Topics in Political Science: Seminar on American Courts

Political Science 695 Seminar 004
Fall 2012
Wednesdays 8:00-10:00
Grainger 1180

Professor Information
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Class Description
This course examines various American courts, how they operate, controversies surrounding them, and calls for their reform. Among other topics, we will focus on how judges are selected, how state and federal courts operate, and how decisions are implemented and interpreted. Upon completion of the course, you will have a basic understanding of various courts in America, you will be able to understand how these courts work (and don’t work) together, and you will learn to write effectively about your knowledge of the judiciary.

Requirements
I expect you to come to class prepared, which means you will have read the material assigned and can discuss it. This requirement is particularly important in a small seminar such as ours. Additionally, this is a writing intensive course. It is imperative that you complete your writing assignments timely. Failure to do so will result in a lower grade. I will give you writing tips throughout the semester, but I strongly advise you to meet with the Writing Center if you have concerns about your writing skills. [http://www.writing.wisc.edu/]
Papers
Each student will be responsible for writing six short papers (3 pages each) and one final paper (30 pages). Students will be partitioned into two groups and will alternate weeks where a paper is due. Group 1 consists of students with last names beginning with letters A-M. Group 2 consists of students with last names beginning with O-Z.

The short papers should be no longer than 3 pages. Each paper should ask one question that unifies the readings for the week. (For example, under what conditions do presidents nomination Supreme Court justices?) Then spend the next couple pages telling me what the readings for the day had to say on the topic. Finally, spend roughly a page (or 3/4 of a page) talking about additional features that could/should have been addressed. Make sure to write using active voice. Do not split your infinitives. Make sure to write concisely.

The final paper is due at the beginning of class on December 12. This paper is a lengthy research paper on a topic of your choosing. (I want everyone to email me no later than November 14 with the topic, so I can make sure you’re on the right track.) The format will be similar to the short papers. Begin with a broad research question. Then, explain the literature on the topic. Then, explain what holes are left in the literature and what you, as a social scientist, would do to examine that research question. My goal here is for you to produce an interesting overview of an important topic, and to think critically about the literature and how we could improve it.

Grades
Grades will be determined by class participation (20%), six short papers (40%), and a final paper (40%).
The grade scale is as follows:

93-100 (A)
88-92 (AB)
83-87 (B)
78-82 (BC)
70-77 (C)
60-69 (D)
< 60 (Fail)—Don’t do this...

Taking this class pass-fail is not an option.

Please note that all students will be held to the standards of the Undergraduate Student Academic Integrity Policy.

Readings
There are two required books for this class (I will provide additional material where required):


**SCHEDULE**

**September 5:**

Introduction; Hand out syllabi.

**I. Selecting Judges**

**September 12:**

Group 1 paper due.

1. McGuire, chapters 1, 2


**September 19:**

Group 2 paper due.


**September 26:**

Group 1 paper due.


II. Trial Courts

October 3:

Group 2 paper due.


October 10:

Group 1 paper due.

1. McGuire, chapter 4, 5.

October 17:

Group 2 paper due.


III. State Courts

October 24:

Group 1 paper due.


IV. Federal Appellate Courts

October 31:

Group 2 paper due.


November 7:

Group 1 paper due.


IV. The U.S. Supreme Court and Precedent

November 14:

Group 2 paper due.


November 21: TBD

V. Courts and Their Political Environment

November 28:

Group 1 paper due.

1. McGuire, chapter 11, 12

December 5:

Group 2 paper due.


V. Implementation and Impact

December 12:


2. Conclusion and review.

3. Final paper due.