Course Overview

The purpose of the seminar will be to explore two radically different images of democratic politics that have emerged from social choice theory, the formal study of how individual preferences aggregate to make collective decisions.

If political choice occurs across one dimension (such as the traditional left-right ideological spectrum), the theory yields a majority choice at the position favored by the median voter, which, under certain circumstances, will also be a winning, equilibrium strategy in elections and other decisions made by voting. This result has powerful practical, normative, and scientific implications. It advises politicians to adopt centrist programs, endorses such policies as democratically desirable, predicts that policies in the vicinity of the median will remain stable unless and until voters’ preferences shift, and explains political change by looking to forces—typically exogenous to politics—that influence median preferences (e.g., demographics, economics, culture, ideas).

On the other hand, if political choices are shaped by multiple, cross-cutting issue dimensions, then majority voting will rarely produce a stable equilibrium. Politicians can win by manipulating issues opportunistically. The will of the people becomes a debatable and perhaps empty notion. Political outcomes, unless constrained by institutions, are likely to be unstable, whether or not underlying preferences change; and political explanation depends on close attention to historical sequence and conjunction and to inherently political causes, such as the skill and strategy of leaders.

This course is intended primarily as a capstone senior seminar for majors in either Political Science or Philosophy, Politics, and Economics; and priority for enrollment will be given to those students. If space is available, the seminar will also be suitable for senior majors in related
programs, such as Economics or Philosophy. In addition, graduate students in Political Science are welcome. Other interested students should confer with me before enrolling. Although there is a huge formal literature on social choice theory, the seminar is about its political and philosophical implications and applications, rather than the formal analysis per se. Willingness to work through occasional moderately technical expositions will be necessary, but there are no mathematical prerequisites.

Materials

Three paperback books are available for you to purchase at the Penn Bookstore, 36th and Walnut Sts., as “required” books:


In addition, two other paperbacks have been ordered in smaller numbers as “recommended” purchases:


A copy of each of these five books will also be placed on reserve in the Goldstein Undergraduate Study Center (formerly Rosengarten Reserve Room) in the Van Pelt Library.

A coursepack containing required readings from sources other than the books above will be available for purchase from the Campus Copy Center, 3907 Walnut St. However, for some sessions, you will have a choice of readings (varying, for example, in technical difficulty), and the syllabus also includes numerous optional readings. You will not find such items in the coursepack, but instead must resort to the Goldstein Study Center, the Van Pelt stacks or Current Periodicals Room, or (for some journals) on-line sources.

A Note on Textbooks

As far as I know, no textbook on social-choice theory that would be ideal for this course is available. Therefore, you will have various options for learning about basic concepts and results. You’ll find presentations about most of them in the three required course books by Riker, Mackie, and McGann, but each of these authors is mainly concerned with making a larger normative argument, rather than with providing a neutral analytic exposition. Many texts in this
area are written by and for mathematicians, economists, or logicians. If you have an affinity for such work, you may want to seek out and use source books that are not on the syllabus. Otherwise, I recommend that you rely on one or more of the following texts:

- Paul E. Johnson, *Social Choice: Theory and Research*, Sage, 1998. I have ordered copies of this book as a recommended purchase, because it is inexpensive, in print, and generally clear. However, it is also terse and abstract, even though the author is a political scientist.


- Nicholas R. Miller, *Committees, Agendas, and Voting*, Routledge, 2001. A lucid exposition by a political scientist who is one of the leading contributors to this field. Unfortunately, the book is available only in hardback at the exorbitant price of $195.

- Kenneth A. Shepsle and Mark S. Bonchek, *Analyzing Politics: Rationality, Behavior, and Institutions*, Norton, 1997. Intended for undergraduates and easy to follow; however, the book only partially overlaps with the concerns of our course.


All of these books should be available on reserve in the Goldstein Study Center. In some weeks, the syllabus lists as alternative sources selections from several of these books. I encourage you to use whichever ones work best for you.

**Requirements**

Assessment of your work will be based on three sets of requirements: class participation, reflection papers, and either a research paper or two essays.

**Class Participation**

Because this course is intended to be a true seminar, active involvement by all members will be crucial to the learning experience. I expect you to attend all sessions, to arrive well prepared—having read and thought about all required readings, and to contribute thoughtfully and constructively to discussions.
Reflection Papers

During the semester, you will be asked to write four reflection papers at more-or-less regular intervals. (We’ll work out a schedule during the first week or two of the course.) In these papers, I ask you to reflect on ideas in one or more of the readings for that week – e.g., by raising questions about aspects that puzzle you, challenging ideas with which you disagree, applying concepts that seem to you useful, or connecting course ideas to something you have previously learned or observed.

