Syllabus for Government 1017:  
Theoretical Foundations of Democratic Politics  
Fall 2008  
Location and time: CGIS Knafel 401, Wednesdays, 2-4

Instructor: Sean Ingham

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Office Hours: Tuesdays 12:30–1:30, and by appointment

Course description: This course introduces students to formal models of politics by focusing on applications in the study of democracy: voter turnout, electoral competition, the causes of democratization, and legislatures, among other topics. The theories studied in the course—the theory of individual choice and utility theory, social choice theory, and game theory—have, however, a much wider application and can be of use to students with interests outside of these topics, especially those planning on writing senior theses. While these theories have their origins in economics, they are now widely used in political science, and a senior thesis writer is likely to come across articles employing these methods during his or her research. The goal of this course is to help students become critical, intelligent consumers or producers of research employing these methods, as they choose.

Readings: The primary textbook for the course is:


We shall also make selective use of the following:


All of these books are on reserve at Lamont. Additional readings are available on Jstor or will be made available in class.

Shepsle and Bonchek offer a very accessible introduction to the rational choice approach to studying politics. Austin-Smith and Banks is a much more advanced and formal treatment of topics in individual and social choice theory (weeks 1-3). We shall move slowly through a short, but important section of this book. For students desiring a more advanced treatment of game theory and its applications in political science (weeks 4-13, but not covered in Austin-Smith and Banks), the recommend text is *Political Game Theory*, McCarty and Meirowitz. McCarty and Meirowitz is also on reserve at Lamont.

**Prerequisites:** A basic understanding of single-variable calculus will come in handy, although it is not absolutely necessary. More important is that one not be averse to symbolic notation, deductive reasoning, and logical problem-solving.

This course covers some of the same material as Social Analysis 46: A Rational Choice Approach to Politics and Government 2005/6: Positive Political Theory I/II, but at a level more advanced than the former and less advanced than the latter. Having taken SA 46, any economics course, or any other political science course involving formal modelling would be useful background, but is certainly not a prerequisite for this course.

**Grading:** The final grade will consist of class attendance and participation (20%), weekly problem sets (25%), a midterm exam (25%) on Oct. 29, and a final exam (30%) during exam period. Problem sets will be assigned a week before the due dates listed below. Problem sets will not be accepted late. Readings should be completed by the date for which they are listed.
Schedule

This schedule is somewhat provisional. We will move faster or slower through the topics, and will add topics to the end or omit topics from the end, depending on how well students are handling the material.

Week 0, 9/17 — Introductory lecture

Theory of Individual and Social Choice

Week 1, 9/24 — Individual preferences, choice, and utility theory

- Section 1.2 of Osborne
- Ch. 1, 2 of Shepsle and Bonchek
- Optional: Ch. 1 of Austin-Smith and Banks

Week 2, 10/1 — Majority preference cycles and Arrow’s Theorem

- Shepsle and Bonchek, Ch. 4
- Ch. 2, section 1 in Austin-Smith and Banks
- Mackie, G. “Saving Democracy from Political Science”, in Dahl et al.
- Problem Set 1 due

Week 3, 10/08 — Continuation of week 2

- Ch. 5 of Shepsle and Bonchek
• Finish Week 2’s readings

• Problem Set 2 due

Week 4, 10/15 — Expected utility theory and application to voter turnout

• Sections 4.1.3, 4.12.1, 4.12.2 of Osborne


Political Game Theory

Week 5, 10/22 — Normal Form Games and Nash equilibrium

• Sections 2.1-2.9 of Osborne


• Problem Set 3 due

Week 6, 10/29 — Midterm

Week 7, 11/5 — Continuation of week 5; mixed strategies

• Chapter 4 in Osborne
Week 8, 11/12 — Application: party competition in democratic elections

- Section 3.3 in Osborne

- Problem Set 5 due

Week 9, 11/19 — Extensive form games and subgame perfect Nash equilibrium

- Chapter 5 of Osborne

- Problem Set 6 due

Week 10, 11/26 — Application: transitions between authoritarian and democratic regimes

- McCarty & Meirowitz (2007) Ch. 7, section 7.7

- Problem Set 7 due

Week 11, 12/03 — Bayesian Nash equilibrium

- Sections 9.1-9.3, 9.5 of Osborne

- no problem set over Thanksgiving break

Week 12, 12/10 — Application: Jury Voting and “Epistemic Democracy”

- Section 9.7 in Osborne

- Problem Set 8 due
References


