Syllabus SPIA 590B - POL598 JDP PhD seminar

The Politics of Inequality (half-term, session I)

Spring 2022, Jan 24 – March 1

T 1:30-4:30

Professor Tali Mendelberg

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The course investigates the interplay of politics and inequality, with a focus on class and race in the United States. The focus will be on individuals’ political views and behavior, with some attention to political institutions. We take up questions such as: does the political system equally represent the poor, middle class, and rich? Do Americans want government to ameliorate inequality? How do structural factors such as geography affect the politics of racial and ethnic inequality? Why are some people threatened by immigration while others embrace it, and how does that connect to populism? What are some policy solutions to the problems of inequality?

***Written Assignments***

A. Reaction pieces (40% of the course grade)

Each student will write four short reaction pieces. A reaction piece is supposed to be a *critical, analytical* and *original* assessment of the week’s required readings (you are not required to read the optional readings). For example, students can highlight the advantages and drawbacks of a given reading on empirical and/or theoretical grounds; suggest avenues for improved research; or discuss how readings of a given week complement or conflict with other knowledge, especially in their disciplinary subfield (if other than political science). All reaction pieces must address at least two readings. Summaries of the readings should be kept to a minimum (no more than one short paragraph). In a final paragraph please address how your discipline's approach to the week's topic might differ (Politics students will skip this paragraph). The main purpose of these reaction pieces is for students to engage critically and creatively with the week’s readings. Maximum length: 3 double-spaced pages (about 900 words). These should be submitted on Canvas by 10 PM on the day before the class for which they are assigned.

B. Project bibliography (10% of the course grade)

Students will write an annotated bibliography related to their JDP research topic. You should include at least ten scholarly journals and books outside your academic discipline (include major scholarly contributions as well as recent developments). Include sources that address key questions and controversies that have arisen in the research area. The goal is to gain an understanding of the literature on your topic outside of your academic discipline. You can also include some sources in your discipline, but these should be few. The project bibliography is due the Monday after spring break, **at 10 PM**, via Canvas.

***Discussion Leaders (10% of the course grade)***

In each session (except the first), you will team up to present and lead class discussion. In a fifteen-minute presentation, student discussion leaders will identify themes for discussion and raise questions arising from the readings. Following the presentation, they will facilitate deep and comprehensive discussion of the readings’ arguments and findings. Discussion leaders should co-ordinate with each other before class. Sign up for a presentation on Canvas. Feel free to directly trade assigned dates with each other (no need to notify me in advance).

**Participation (40% of course grade)**

Every student should read and think about all the required readings and come prepared to offer thoughts and questions about them, for every class meeting.

I will provide some questions to help guide your reading and discussion, but you should think of additional big questions for yourself as well.

**Reading List**

Readingscan be accessed on Canvas.

\* Starred readings are large chunks of books.

**Week 1 (1/25):  *Political causes of economic inequality***

Porter. E. 2015. What the Debate on Inequality is Missing. *NY Times*. <https://www.dropbox.com/s/1wnm1fc5ca8llwn/Porter%202015%20NYT_What%20the%20Debate%20on%20Inequality%20Is%20Missing%20-%20The%20New%20York%20Times.pdf?dl=0>

Bonica, A., N. McCarty, K. Poole, and H. Rosenthal. 2013. Why Hasn’t Democracy Slowed Rising Inequality? *J. Econ. Perspectives*.

\* Bartels, Larry. 2016. *Unequal Democracy,****2nd****edition.*Readchs 1, 2, and skim 7 (the eroding minimum wage) and 8 (economic inequality and political representation).

Gilens, Martin, and Benjamin I. Page. 2014. Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens. *Perspectives on Politics*. [For more: Gilens, *Affluence and Influence*]

SKIM Brunner, E., Ross, S. L., and Washington, E. (2013). Does Less Income Mean Less Representation? *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 5(2):53–76

SKIM Leighley, J. and Oser. 2018. Representation in an Era of Political and Economic Inequality: How and When Citizen Engagement Matters. *Perspectives on Politics.*

Questions:

Bartels and Gilens&Page argue that affluent Americans’ influence is vastly disproportionate. What is their evidence and how persuasive is it? What mechanisms might explain it if true? What are some important caveats and rebuttals? Could their findings be explained by the influence of partisanship rather than of affluence?

Are any of the explanations mentioned by Bonica et al. not well-considered in the other studies this week? Which seems to you more important to investigate further, and why?

Lower-income Americans vote at much lower rates than other Americans. Is that one of the reasons why government fails to enact policies that represent their economic interests? How much does voting explain inegalitarian policy? How do Leighley and Oser answer the question, and how does that answer differ from Bartels’ (ch 8)?

What is the role of political parties in the politics of inequality?

**Week 2 (2/1): Attitudes Toward Redistribution**

1. *Do Americans know, and care, about economic inequality?*

\*Bartels, Larry, 2016. *Unequal Democracy, 2nd edition,* [pick Ch 5 or 9 and skim the other:] Chs 5 (Bush tax cuts), ch 9 (Stress test: The political economy of the Great Recession), 10 (The Defining Challenge of our Time?).

McCall, Leslie, 2017. Exposure to Rising Inequality Shapes Americans’ Opportunity Beliefs and Policy Support. <https://www.pnas.org/content/114/36/9593>

1. *Do Americans see what government does for them?*

Mettler, Suzanne. 2018. *The Government-Citizen Disconnect*, chapter 1

1. *Do* *White Americans’ racial attitudes depress support for redistribution?*

\* Gilens, Martin. 1999. *Why Americans Hate Welfare,* chs 1, (pick one and skim the others: Chs 4-6), 8.

