

SOCIAL ANALYSIS 46 THINKING ABOUT POLITICS

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Professor Kenneth Shepsle
Institute of Quantitative Social Science
Department of Government
K312 CGIS (Knafel Building)

617-495-4928
kshepsle@iq.harvard.edu

Office Hours: Thursday 12-2 or by appointment

General Comments

This course surveys approaches to and models of politics based on the rational-actor paradigm. The underlying theme of the course is that politics may be described and understood in terms of rational, goal-seeking behavior by individuals in various institutional contexts. This approach explains a broad range of political phenomena, provides non-obvious insights, illuminates a number of paradoxes and puzzles, and (hopefully) encourages the student to think deeply and with sophistication about current events, history, and both public and private political life generally. The main emphasis is on providing tools and approaches for *analyzing* political events and phenomena, not judging them.

The lessons of the rational-choice approach apply to *private* politics as well as to *public* politics -- to office and workplace politics and the politics of families, clubs, Harvard houses, university departments, churches, and firms, as well as to the public politics of legislatures, courts, bureaucracies, elections, parties, and interest groups.

The course is organized into one organizational session, 20 lectures, 3 lecture sessions "to be determined," and 9 section meetings. Lectures are given two times weekly, lasting one hour each. They are arranged into four main subjects: individual choice, group choice, collective action, and institutions. Sections meet most weeks. Sections will focus on four principal tasks: controversies, experiments, general discussions, and examination reviews.

Student performance is judged on the basis of five activities: (1) an in-class midterm examination on Tuesday, October 13 (25%); (2) 750-word papers on *two* of the three "controversies" described below (10% each); (3) section participation (10%); (4) a 3000-word paper due on Friday, December 11 (20%); and (5) an in-class final examination scheduled by the College (25%). The midterm will cover materials through the lectures on group choice. The final paper may either be an elaboration of one of the shorter papers or an entirely new one; it should be discussed with and approved in advance by your TF. (A word to the wise: An entirely new paper tends to be more exciting, both to write and to read, but requires a bit more forethought.)

Section Participation

Section participation is extremely important in this course. The first meeting is organizational – meet ‘n greet. Three meetings will be devoted to selected controversies, applying the lessons of the lecture and reading material to specific controversial issues. On two occasions the student will participate in group social science experiments that illustrate some of the principles with which we shall be concerned during the semester. One occasion is devoted to a general discussion organized by the TF on a topic of his choosing. Finally, discussion/review meetings of section will be scheduled for just before the midterm and final examinations. *Your schedule must allow for lectures on Tuesday and Thursday 11-12:00 each week,*

and a section meeting most weeks on Thursday mornings, 9-10:30. (If enrollments warrant, we will add an additional section on Wednesdays, 3-4:30.) Most weeks, section will only last an hour. The two experimental sessions may take up the full hour and a half.

Readings

All readings should be done during the week indicated since they are keyed to lecture materials. Some of the readings serve as broad background for the lectures; others explicitly cover lecture materials; still others are assigned for specific section meetings. All books will be on reserve at Hilles and Lamont Libraries. However, the student is urged to purchase his or her own copy of these materials. The books are available at the COOP. The other materials will be made available on-line on the course web page as well as with links to many articles from the electronic version of this syllabus. The books for purchase are:

Bianco, *American Politics: Strategy and Choice*
 Laver, *Playing Politics: The Nightmare Continues* (online)
 Riker, *Liberalism Against Populism*
 Riker, *The Art of Political Manipulation*
 Shepsle and Bonchek, *Analyzing Politics*

The books by Bianco, Laver, and Riker (*The Art...*) are collections of stories, vignettes, and experiments; their contents are distributed throughout the syllabus. The other book by Riker (*Liberalism...*) and the one by Shepsle and Bonchek will serve as texts for the course. [Laver's *Playing Politics: The Nightmare Continues* requires some additional explanation. It is a madcap collection of experiments, each with an important political point to make, and each illustrating the very real power of rational choice, but presented in such a bizarre fashion that the reader risks nightmares and may sometimes believe he or she is watching *Blue Velvet*, *Twin Peaks*, or *Six Feet Under!*]

Experiments

On two occasions during section meetings, students will participate in social science experiments. In each experiment, students, depending on their play and that of their classmates, will win "points." These points will add up during the semester and students will be rank ordered in terms of total points. Those in the top 40% will have his or her section participation grade incremented by one grading level, e.g., B+ to A-.

Papers

At the first section meeting, students will volunteer to take a leadership role in two of the three "controversy" discussions. By the Monday before the date of that session, he or she will turn in a memo *no longer than a page* to the TF, outlining the major issues to be emphasized during discussion. The TF will use these memos (several students will write them for each discussion) to organize discussion. These memos serve an additional function for the student. They will serve as a preliminary outline for a three-to-four-page paper elaborating on the themes of the controversy. That paper is to be turned in to the TF the following week (so that the student can benefit from any discussion in class). If a student chooses, he or she may expand one of these papers to satisfy the final paper requirement. The writing of the final paper should be done in consultation with his or her TF. It is due on Friday, December 11.

