

Controversies in American Politics

POLS G8245
Columbia University, Spring 2013
W 2:10-4:00pm

Instructors

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Course Overview

This is a seminar intended mainly for Ph.D. students interested in working in depth on current controversies that draw attention from contemporary American politics scholars. The course focuses on evaluating the theoretical arguments found in the literature and the quantitative empirical research used to resolve these controversies. While we expect that students will arrive with different backgrounds in terms of American politics reading, statistical skills, and training as theorists, all students should be willing to approach the research questions at the highest level.

During the first half of the course, the instructors will lead discussion on several controversies. These are topics of current academic debate and also part of the public discussion of politics.

During the second half of the course we will focus on topics chosen by the seminar participants. Students will be expected to help lead the discussion for the readings from at least one of the weeks.

The last two or three seminar meetings (depending upon the number of seminar participants) will be devoted to student presentations of the research projects that they plan to submit for their seminar paper.

Course Requirements

This course has two main requirements. The first is attendance and participation (40%). Students are expected to come to class prepared to talk about the readings. We will also provide datasets to replicate particular studies. Students are expected to have at least attempted to replicate the findings in these studies.

The second requirement is to submit a research paper (60%). These papers should involve some original empirical analysis that will contribute to our understanding of current debate in the literature. Students will present their preliminary findings during the final weeks of the seminar.

Students taking the class for “R” credit are expected to attend and participate. The paper is optional.

Course Schedule.

(Topics and sequence are tentative. Reading lists are in preparation.)

Week 1. 1/23 Introduction and Overview

Week 2. 1/30 Incumbency Advantage I: Do Incumbents Have an Electoral Advantage?

Erikson, Robert S. 1972. “Malapportionment, Gerrymandering and Party Fortunes in Congressional Elections.” *American Political Science Review*, 65: December, pp. 1234-1245.

Gelman, Andrew and Gary King. 1990. “Estimating Incumbency Advantage without Bias” *American Journal of Political Science*. 34:4:1142-64.

Levitt, Steven D., and Catherine D. Wolfram. 1997. "Decomposing the Sources of Incumbency Advantage in the U.S. House." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 22(1):45-60.

Lee, David. 2001. “The Electoral Advantage to Incumbency and Voters’ Valuation of Politicians’ Experience: A Regression Discontinuity Analysis of Elections to the U.S. House.” NBER Working Paper

Erikson, Robert S and Rocio Titiunik. 2012. “Using Regression Discontinuity to Uncover the Personal Incumbency Advantage.” *Typescript*

Recommended

* Erikson, Robert S. 1971. “The Incumbency Advantage in Congressional Elections.” *Polity*, 3: Spring, pp. 395-405.

* Caughy, Devin and Jasjeet Sekhon. 2011. “Elections and the Regression Discontinuity: Lessons from Close U.S. House Races, 1942-2008” *Political Analysis*, 29(4)385-408.

* Zaller, John 1998. Politicians as Prize Fighters: Electoral Selection and the Incumbency Advantage. In *Politicians and Party Politics*, ed. John G. Geer. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 125-85.

* Ashworth, Scott and Ethan Bueno de Mesquita. 2008. "Electoral Selection, Strategic Challenger Entry, and the Incumbency Advantage." *The Journal of Politics*, 70:4:1006-1025.

* Hirano, Shigeo and James M. Snyder Jr. 2009. "Using Multi-Member Districts to Decompose the Incumbency Advantage." *American Journal of Political Science*, 53:2:292-306.

Week 3. 2/3 Incumbency Advantage II: Methodological Controversies and Causes

Cox, Gary W., and Jonathan N. Katz. 1996. "Why Did the Incumbency Advantage in U.S. House Elections Grow?" *American Journal of Political Science* 40(2):478-497.

Ansolabehere, Stephen and James M. Snyder Jr. 2004. "Using Term Limits to Estimate Incumbency Advantages When Officeholders Retire Strategically." *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 39:4:487-515.

Ansolabehere, Stephen, Erik C. Snowberg and James M. Snyder, Jr. 2006. "Television and the Incumbency Advantage in U.S. Elections." *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 31(4)469-490

Prior, Markus (2006). The Incumbent in the Living Room: The Rise of Television and the Incumbency Advantage in U.S. House Elections. *Journal of Politics*, 68 (3): 657-673

Robert S. Erikson and Thomas R. Palfrey. 1998. "Campaign Spending Effects and Incumbency: An Alternative Simultaneous Equations Approach." *Journal of Politics*, 60: May, pp. 355-373.

Recommended

* Ansolabehere, Stephen, James M. Snyder, and Charles Stewart. 2000. "Old Voters, New Voters, and the Personal Vote: Using Redistricting to Measure the Incumbency Advantage." *American Journal of Political Science* 44(1): 17-34.

* Sekhon, Jasjeet and Rocio Titunik. 2012. "When Natural Experiments Are Neither Natural Nor Experiments." *American Political Science Review*, 106:1:35-57

* Ansolabehere, Stephen and James M. Snyder Jr. 2002. "The Incumbency Advantage in U.S. Elections: An Analysis of State and Federal Offices, 1942-2000." *Election Law Journal*. 1:3:315-338.

Potential Topics for Weeks 4-10 (We will pick these topics based on the interests of the students enrolled in the class):

- **Elected versus Appointed Public Officials:** What difference does it make if officials (and judges) are elected or appointed?
- **Voter Turnout and Political Outcomes:** Does increasing voter turnout affect election outcomes?
- **Genetics and Politics:** Is much of our political behavior really determined by our genes?
- **Political Polarization:** Is U.S. politics more polarized than in the past? If so why has this occurred?
- **Political Insulation:** Does insulating bureaucrats from politicians improve government performance? When do politicians choose to insulate bureaucrats from political influence?
- **Presidential Influence:** How easy is it for presidents to influence congress?
- **Party in Congress:** How much influence do political parties have over members of Congress?
- **Money in Politics:** Why is there so little money spent in U.S. elections?
- **Primary Elections:** What impact do primary elections have on American politics?
- **Media and Politics:** Is there such a thing as media bias, and can it be measured?

Week 11. 4 / 10 No class

Week 13-14. Presentations of Student Research Projects