I plan to organize a substantial part of each seminar around ideas in reflection papers. To make that feasible, you must send your paper to me (as an email attachment) no later than 10 p.m. on the Tuesday before the class for which you are writing. If you wish, you may also send any or all of your reflection papers to classmates via our listserv. You are encouraged but not required to read papers that classmates make available. In seminar discussions, we won’t assume that everyone has read the papers.

Reflection papers should be about 1000 to 1500 words long (approximately 2-3 pages single-spaced, with standard margins and font). If you would like editorial feedback, please send me a double-spaced version.

Research Paper or Two Essays

PPE majors must write a research paper. Other members of the class will have a choice between writing one research paper or two essays.

(a) The research paper should be 15-25 standard double-spaced pages. It will be due by 5 p.m. on December 22, the last day of the exam period, but you are welcome to submit your paper earlier. The paper may be on any subject, provided it is related to themes or ideas from the course. As the name implies, research papers must involve significant use of sources beyond the required readings. I will suggest topics, but you may also devise your own, subject to my approval. If you choose the research paper option, you must give me a paper proposal (just a paragraph or two will do) by November 11. We will then schedule an individual meeting to discuss your research plans. To help avoid incompletes, late research papers will be penalized one full grade. Toward the same end, you will have the option of submitting a preliminary draft of your paper, in which case you may revise and resubmit–with the possibility of a grade change–any time before April 15 in the Spring semester. Eligible students may also expand the research paper into an Honors thesis to complete in the spring.

(b) Each essay will be on a theme of your choosing related to one of the major sections of the course. Students choosing the essay option must write separate essays in response to two of the three syllabus sections. Due dates for essays are October 28 for Section I, November 18 for Section II, and December 22 for Section III. Essays may or may not involve research beyond the required readings, but in any case they must demonstrate significant independent thought and
analysis. Each essay should be 8-13 standard double-spaced pages. Late essays will be penalized. I will not offer a revise-and-resubmit option for essays.

A research paper or essay may take off from a topic you first explored in a reflection paper. However, if ideas or writing from a reflection paper are incorporated in a longer paper, my expectations for it will increase commensurately.

Assessment

Semester grades will be based on an equal weighting of grades for class participation, the set of four response papers, and the research paper or two essays. However, you must receive a passing grade for all three components in order to pass the course; and if you choose the option of writing two essays, you must receive a passing grade for both essays.

All papers will be graded using the conventional grading system. I will explain criteria for assessing papers in class or in a handout if desired. Class participation will be based on points converted into letter grades. That system will be explained in class.

Reading Assignments

Readings marked by an asterisk (*) are optional. I encourage you to look over such items and to read those that interest you. They may also be useful in writing essays or research papers. Other readings are required; however, if two or more readings are connected by ‘or’, they are alternatives. Read at least one of them.

The availability of readings is indicated as follows:

- **T** = in a course text that you can buy at the Bookstore
- **C** = included in the coursepack that you can buy at Campus Copy
- **R** = reserved in Goldstein/Rosengarten
- **H** = handout to be distributed in class

Despite the number of optional and alternative items, what follows is only a small fraction of a huge literature. If you know of, or come across other items that you think are especially relevant to the concerns of this course, please call them to my attention.

Please note that references from book chapters may not be included in the coursepack. In such cases, you might want read from your coursepack in the library, with the book itself handy. I recommend such a practice not only for checking references, but also for getting an overall idea of a book and for browsing in it.
9/9: Introductory and Organizational Meeting

I. BASIC IDEAS

9/16: Historical Background

C, R Iain McLean and Arnold B. Urken, eds., *Classics of Social Choice*, University of Michigan Press, 1995, ch. 1 (pp. 1-63). *I also encourage you to browse in the other chapters by the original authors, such as chs. 7 and 8 by Condorcet (particularly pp. 122-43).

T, R Johnson, *Social Choice*, Preface and ch. 1 (pp. ix - 8).


9/23: Arrow’s Theorem

T, R Johnson, pp. 9-30

or T Riker, *Liberalism*, ch. 5 (pp. 115-36)—* chs. 3 and 4;


or R Gaertner, *A Primer in Social Choice Theory*, ch. 2

There are also numerous more technical expositions and critiques of the Arrow theorem, but if you find the presentations listed here too elementary (or if you have absorbed them), I suggest you proceed to the original source:


*T, R Mackie, pp. 72-85

9/30: Black’s Median Voter Theorem

T, R Johnson, ch. 5 (pp. 49-59) plus refer back to ch. 4 as necessary to understand basic concepts, especially unidimensional and multidimensional spatial models and single-peakedness

or R Gerald S. Strom, The Logic of Lawmaking, chs. 1 and 2

or R Shepsle and Bonchek, pp. 82-91.

or R Gaertner, ch. 3


* R Black, Theory of Committees and Elections, esp. chs IV and VII.