Examinations and Other Logistics

Both the in-class midterm and the College-administered final are *open-book*. The student will be permitted to use any materials to assist him or her – books, articles, lecture and section notes, handouts, etc. – anything but personal consultants! Therefore, it is vital to attend lecture and section very regularly. Students are encouraged to prepare for these examinations in groups.

Professor Shepsle is available for individual meetings during his office hours (Thursdays 12-2) or at other times that may be scheduled by contacting him after class, telephoning his office, or e-mailing him. Likewise, the TF is available for assistance and will announce office hours, office locations, and telephone number at the first discussion section.

TOPICAL SYLLABUS

I. INTRODUCTION

TH 9.3 ORGANIZATIONAL MEETING

(goals of course; description of course materials; brief examination of rationality; problems with other approaches)

II. INDIVIDUAL CHOICE

(What do we mean by choice? What is rationality? How should we conceive of preference and value?)

TU 9.8 LECTURE II.1: RATIONAL CHOICE

(methodological individualism; philosophical meanings of rationality; logic of preferences)

TH 9.10 LECTURE II.2: MODELS OF CHOICE

(risk, uncertainty, and expected utility)

III. GROUP CHOICE

(what mechanisms can groups use to make choices? what criteria can we use to judge group decisions? what do groups "want"?)

TU 9.15 LECTURE III.1: GROUP CHOICE AND ARROW'S THEOREM

(Condorcet paradox; examples from politics; generalization of Condorcet paradox to large groups and multiple alternatives; statement of Arrow theorem)

TH 9.17 LECTURE III.2: MAJORITY RULE AND COLLECTIVE CHOICE

(Arrow's theorem and majority rule; how likely is collective intransitivity? how can we get around it? Black's single peakedness; other value restrictions)

>> TH 9.17 SECTION MEETING 1: *Organizational*<<

TU 9.22 Continuation of LECTURE III.2

TH 9.24 LECTURE III.3: SPATIAL MODELS (ONE DIMENSIONAL)

(spatial set-up; Black's logic of committee decision making; Downs's logic of electoral decision making)

>>TH 9.24 SECTION MEETING 2: *Experiment*<<

TU 9.29 LECTURE III.4: SPATIAL MODELS (MULTIDIMENSIONAL)

(win sets; chaos; committees and elections; review of experimental results)

TH 10.1 LECTURE III.5: MANIPULATION

(strategic preference misrepresentation; agenda control)

>>TH 10.1 SECTION MEETING 3: *Controversy: What is the public interest?*<<

TU 10.6 LECTURE III.6: ALTERNATIVE ELECTION SYSTEMS

(plurality; plurality with runoff; proportional representation; rank-order voting; approval and negative voting; elections in Harvard's FAS)

TH 10.8 Continuation of LECTURE III.6

>>TH 10.8 SECTION MEETING 4: Midterm Review<<

TU 10.13 *** MIDTERM EXAMINATION ***

IV. COLLECTIVE ACTION

(why do people participate in group activities? what are the costs and benefits? what are the social effects of doing things publicly vs. privately?)

TH 10.15 LECTURE IV.1: PRISONERS' DILEMMA
(problem of cooperation; in-class PD experiment; n-person PD game)

TU 10.20 Continuation of LECTURE IV.1

TH 10.22 LECTURE IV.2: OLSON'S *THE LOGIC OF COLLECTIVE ACTION*
(collective action, voting, other forms of participation)

>>TH 10.22 SECTION MEETING 5: Experiment<<

TU 10.27 LECTURE IV.3: PUBLIC GOODS AND EXTERNALITIES
(public goods; externalities; free riding; commons problems; property rights; other institutions)

V. INSTITUTIONS

(how are group preferences implemented? what are the "operating characteristics" of political institutions? what problems confront institution builders?)

TH 10.29 LECTURE V.1: GENERAL REMARKS
(institutions as responses to "failures"; division- and specialization-of-labor; jurisdictions; monitoring; transactions costs)

>>TH 10.29 SECTION MEETING 6: Controversy: Who will save
New England fishermen (from themselves)?<<

TU 11.3 LECTURE V.2: LEGISLATIVE MODELS
(legislative structure; legislative procedure; bicameralism)

TH 11.5 Continuation of LECTURE V.2

TU 11.10 LECTURE V.3: HIERARCHY AND BUREAUCRACY
(objective functions; incentives and monitoring; markets v. hierarchies)

TH 11.12 Continuation of LECTURE V.3

>>TH 11.12 SECTION MEETING 7: TF Discussion<<

TU 11.17 LECTURE V.4: LEGISLATIVE-EXECUTIVE RELATIONS
(bureaucratic drift; coalitional drift; police patrols and fire alarms; capture and cozy triangles)

TH 11.19 Continuation of LECTURE V.4

TU 11.24 To be determined

TU 12.1 To be determined

>>TH 12.1 SECTION MEETING 8: *Controversy: Heresthetic – Are politicians manipulators?*

TH 12.3 To be determined

>>(TO BE SCHEDULED DURING READING PERIOD) SECTION MEETING 9: *Final Review*<<

SYLLABUS OF READINGS FOR LECTURES

Readings for Lecture II.1 and II.2

Shepsle and Bonchek, *Analyzing Politics*, Chap. 1-2.

