

# RESEARCH SEMINAR: DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

Fall 2008

Political Science 320  
Haverford College

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(and by appointment)

## Course Description

This research seminar is intended to serve two functions for political science majors. First, it is a capstone seminar that gives students an opportunity to reflect upon the condition of democracy in America. And second, the seminar will prepare students to undertake a senior thesis on some aspect of power and politics in the United States.

We will begin by reading several texts that critically assess the vibrancy of democracy in the United States while offering varied explanations for its perceived shortcomings. Are citizens themselves at fault for failing to pay sufficient attention to politics and neglecting to hold public officials accountable for their behavior? Or, are there structural defects embedded within our political institutions that both facilitate the empowerment of elites and inhibit ordinary citizens from exercising genuine control? Alternatively, have changes in American society hampered the functioning of a democratic government? We will then zero in on the phenomenon of popular participation in politics. Why do some Americans participate extensively in politics while others shun political engagement? What kinds of people are most likely to participate in politics? Why have young people, in particular, tended to shy away from politics in the past and why might this be changing now? We will then focus on the situation of marginalized groups in the U.S. and consider the extent to which the political system offers opportunities for such groups to advance their interests or reinforces chronic inequalities of wealth and power. We conclude by examining the key political institution intended to connect citizens to government – the electoral process. Does the electoral system adequately fulfill that linking function?

As we evaluate the concept and practice of democracy in this country, we will also prepare for the senior thesis by studying how political scientists conduct empirical research. We will discuss how to think about research questions, carry out a literature review, construct hypotheses, define concepts, measure variables, and collect and analyze data.

The major requirement for the course, apart from regular class attendance and informed participation in class discussions, is a 15-20 page paper consisting of (1) a literature review in response to a viable research question dealing with American democracy and (2) an abbreviated research design laying out the basic plan for conducting the research for your senior thesis during the spring semester.

## Requirements

Class participation	20%
Paper proposal	no grade
Annotated bibliography	10%
Presentation of research	10%
Research paper (15-20 pages)	60%

## **Texts**

Bill Bishop, with Robert G. Cushing, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded Americans Is Tearing Us Apart* (Houghton-Mifflin, 2008).

Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of Democracy* (Yale University Press, 2005).

Christina Wolbrecht and Rodney E. Hero, eds., *The Politics of Democratic Inclusion* (Temple University Press, 2005).

Alan Wolfe, *Does American Democracy Still Work?* (Yale University Press, 2006).

All other assigned readings will be available through Blackboard.

## **Topics and Readings**

### **I. Introduction to Course**

#### **Week 1**

- A. Course overview
- B. Thinking about your thesis

### **II. Citizens and American Democracy**

#### **Week 2**

Alan Wolfe, *Does American Democracy Still Work?* pp. 1-136.

#### **Week 3**

Alan Wolfe, *Does American Democracy Still Work?* pp. 137-190.

John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Thiess-Morse, "Americans' Desire for Stealth Democracy" in *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work*

John Gaventa, "Citizen Knowledge, Citizen Competence, and Democracy Building" in *Citizen Competence and Democratic Institutions*, eds. Stephen L. Elkin and Karol Edward Soltan

### **III. Political Elites and American Democracy**

#### **Week 4**

Research Skills Workshop, Magill Library

Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Off-Center*, Introduction, Chs. 1-4.

## **Paper Proposal Due**

IV. Polarization and American Democracy

Week 5

Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Off-Center*, Chs. 5-6, Conclusion.  
Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort*, Chs. 1-6.

Week 6

Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort*, Chs. 7-12.  
Morris Fiorina, "If America Is Not Polarized, Why Do So Many Americans Think It Is?"  
in *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*

Week 7

**Fall Break**

V. Participatory Democracy

Week 8

Cliff Zukin, et al., *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen*, Chs. 1-3.  
Morris P. Fiorina, "Extreme Voices: A Dark Side of Civic Engagement" in *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*, eds. Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina.

**Annotated Bibliography Due**

VI. Marginalized Groups and Democratic Inclusion

Week 9

Christina Wolbrecht and Rodney E. Hero, eds., *The Politics of Democratic Inclusion*,  
Chs. 3-8.

Week 10

Christina Wolbrecht and Rodney E. Hero, eds., *The Politics of Democratic Inclusion*,  
Chs. 9, 11-14.

VII. Electoral Democracy

Week 11

Steven E. Schier, "What an Electoral System Can Do" in *You Call This an Election? America's Peculiar Democracy*.

Thomas E. Mann, "Is Reform of America's Electoral System Possible?" in *Uniting America: Restoring the Vital Center to American Democracy*, eds. Norton Garfinkle and Daniel Yankelovich.

Film in class: "Can Mr. Smith Get to Washington Any More?"

VIII. Research and Writing

Weeks 12-13

- A. Preparation of Literature Review/Research Design
- B. Individual Meetings with Steve during Class Time

Weeks 14-15

- C. Presentation of Research

**Paper Due at End of Exam Period**