10/7: Interlude: Are we barking up the wrong tree? (or is the tree an elephant’s leg?)

C, R Drew Westen, The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation, Public Affairs, 2007, ch. 2 and 3

H Michel Balinski and Rida Laraki, Majority Judgment: Measuring, Ranking, and Electing, manuscript, 2009, forthcoming from MIT Press, chs. 6 and 7

* Donald P. Green and Ian Shapiro, Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory, Yale University Press, 1994, ch. 7

10/14: Manipulation of Voting Systems, Strategic Voting, and Vote Trading

C, R Shepsle and Bonchek, Analyzing Politics, pp. 166-77

C, R Strom, Logic of Lawmaking, ch. 3


C, R Frohlich and Oppenheimer, Modern Political Economy, pp. 123-40

T, R Mackie, ch. 7 (pp. 158-72)

*T, R* Riker, *Liberalism Against Populism*, chs. 2, 6

*R* Poundstone, *Gaming the Vote*, chs. 3, 5, 6

10/21: The Chaos Theorems: Disequilibrium in Multidimensional Politics

*T, R* Riker, *Liberalism Against Populism*, ch. 7

*T, R* Johnson, pp. 60-80

or *R* Strom, *Logic of Lawmaking*, ch. 4


*T, R* Johnson, pp. 93-6

or *(R)* Strom, ch. 7 (both on the uncovered set)

*T, R* Mackie, ch. 8 (pp. 173-96)


II. EMPIRICAL EXTENSIONS AND APPLICATIONS

10/28: Structure-Induced Equilibrium [SECTION I ESSAYS DUE]

*T, R* Johnson pp. 80-93

or *R* Strom, ch. 6


*T, R* McGann, ch. 5


**11/4: Heresthetic**


T Riker, *The Art of Political Manipulation*, Preface, ch. 1, and Conclusion, plus at least one of the following chapters: 2, 4, 5, 6, and 10


C Iain McLean, “Review Article: William H. Riker and the Invention of Heresthetic(s),” *British Journal of Political Science*, 32:3, July 2002, pp. 535-45 (The remaining pages of this article will be more relevant on 11/25.)

* R Strom, ch. 5

11/11: Historical Applications  [RESEARCH PAPER PROPOSALS DUE]

T Riker, Liberalism Against Populism, ch. 9


* T, R Riker’s Art of Political Manipulation includes several more cases that have to do with heresthetics and race (chs. 1, 2, and 11)


* Iain McLean, Rational Choice and British Politics: An Analysis of Rhetoric and Manipulation from Peel to Blair, Oxford University Press, 2001; any chapters


III. NORMATIVE INFERENCES AND DEBATES

11/18: William Riker’s Challenge to Democratic Theory [*SECTION II ESSAYS DUE*]

T, R Riker, *Liberalism Against Populism*, chs. 1 and 10

T, R Mackie, ch. 2 (pp. 23-43)

* R Poundstone, *Gaming the Vote*, ch. 10


*Peter C. Ordeshook, Douglas Rae, and William Riker, symposium in the *American Political Science Review*, 74, June 1980, pp. 447-58; *preceded by an article by Riker that can be read as a supplement to his chapter above. This symposium, including Riker’s article, also appears in Peter C. Ordeshook and Kenneth A. Shepsle, eds., *Political Equilibrium*, Kluwer-Nijhoff, 1982, Part I.


11/25: Gerry Mackie’s Impassioned Rebuttal

T, R Mackie, chs. 1, 12, 13, pp. 378-96, and ch. 18. Also, optional: *chs. 9, 10, 11, 17

C McLean, “Review Article: William H. Riker and the Invention of Heresthetic(s),” pp. 545-58

12/2: Miller and McGann: Pluralistic Majoritarianism


T, R Anthony McGann, *The Logic of Democracy*, ch. 1, 2, 4, 9 (*chs. 3 and 8)
12/9: Additional Attempts at Synthesis


T, R McGann, pp. 130-41 (*remainder of chs. 6 and 7 optional)*


12/22: RESEARCH PAPERS AND SECTION III ESSAYS DUE BY 5:00 P.M.