Bianco, *American Politics*, Chap. 1

Laver, *Playing Politics*, Chap. 1-2

Cushman, "Rational Fears," *Lingua Franca* (Nov/Dec 1994): 42-54.

Readings for Lectures III.1 and III.2

Shepsle and Bonchek, *Analyzing Politics*, Chap. 3-4

Riker, *Liberalism Against Populism*, Chap. 1-3, 5

Readings for Lecture III.3 and III.4

Shepsle and Bonchek, *Analyzing Politics*, Chap. 5

Laver, *Playing Politics*, Chap. 6-8

Bianco, *American Politics*, Chap. 5

Readings for Lecture III.5

Riker, *Liberalism*, Chap. 6-9

Shepsle and Bonchek, *Analyzing Politics*, Chap. 6

Laver, *Playing Politics*, Chap. 9

Readings for Lecture III.6

Riker, *Liberalism*, Chap. 4

Shepsle and Bonchek, *Analyzing Politics*, Chap. 7

Bianco, *American Politics*, Chap. 2

Recommended: Levin and Nalebuff, "[An Introduction to Vote-Counting Schemes](#)," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 9 (1995): 3-26

Recommended: Colomer and McLean, "[Electing Popes: Approval Balloting and Qualified-Majority Rule](#)," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 29 (1998): 1-22

Readings for Lecture IV.1

Shepsle and Bonchek, *Analyzing Politics*, Chap. 8

Laver, *Playing Politics*, Chap. 3-5

Recommended: Grossman, "[The Dilemma of Prisoners](#)," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 38 (1994): 43-55

Readings for Lecture IV.2

Shepsle and Bonchek, *Analyzing Politics*, Chap. 9

Bianco, *American Politics*, Chap. 3-4

Johnson (and others) "Why I Won't Vote," *Lawrence (KS) Journal World* (Nov 5 1996), p.5B; (Nov 7 1996), p. 6B; (Nov 9 1996), pp. 8B-9B; (Nov 12 1996), p. 1B

Jay, "The Rise of Facebook Activism" <http://www.cbc.ca/technology/story/2008/09/05/f-online-protest.html>

Readings for Lecture IV.3

Shepsle and Bonchek, *Analyzing Politics*, Chap. 10

Frank, "The Invisible Hand is Shaking," *New York Times*, May 25, 2008, Week in Review section, page 5.

Readings for Lecture V.1

Shepsle and Bonchek, *Analyzing Politics*, Chap. 11

Shepsle, "Studying Institutions: Some Lessons from the Rational Choice Approach," *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 1 (1989), 131-147

Readings for Lecture V.2

Shepsle and Bonchek, *Analyzing Politics*, Chap. 12

Bianco, *American Politics*, Chap. 6

Shepsle and Weingast, "Penultimate Power: Conference Committees and the Legislative Process," in Fiorina and Rohde (eds.) *Home Style and Washington Work*, pp. 199-219

Stockman, "The Social Pork Barrel," *The Public Interest* (Spring, 1975): 3-30

Readings for Lecture V.3

Shepsle and Bonchek, *Analyzing Politics*, Chap. 13-14.

Readings for Lecture V.4

Shepsle and Bonchek, *Analyzing Politics*, Chap. 15

Bianco, *American Politics*, Chap. 7-8

McCubbins and Schwartz, "[Congressional Oversight Overlooked](#)," *American Journal of Political Science* 28 (1984), 165-79

SYLLABUS OF READINGS FOR SECTION MEETINGS

Controversy #1: What Is the Public Interest?

Riker, *Liberalism against Populism*, Chap. 10

Grofman and Feld, "[Rousseau's General Will: A Condorcetian Perspective](#)," *American Political Science Review* 82 (1988), 567-576

Controversy #2: Who Will Save New England Fishermen (from themselves)?

Hardin, "[The Tragedy of the Commons](#)," *Science* 162 (1968): 1243-1248

Ingrassia, "[Overfishing Threatens to Wipe Out Species and Crush Industry](#)," *Wall Street Journal* (July 16, 1991), pp. A1, A8

Dobbs, "A Warning by the Sturgeon General," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition* (June 8-14, 1992)

Hockstader, "Caviar Wars Decimate Sturgeon," *International Herald Tribune* (June 10, 1997), p.1

Barro, "[Federal Protection -- Only Cute Critters Need Apply](#)," *Wall Street Journal*, August 4, 1994, p. A12

McGrory, "Lobstermen Hauling Up Empty Traps," *Boston Globe*, July 20, 1994, pp. 1, 23

Controversy #3: Heresthetic – Are politicians manipulators?

Riker, *The Art of Political Manipulation*

McLean, *Rational Choice and British Politics*, Chap. 2

Shepsle, "[Losers in Politics](#)," *Perspectives on Politics* 1 (2003): 307-315.