POLITICAL SCIENCE 273: AMERICAN POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

Institutions, Interests, and Ideas in the Process of American State Formation

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Course Overview

This course is designed primarily to be a graduate reading seminar. Its central purpose is to introduce students to the literature on American state building and, through it, to the sub-field of American political development (APD). As an analytic category, “the state” is at the heart of APD and has been at least since the publication of Stephen Skowronek’s seminal book, *Building a New American State* (1982). The study of American state formation is not only an object of inquiry in itself, it is also a crucial jumping-off point for scholars interested in social movements, political parties, the presidency, and administrative politics; issues of class, race, and gender; and the nature and development of American liberalism. Over the course of the quarter, we will attempt to tap into a number of these dimensions as a means to exploring the not only the importance of institutions, interests, and ideas to the historical development of the American state (the state as a dependent variable), but the centrality of American state structure itself to institutional development, group formation, and evolution of public discourse (the state as an independent variable).

As noted above, this course is an introduction to American political development, a sub-field situated in some tension at the disciplinary crossroads of political science and history. I say tension, because political science stresses values like parsimony, generalization and theory-building, while historical analysis remains much more committed to the epistemological importance of complexity, spatial and temporary specificity, and (consequently) the uniqueness of events. As the political science mainstream has turned for inspiration to the concepts and methods of economics, this difference has only magnified. Thus, a central concern of this class is to address the relationship of historical analysis to political science. What is a historically-sensitive political science? How do we balance theory-building and systematic analysis with a sensitivity to the complex and often contingent nature of historical processes?

As all of this suggests, some considerable knowledge of history is essential to doing serious work in APD. With this in mind, the reading for this class will stress the reading of entire books, rather than articles or book chapters. What is lost in breadth of coverage, I believe, is more than compensated for by the opportunity to learn in some detail about the historical formation of the American state, as well as to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of particular historical analyses, as practiced both by political scientists and historians.

Grades

Seminar participation will account for 50% of your final grade. This course is reading intensive. You are expected to come to each class session having read and thought about the week’s materials. I will typically take responsibility for framing discussion for the first one-half to two-thirds of each session.
Students will be responsible for guiding us the rest of the way. Thus, each student will be responsible for framing at least one question or criticism capable of sustaining class discussion.

The other 50% of the course grade is attached to a critical review essay to be written on a topic of your choice. Specifically, you will be asked to identify and critically discuss a set of recent works in APD on a topic of your choice. Your job is to 1) identify an area of “live” controversy (either substantive or methodological), 2) familiarize your reader with the history of that debate, 3) assess the nature and the sources of contemporary controversies, and, finally, 4) identify the most important lines of inquiry, suggest ways to clarify and/or resolve contemporary disagreements, and point the reader toward the most profitable avenues of future research. As this suggests, your paper should be one part bibliographic essay (steeping yourself and your reader in a vibrant research community and its traditions of discourse) and two parts critical discussion — an effort to help you discover and frame important lines of scholarly investigation (with “important” defined here as improving the quality of debate and advancing knowledge in a well-defined area of inquiry).

Your paper should be approximately 20 pages in length and is due at the end of the quarter.

**Books**


**Readings**

**Week 1: Introduction**

No readings assigned.

**Week 2: The Liberal Tradition in America?: A View from the States**

Week 3: Antebellum Governing Structures and the Emergence of National State Authority

Bensel, *Yankee Leviathan* (all).


Week 4: Agrarianism and Progressive Era Regulation

Sanders, *Roots of Reform* (all).

Week 5: Corporate Liberalism and Progressive Era Regulation


Week 6: Corporate Liberalism, State Capacity and America’s New Deal

Gordon, *New Deals* (all).


Week 7: Administrative Reform and the Expansion of Presidential Power

Arnold, *Making the Managerial Presidency* (all).

Week 8: Administrative Reform and the Decline of Political Parties

Milkis, *The President and the Parties* (all).


Lieberman, *Shifting the Color Line*

Week 10: Institutional Structure and the Politics of Dismantling

Pierson, *Dismantling the Welfare State?* (all).