensive reading and preparation, participation in seminar discussions, and writing and research.

Participation (20% of final grade)

It is my strong feeling that seminars should be more about what you think of the readings and less about what I think of them. In other words, the quality of the seminar will depend largely upon the level of participation of the students. Everyone is expected to prepare the assigned readings by the day of the seminar and be willing and able to participate meaningfully in discussions. Note that it is my experience that waiting until the day before the seminar to begin the readings is not a very good way to facilitate this goal. Our goal is to emerge from each meeting with a solid understanding of each article/chapter, not only individually but also how they might be integrated. In my opinion, one of the major differences between graduate and undergraduate training is that you are now expected to do more than merely summarize readings and other people’s opinions. Rather, you are expected to analyze the readings--for both their strengths and weaknesses--and evaluate them with your own insights.

In addition, as part of your participation grade, I am asking each student to submit three weekly topics questions for each week of the semester. These questions should stem from the readings for each week, and can address theoretical issues, methodological concerns, integration of the week’s readings into broader literature, etc. These questions are due by 1:00 p.m. each Tuesday.

Agenda Papers (25% of final grade)

Each class member will choose one seminar meeting at which to present a brief paper on the assigned readings (note: the number of agenda papers required may change depending on
class enrollment). The paper should be an overview and **critical analysis** of the week's readings in which you develop and support a line of argument concerning the material. Importantly, **this paper should be more than a mere summary of the readings**. It should be a coherent, analytical treatment of the topic intended to stimulate discussion. Thus, a good agenda paper will contain the following: (1) a brief summary of each article; (2) an analysis/critique of the material; and most importantly, (3) a well-developed line of argument that attempts to draw the readings together.

The paper should be roughly 8 typewritten pages. In order to give your classmates adequate time to prepare their critiques (see below) of your work, papers should be distributed to them (and me) by Monday afternoon prior to the next day's class meeting. In the seminar, paper presenters should be prepared to give an oral summary of their papers and help lead the discussion. [Note: except under extreme circumstances (to be defined by me), agenda papers that are not turned in on time for the class to prepare critiques will not be accepted.]

**Critiques (20% of final grade)**

To encourage timely reading of each week's material as well as to develop your analytical skills, each class member will submit a series of critiques of the weekly agenda papers. These critiques should offer opinions and thoughts about the summary, analysis, and line of reasoning offered in the agenda paper for that week, as well as your own brief analyses of the week's readings. These will be due at the time of the seminar and should be roughly 3-4 typewritten pages.

**Research Design (35% of final grade)**

One goal of any graduate seminar should be to engage in the research enterprise. Each week our meetings will be about honing your skills in analyzing other peoples' research. One of the most important aspects of the class will be how you put these insights to work in your own research. As such, each student will be responsible for producing a research design. Note that we are not talking about annotated bibliographies or literature reviews here, but a research project in which you study a body of literature, develop a well-reasoned argument, and then set about to design a test of your ideas in an empirical fashion. What I am looking for here is a sophisticated treatment of a problem of interest to you in any area of state politics. My goal here is to get you positioned to produce a manuscript that will result in a conference paper or publication. We will take the first step here – the generation of a topic and design of the study. Anybody interested in addressing the next stages – data gathering and analysis – is encouraged to do so.

A final note on grading: It is my strong belief that as political scientists we must be held accountable not only for the quality of our ideas and analyses, but for our ability to express them. Unfortunately, as you will soon discover in your readings, many in the profession fall woefully short in this latter area. I do not expect you to be among this group. *As such, I will be taking grammar and spelling into account on all written assignments.* As I hand back your weekly assignments they will be marked for grammatical errors. I expect you to pay attention to these markings and use them to help you avoid habitual mistakes and improve your writing skills.

**The Readings**
Most of our time in class will be spent talking about state politics and policy. Our discussions will grow out of the assigned readings and whatever other knowledge or experiences the seminar members bring to class. I have some ideas that may be helpful in approaching the readings and in orienting class discussion, and will offer these as I deem appropriate. These are not meant to constrict discussion or your individual approaches to the readings, but rather to provide a common framework in thinking about the readings to enhance the quality of our discussion. As noted above, I expect the students to be the leaders in class discussions. Thus, I expect class participants to shoulder the greatest burden in discussing material; I will serve to help prod and guide discussion when it may be getting off track. It should go without saying that a seminar run in this manner will not be effective unless students take their responsibility for being prepared seriously. In most class sessions we will be asking four types of questions:

(1) Descriptive. What are the states doing? Is there significant variability among the states? Has there been much change over time? A key here is establishing an understanding of how the states are similar, how they are different, and how they have changed or are changing.

(2) Explanatory. As political scientists we seek to explain our descriptions. What explains differences among the states and over time? Does the combination of facts and models suggest new insights into political activity in the states? Are fruitful lines of inquiry suggested? Are reasonable theories being developed?

(3) Methods. Are the methods sound and appropriate? How does the choice of research design illuminate or structure the findings. Are there alternative ways of approaching the research question that would better illuminate the important theoretical questions? While no study is methodologically perfect, are there methodological problems that might undermine the major conclusions? Can these be fixed?

(4) Evaluative. What do the readings say about issues of democratic governance? Can the criteria of efficiency, equity and accountability be brought to bear to evaluate how the states are doing relative to one another, relative to the national government or localities, relative to their historical performance, or relative to some (hopefully explicit) normative standard? If we are talking about policy, can we speak meaningfully about “better” policy? The economists’ criteria of Pareto optimality is frequently invoked here. Do we mean anything else?

As you do the readings, please reflect on these questions in formulating your reactions. My hope is that the diversity of perspectives that we will bring to a more-or-less common set of questions will yield lively and enlightening discussions.

I will provide periodic feedback on your performance in the class. If you have any questions about this, or any other aspect of the course, please be sure to come and see me, or if that is not convenient, drop me an note through e-mail.

The following books are not required, but highly recommended. They can be found at various internet textbook outlets and used versions are generally inexpensive.

Erikson, Robert, Gerald Wright, and John McIver. 1993. *Statehouse Democracy*
Cambridge University Press.

In addition, you are required to buy (and read) Strunk and White, The Elements of Style. It can be found in the Ole Miss bookstore as well as Square Books. See my comments above for my views on the importance of effective writing. Some hints before you begin your assignments:

1. Read Strunk and White
2. Prepare adequate notes and an outline
3. Re-read Strunk and White
4. Prepare a draft of your manuscript
5. Re-read Strunk and White

Course Schedule and Readings

Jan 20: States in a Federal Setting

Articles


Jan. 27: Political Culture

Articles

Dran, Ellen M., Robert B. Albritton, and Mikel Wyckoff. 1991. “Surrogate versus Direct


Feb 3: Public Opinion

**Articles**


Feb 10: Participation

**Articles**


Feb. 17: Elections

Articles


February 24: Party Competition

Brown, Robert D., and John M. Bruce. 2002.. “Political Parties in State and Nation: Party


March 2: Political Parties

**Articles**


March 9: Spring Break

March 16: Legislatures

**Articles**


Berry, William, Michael Berkman, and Stuart Schneiderman. 2000. “Legislative


Arceneaux, Kevin. 2001. “The “Gender Gap” in State Legislative Representation: New Data to Tackle an Old Question.” *Political Research Quarterly*

**March 23: Governors**


**March 30: Party Competition and Party Control as Policy Determinants**

**Articles**


April 6: More on Policy Determinants

Articles


April 13: work on papers

April 20: work on papers

April 27: work on papers