Questions:

Do Americans know, and care, about economic inequality? Do they support doing something about it?

How do political factors shape attention to and support for remediating economic inequality?

How do white American’s racial attitudes affect support for redistribution? Are white people resistant to means-tested programs because they dislike helping the poor, or because they apply to them negative views of stigmatized racial groups?

**Week 3 (2/8) Racial status, threat, and geography**

1. *Racial geography*

Acharya, A., M. Blackwell, and M. Sen. 2016. The Political Legacy of American Slavery. *JOP*

<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/686631>

SKIM Trounstine, Jessica. 2016. “Segregation and Inequality in Public Goods.” *AJPS* 60(3): 709-725.

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/ajps.12227>

SKIM Weaver, Vesla and Amy Lerman, 2010. Political Consequences of the Carceral State. *APSR* 104(4): 817-833.

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/political-consequences-of-the-carceral-state/4E39A3AFDAB682A1D4DE53C57E38C019>

Walsh, Katherine. 2012. Putting Inequality in Its Place: Rural Consciousness and the Power of Perspective. *APSR*.

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/putting-inequality-in-its-place-rural-consciousness-and-the-power-of-perspective/A603EA36286F837AEB4F0CF250D4595A>

1. *Immigration:*

[SKIM] Brader, Ted, Nicholas Valentino, Elizabeth Suhay. 2008. What Triggers Public Opposition to Immigration? Anxiety, Group Cues, and Immigration Threat. *AJPS*.

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2008.00353.x>

Berman, Shari. 2021. “The causes of populism in the West.” *Annual Review of Polit Sci.*

Questions:

An influential theory about political geography is the ‘racial threat thesis’: White Americans perceive threats to their interests where the percentage of African Americans in their area is high. In your interpretation, is this thesis about historical legacies or about contemporary percentages? Is its psychological mechanism more symbolic (prejudice and distorted perception) or concrete (real competition over resources and power)? What is the evidence for the racial threat thesis, and is it compelling?

Do your answers change when you consider immigrants instead of African Americans?

Consider Weaver and Lerman’s study. What is the interplay of geography, class, race, and politics in their study? What do they argue are the political effects of policing poor communities of color in urban areas, and is the evidence persuasive?

Are rural white Americans motivated by their attachment to place, or by race? Are these distinct, or intertwined, political identities? What is the concept of a political consciousness, and how does it figure in this account of inequality?

How might ethno-racial status threat explain the rise of populism? What are the alternative (competing) explanations?

***Week 4 (2/15): Race, Class, and Gender in US Elections***

\*Sides, J., M. Tesler, and L. Vavreck. 2018. *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Election and the Battle for the Meaning of America.*

SKIM Ghitza and Robinson 2021. “What Happened in 2020?” Catalist.us. <https://catalist.us/wh-national/>

Questions:

What is the role of voters’ economic self-interest in presidential elections? What is the role of group identities, and which identities are the most powerful in recent elections in the US?

Do these explanations compete with each other? What is the evidence for each?

How was 2016 different? How was it similar to prior elections? How would you use this book to understand 2020, or predict 2024?

**Week 5 (2/22): Affluent politics**

Cote, Stephane, Julian House, and Robb Willer 2015. “High Economic Inequality Leads Higher-Income Individuals to Be Less Generous”. *PNAS*.

<https://www.pnas.org/content/112/52/15838.short>

SKIM Mendelberg, T., K. McCabe, A. Thal. 2017. College Socialization and the Economic Views of Affluent Americans. *AJPS*.

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/ajps.12265>

SKIM: Margalit and Shayo 2020. How Markets Shape Values and Political Preferences: A Field Experiment . *AJPS*. [Giving people even a small sum and having them invest in stock market increases rightwing views about economics, more than a pure control and more than giving them fake money or having them bet on sports-related investments.]

\*Chrystia Freeland, 2012. *Plutocrats,* chs 1, Skim 2, 5, 6, and conclusion.

Questions:

How do affluent people view their role in the economic and political system? How does that contribute to our understanding of inequality? What is to be learned from the study of affluent people’s attitudes and behavior?

Are affluent people more conservative because of their material interests or socio-cultural factors?

**Week 6 (3/1): Policy-making and policy solutions**

a. Broad arguments:

\*Page, B and M Gilens. 2018. *Democracy in America?* Chs 1, and part III and IV (what can be done, and how to do it) specifically: chs 7, 8, 9, 10

<https://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/D/bo27316263.html>

b. Descriptive representation:

\*Carnes,2018*. The Cash Ceiling:* *Why Only the Rich Run for Office and What We Can Do about It.* Chs 1, 3, 6*,* and chapter-end summaries.

Reingold, B. and A. Smith. 2011. Welfare Policymaking and Intersections of Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in U.S. State Legislatures. *AJPS*. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2011.00569.x>

Questions:

What are some overarching, systemic solutions to some of the problems we have studied, and what are their strengths and weaknesses?

What is the theory of descriptive representation, and how does it speak to issues of political inequality? How do class, race, and gender figure in this theory? Do these dimensions differ from each other politically? What is an “intersectional framework” and how would we know if it explains empirical patterns of political behavior?