Electoral Politics

Module Description: This module provides students with an overview of the major empirical research conducted in the area of electoral politics. The studies evaluated here are drawn from a wide range of democracies. This is especially useful when we are interested in questions about institutions and the relationship between institutions and elections. The course will cover topics that include electoral systems, the role of political parties, the nature of political campaigns, voting and political behaviour.

Readings: The following text is required and is available for purchase at the Blackwell’s. An additional copy will be made available on short term loan from the library. Additional readings are drawn from articles and book chapters that can be accessed online through the Exeter Learning Environment (ELE). Unless otherwise noted all assigned readings are required.


Module-specific skills: At the end of the module you should be able to address questions such as the following: How do differences in institutional arrangements influence voter turnout? Are citizens more likely to be satisfied with the way democracy works in systems that encourage consensus decision making? How do political campaigns influence vote choice? What is the role of political parties in modern political campaigns? How do party leaders influence vote choice?

Assessment
10% Lead discussion with presentations
90% Take home (48 hours) Final exam will be distributed on 13 Dec. and due on 15 Dec.

Lead a Seminar: At some point during the term you will be asked to lead a seminar with two other students. You will need to sign up for a day for your presentation on the module website (listed above). You should do this the first week of classes otherwise you will be left with little or no choice. It is very important that seminar leaders come to class well prepared with interesting and thought-provoking questions and topics of conversation. Your intention is to provoke discussion, NOT to summarize the readings! This requirement is not as scary as you might think. If we have a talkative class, it should be easy! Rather than a summary of each reading, the presentation should attempt to integrate the essential reading (and make reference to suggested reading if appropriate) and outline major themes found in the readings. The presentation should also highlight the broader questions being addressed. The presentation should consider the following questions:

- What are the major theoretical perspectives that structure the argument presented in the reading?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the argument presented?
- What are the major implications of the findings for the study of electoral politics?
- What are the major implications of the findings for particular theory/questions being addressed?
- What suggestions would you make to improve the argument presented?
Class Participation: The quality of this seminar—what you get out of it—depends on what you and your classmates put into it. In contrast to a typical class, where the instructor lectures and asks questions, the seminar format requires students to take a much more active role through discussion (and in this seminar, leading discussions). Thus participation in discussions is essential. Yet, I am only interested in informed participation. If you talk a lot, but it is apparent that you have not read, you are not fulfilling this requirement. Please prepare for class not only by reading all of the assigned material, but also by thinking about it. A seminar can be a productive and enjoyable experience only if every member of the class is willing to carry his or her share of the load.

Schedule

5 October: Introduction
Discussion Topic(s): Why Study Elections?
Comparing Democracies, Ch 1.

12 October: Proportional and Majoritarian Visions
Discussion Topic(s): What is the difference between a winner-take-all system and a proportional system? What are the advantages and disadvantages of these systems? How do institutional rules reward winners and punish losers? Why is it more important to understand losers than winners?

Comparing Democracies, Ch 2.
Powell, G. Bingham Jr., Elections as Instruments of Democracy: Chapters 1 & 2

Recommended:

19 October: Parties and Party Systems
Discussion Topic(s): What do parties do? Why are the advantages and disadvantages of a two party system? How do parties mobilize voters?

Comparing Democracies 3, Ch 3-4.

26 October: Campaigns and Communications
Discussion Topic(s): Do political campaigns affect behavior? Why did early research suggest that campaigns didn't matter much? Who is most likely to be affected by paid media? What consequences does this have for democratic processes?
Comparing Democracies, Ch 5-6.

2 November Political Attitudes
Discussion Topic(s): Why are citizens cynical about politics? Who is to blame? What impact do such attitudes have in any on the political system and governance? How do those who voted for losing parties or candidates react to electoral outcomes?


9 November: Political Participation
Discussion Topic(s): Who Votes? How can we explain levels of turnout in elections? What factors affect turnout? Although society has become more affluent, voter turnout still appears to be on the decline in many democracies. Why? What can be done to foster higher turnout?

Comparing Democracies, Ch. 8
16 November: Issues and the Vote Choice
Discussion Topic(s): How do voters decide? To what extent do issues matter? Are they more or less important than performance?

Comparing Democracies, Ch 7

23 November: Accountability
Discussion Topic(s): Can voters hold governments accountable? Under what conditions does this occur?

Comparing Democracies, Ch 9, 11.

30 November: Direct Democracy
Discussion Topic(s): Advantages/disadvantages of direct democracy, demands on the citizen, impact on the political process.


7 December: Electoral Reform
Discussion Topic(s): Negative campaigning, Strengthen parties, Postal voting, compulsory voting, Electoral systems, adopt PR?

Comparing Democracies, Ch 10,

13 December: Final exam distributed (due 15 December)