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1 Instructor: contact information

- Adam Zelizer
  - Email: zelizer@uchicago.edu
  - Class time: Tu, Th, 11:00-12:20pm
  - Office hours: By appointment

2 Canvas website

I will post course materials on Canvas, including assignments, readings, or other materials. Please email me if you are not able to access the Canvas site or if any materials are missing.

3 Course description

Legislatures have been called the “central citadels” of democracy and the chief defense against dictatorship. Today, there is a widespread view that legislatures are broken. From city councils and state legislatures to Congress and the UK Parliament to the European Parliament and the United Nations, legislatures seem unable to address society’s problems. Their failures give space for populist demagogues and the erosion of democracy.

This course will introduce students to the policymaking process and politics of legislatures. We will study legislative institutions; the decision-making processes of individual legislators; and the role of outside advocates and interests. Our goal is to understand how legislatures work - in terms of producing policy that incorporates expertise and responds to policy demands from the public - and why they often don’t.

Methodologically, the course aims to build and expand on the skills that students are developing in all Harris public policy master’s programs: microeconomics, statistics, analytical politics. We use formal mathematical models (mostly game theory) to think about how legislators act strategically within given contexts. We complement this formal analysis by studying empirical research to explore theoretical models and gain insight into real-world events. The course assignments require students to work on strategic thinking, to interpret empirical findings, and to strengthen written communication skills that allow students to advocate for policy or procedural reforms to improve legislative performance.

4 Logistics

This is a nine-week course and the course material has been organized into nine modules (i.e., one module per week). Each module will focus on one pathology of legislatures. The content of each module is discussed in section 6.
4.1 Lectures

Each lecture will include both technical and practical discussions of the topic in that module. I will provide detailed walkthroughs of theoretical models that address key concepts in for that module. The concepts developed in the models will be useful for the analysis of empirical research the course project.

Each class will also include discussion of empirical applications of the theoretical models. The academic articles reflect the best empirical research on the topic in that module. Many of them include advanced statistical methods and analyses, and as a result I expect there will be parts of most papers that are difficult to follow. That is why we will discuss the articles together in class. If you find the articles too lengthy or dense, you may consider reading the abstract, introduction, and conclusion (the so-called “graduate student read”). We are reading them because they offer the best evidence available to learn about legislatures, and even if there are some elements that are difficult, the main takeaways of each article should be informative about the key concepts we are covering in the course.

4.2 Office hours

All office hours will be available by appointment. Please do not hesitate to ask for a meeting! Talking with students about the course, or about your interests and experience in policymaking, is one of my joys in teaching. Holding office hours by appointment is intended to make sure I am available to you whenever your schedule permits, including nights and weekends. Before class will often be a good time to meet.

5 Evaluations

Students will be evaluated based on three components. First, two short online assessments (20% total). Second, an in-class presentation of one of the course readings (20% total). Third, a quarter-long research project (60%). Notice that there will be no midterm or final exam.

1. Online assessments: There will be two online reading assessments, which will be posted on Canvas under the Assignments tab at least one week before they are due. They must be submitted on Canvas before midnight on the date specified. The assessments are meant to judge whether students are absorbing key concepts from the readings and lectures.

2. In-class presentation: Each student must pick one paper from the syllabus for which they will lead discussion in class. I leave it up to the student to discuss the paper as they see fit, but below are a list of questions that I share with PhD students about how to evaluate papers. Some of the points are a bit technical, or targeted for empirical papers, so you may prefer to focus on the more substantive questions and conclusions papers reach than their methods.

   (a) What is the question? Is it interesting? A well-written paper will answer this question quickly. As soon as you identify the question, you should ask whether it
is truly interesting. Is it intrinsically interesting, is it relevant for policy, or does it make progress in light of an existing, interesting literature?

(b) Has this question already been answered well in previous papers? What contributions does the paper make over previous studies?

(c) Before reading too far, think about how you would answer this question. What would you do if you had to write a paper on this question? This will help in your subsequent evaluations.

(d) What is the empirical strategy? Think about the quantity being estimated. How does it relate to the question of the paper? What is the source of exogenous variation being used? What identification assumptions are necessary? Are these assumptions plausible? Are they clarified by the author and well justified?

(e) What data are being used? How were they collected? How are the variables defined? What is the unit of observation? Are these choices appropriate?

(f) Did the authors appropriately interpret their results? Did they interpret their results in substantively meaningful ways? Did they conflate statistical and substantive significance?

3. Research project: Students will work on a research project throughout the quarter. Each student must work on answering a specific policy and procedural question of their choice (i.e., a real problem facing a real legislature). There are two possibilities for these questions. First, students can work on a policy question that a legislature is facing. For example, “How should Illinois address its unfunded pension obligations” or “How has Illinois’ recent bail reform affected crime rates?” These issues need not relate to Illinois; any legislature, from a city council to school board to national legislature are fair game. Second, students may also choose a topic related to procedure rather than policy. For instance, “What are the anticipated effects of eliminating the filibuster” or “How can Congress re-establish regular order and committee power in the legislative process?” Bear in mind that these are just examples and I encourage students to be creative and truly connect the project to their policy interests. My goal is to share your projects with a relevant legislator or interest group at the conclusion of the course. As part of the work on the project, students must deliver several outputs throughout the quarter. In total, these outputs represent 60% of the final grade.

