

Freshman Seminar on American Political Development
Professor Larry Evans
Fall 2005

This course is a freshman seminar intended for first-year undergraduates with an interest in the political history of the United States. There are no prerequisites or expectations about prior background. I have several goals for the class.

First, my aim is to introduce new college students to some of the best recent scholarship in the area of American political development. There is no “textbook” for the course. Instead, the readings are structured around six recent treatises authored by some of the leading scholars in the country.

Second, the seminar is designed to be “writing intensive.” As a result, there will be several writing assignments included among course requirements and we will regularly discuss the different kinds of writing that students will do during their undergraduate years and also after graduation.

Third, there will be a major “research” component to the course. Rather than expect students to design their own projects, I will provide each member of the class with a topic and archival materials that touch on the coalition building process on a major piece of legislation, 1955-1993. As a result, even though this is an introductory class aimed at first-year students, members of the class will be able to conduct original research on significant topics. The research component also will include a basic introduction to the construction of data sets and to very rudimentary statistical analysis. I emphasize that this seminar assumes absolutely no statistical background or significant quantitative abilities – I will teach you exactly what you need to know.

At the end of the seminar, participants should have: (1) learned a lot about the substance of American political history; (2) developed skills at interpreting and criticizing cutting-edge scholarly work in political science; (3) significantly improved their writing abilities; and (4) developed a basic familiarity with the main approaches to research used by contemporary social scientists. For interested students, this class also will fulfill the computer proficiency requirement for the government concentration.

The reading list is oriented around six books, which are all available for purchase at the William and Mary bookstore. The titles are the following:

Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History, by James Morone

Why Parties? The Origin and Transformation of Party Politics in America, by John Aldrich

The American Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century, by Richard Benschel

The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton, by Stephen Skowronek

Politics or Principle: Filibustering in the United States Senate, by Sarah Binder and Steven Smith

Mobilizing Public Opinion: Black Insurgency and Racial Attitudes in the Civil Rights Era, by Taeku Lee

There may be a few short readings added to the list, mostly pertaining to the course writing assignments. If so, I will provide students with such materials as the class proceeds.

Final grades for the seminar will derive from five assignments: A brief reaction memo about one of the course books (10 percent); a research prospectus (10 percent); a research paper (30 percent); an exam (30 percent); and class participation (20 percent). The reaction memo will be two pages maximum (single-spaced) and will summarize and critique one of the course books. Included here will be the books by Morone, Aldrich, Bense, Skowronek, and Binder and Smith. I will make the reaction assignments during the second week of class. Reaction memos must be turned in to me at the beginning of class on the first day for which a book is assigned.

The research prospectus also will be in memo format with a two-page maximum (single-spaced). It will summarize for me how you intend to proceed with the research paper. During early September, I will provide detailed expectations about the structure of the prospectus and the research paper. As mentioned, the research paper will be an analysis of coalition-building activities on a major legislative initiative. It will make use of a unique data set that I am constructing of whip counts (secret polls conducted by congressional party leaders of member positions) on major bills in the 1955-93 period. The collection of the data was sponsored by the National Science Foundation and the Charles Center as part of ongoing efforts to enhance opportunities at William and Mary for undergraduate research. There is no need for special concern about the research paper. I will work closely with you as you conduct the research. A rough draft of the research paper will be due three weeks before the due-date for the final version. The target length for the final version of the research paper is 15-20 pages (double-spaced).

There also will be an exam covering all of the reading materials and class discussions. It will be scheduled during the regular final exam period allotted to your section of GOVT 150. Finally, because this is a small seminar class, I will expect regular participation in class discussions by all students enrolled in the course.

Syllabus

8/25	No assignment
8/30	Morone, Chapters 1-3
9/1	Morone, Chapters 4-7
9/6	Morone, Chapters 8-12
9/8	Morone, Chapter 13-Epilogue
9/13	Aldrich, Chapters 1-3

9/15	Aldrich, Chapters 4-5
9/20	Aldrich, Chapters 6-7
9/22	Aldrich, Chapters 8-9
9/27	Bensel, Chapters 1-2
9/29	Bensel, Chapter 3
10/4	Bensel, Chapters 4-6
10/6	Bensel, Chapter 7
	Research prospectus due
10/13	Skowronek, Preface, Chapters 1-3
10/18	Skowronek, Chapters 4-5
10/20	Skowronek, Chapter 6
10/25	Skowronek, Chapter 7
10/27	Skowronek, Chapter 8
11/1	Binder and Smith, Chapters 1-3
11/3	Binder and Smith, Chapter 4
11/8	Draft research paper due
11/10	Binder and Smith, Chapters 5-6
11/15	Binder and Smith, Chapter 7
11/17	Lee, Chapters 1-3
11/22	Lee, Chapters 4-5
11/29	Research paper due
12/1	Lee, Chapter 6
TBA	Exam