Course Description:

Interest groups and political parties are central to understanding the American political system. Although the U.S. Constitution does not mention either political entity, both dramatically shape elections and governance. Throughout the history of the United States, political thinkers and pundits have argued whether parties and interest groups play a desirable role. Today, these political organizations routinely come under fire from politicians and mainstream media. Critics lament that “partisan bickering” and “special interests” make up the worst influences on American democracy. Yet, many scholars and commentators argue that parties and groups play an essential role in the American political system. Proponents, for example, often argue that parties and groups provide an invaluable service by linking citizens to government. The purpose of this course is to help students better understand political parties and interest groups so that they may think critically about this debate and form their own opinions concerning the proper role that these political entities should play in the American political system.

The course is broken into two major parts. In the first half, we will focus on interest groups by looking at the origins and formation of groups and group influence on the electoral and policy making processes. In the second half of the course, we will focus on political parties by looking at party systems and party organization as well as the role of parties in elections and government.

Course Requirements:

Each student will complete two exams. Students are expected to attend class regularly and have read the material before coming to class. Please note: Students are required to adhere to the standards of academic honesty as detailed in the College Handbook.

Students are also expected to be courteous. Please do not talk, eat, sleep, arrive late to, or leave during, class (if you must leave early, please notify me before class begins and exit discreetly). Turn off pagers and cell phones! Courtesy must also be extended to your classmates. If you do not behave courteously, I reserve the right to drop you from the course.

Course Readings:


Grading:

The final grade will primarily be composed of two exams each worth half the final grade. The first exam will be held on February 26 and the second exam will be held on April 28. Since students will take two equally weighted exams during the course of the term, there will be no exam held during finals week. Unless I am contacted in advance regarding a critical problem, make-ups will not be granted. There is no extra credit assignments for this course so please do not ask. In some borderline cases, I reserve the right to raise your grade based on class participation and attendance. Attendance will be taken periodically and will count towards your final grade. Students, who regularly participate, in an informed manner, may also have points added to their final grade. Thus, attendance and participation are easy points—take advantage.

Semester Schedule

Section I: The Politics of Interest Groups

Week 1 (Jan. 6 & 8) Overview of Course & Interest Groups and Pluralism Berry, chp. 1 & 2
Cigler, chps. 2 & 3

Week 2 (Jan. 13 & 15) Pluralism and Its Critics Berry, chp. 4
Cigler, chps. 4 & 15

Week 3 (Jan. 22) Interest Groups & Elections Berry, Chp. 6
Note: No class Monday, Jan. 20 (MLK Holiday)

Week 4 (Jan. 27 & 29) Interest Groups & Elections Berry, pp. 55-63
Cigler, chps. 6, 7 & 8

Week 5 (Feb. 3 & 5) Interest Groups & Elections Berry, Chp. 7 & 8
Cigler, chps. 10,11,

Week 6 (Feb. 10 & 12) Lobbying Public Officials Berry, Chp. 9 & 10
Cigler, chps. 12 & 13

Week 7 (Feb. 17 & 19) Lobbying the Public

Week 8 (Feb. 24 & 26) Exam #1 [Feb.26]

Week 9 (March 3-7) No classes—Spring Break
Section II: The Politics of Political Parties

Week 10 (March 10 & 12)  Parties and Party Systems  Bibby, Chps. 1-3

Reminder: March 10 is the last day to withdraw and receive a possible grade of W except for hardship withdrawal.

Week 11 (March 17 & 19)  Party Organization and Activists  Bibby, Chp. 4

Week 12 (March 24 & 26)  Parties and Voters  Bibby, Chp. 8

Week 13 (March 31 & April 2)  Parties and Voters & Parties and Elections  Bibby, Chps. 5 & 6

Week 14 (April 7 & 9)  Parties and Elections  Bibby, Chp. 7

Week 15 (April 14 & 16)  Parties in Government  Bibby, Chp. 9

Week 16 (April 21 & 23)  Parties in Government  No reading

Week 17 (April 28)  Exam #2

This syllabus provides a general plan for the course, deviations may be necessary.