- **Project proposal (0%):** Each student must submit a proposal indicating the specific topic/question they will work on, the scope of the project, and target audience (legislature or legislator). This proposal is meant to allow me to provide feedback, and as such it is ungraded. Maximum length: 1 page (12 pt font, single spacing). Tentative due date: April 18.

- **Op-ed (30%):** Each student must submit a short article in the style of a newspaper op-ed that includes the specific policy question under study, some of the main issues involved and preliminary policy recommendations. This is not meant to be a comprehensive treatment of the question, but rather an eye-catching piece that is addressed at a general public, raises interesting issues and provides a glimpse
of an answer. The op-ed is worth 30% of the final grade. Maximum length: 2 pages (12 pt font, 1.5 line spacing). Tentative due date: May 9.

- **Policy memo (30%)**: Each student must submit a final policy memo that lays out in more detail the question, methodology, findings and recommendations from the research project. The memo must be addressed to a relevant specialized audience (e.g. legislator, parliamentary committee, funding agency, NGO) and provide evidence of rigorous, careful analysis (though this analysis need not be quantitative in nature). The policy memo is worth 30% of the final grade. Maximum length: 5 pages (12 pt font, 1.5 line spacing). Tentative due date: May 27.

6 Course schedule

- **Week 1: Chaos**

  Lecture: McKelvey’s Chaos Theorem, A Model of Agenda Setting

  Readings:

  Supplemental Readings:

- **Week 2: Special interests**

  Lecture: Distributive Models, Structure Induced Equilibrium, Bargaining

  Readings:

  Supplemental Readings:

• Week 3: Information

Lecture: Cheap talk, expertise, specialization

Readings:

Supplemental Readings:

• Week 4: Partisanship

Lecture: Party cartels, polarization

Readings:
Supplemental Readings:


• Week 5: Gridlock

Lecture: Pivotal politics, separation of powers
Readings:

Supplemental Readings:


• Week 6: Representation

Lecture: Selection, Incentives, Beliefs, Responsiveness, Congruence
Readings:

Supplemental Readings:

- **Week 7: Money**

  Lecture: Models of Exchange, Subsidy, Persuasion

  Readings:

  Supplemental Readings:

- **Week 8: Capacity**

  Lecture: Regular Order, Seniority, Centralization

  Readings:
  - Squire, Peverill. “Measuring state legislative professionalism: The squire index revisited”
  - Crosson, Furnas, LaPira, Burgat. “Partisan Competition and the Decline in Legislative Capacity among Congressional Offices”

  Supplemental Readings:

- **Week 9: Reform**

  Lecture: Traps, Equity

  Readings:
  - Fouirnaies, Alexander. “How Do Campaign Spending Limits Affect Elections”
- Fowler, Anthony. “Electoral and policy consequences of voter turnout: Evidence from compulsory voting in Australia”

Supplemental Readings:
- Santucci, Jack. “Variants of Ranked-Choice Voting from a Strategic Perspective.”

7 Academic integrity

The Harris School has a formal policy on academic integrity that you are expected to adhere to. Examples of academic dishonesty include (but are not limited to) turning in someone else’s work as your own, copying solutions to past years’ problem sets, and receiving any unapproved assistance on exams. **Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated in this course.** All students suspected of academic dishonesty will be reported to the Harris Dean of Students for investigation and adjudication. The disciplinary process can result in sanctions up to and including suspension or expulsion from the University. In addition to disciplinary sanctions, students who commit academic honesty will may also be penalized in their course grades, at the discretion of the instructors.

8 Diversity and inclusion

Consistent with the University of Chicago’s commitment to open discourse and free expression, we encourage students to respect and engage with others of differing backgrounds or perspectives, even when the ideas or insights shared may be viewed as unpopular or controversial. Thought-provoking discourse is facilitated when we not only speak freely but also listen carefully and respectfully to others.

9 Accessibility

The University of Chicago is committed to ensuring equitable access to our academic programs and services. Students with disabilities who have been approved for the use of academic accommodations by Student Disability Services (SDS) and need a reasonable accommodation(s) to participate fully in this course should follow the procedures established by SDS for using accommodations. The starting point is to contact disabilities@uchicago.edu. Timely notifications are required in order to ensure that your accommodations can be implemented.
10  **Harris Writing Program**

If you need help with the written assignments in this course please see the Writing Program. The Writing Fellows and Coaches can help you establish best practices in terms of brainstorming, drafting, and editing your assignments, and will critically engage your writing and thinking skills. And if you are an English Language Learner the Writing Program has trained staff on hand to help you with Academic English conventions. Find the Writing Program here.