Senior Seminar: Designing Democratic Governments
POLS 196
Spring 2019

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Class Meeting Time: Thursdays 2:00–4:50p.m.
Class Location: Ellison 2824
Office: 3715 Ellison Hall
Office Hours: T 2:00p.m.–4:00p.m. or by appointment

1 Course Objectives

What kind of democratic government should a country have? In this seminar, we will examine the
process by which governments are designed; the major choices that must be made (for example,
a proportional representation versus a majoritarian electoral system); and the arguments for and
against particular choices. We will ask how these choices matter for political outcomes, public
policy, and peoples’ lives. We will also grapple with the importance of democratic government
and how to sustain it (and hence how democracies die, to paraphrase a recent, influential book).
Throughout, the theoretical issues will be illuminated by discussions of both historic and current
examples of institutional choice, with a particular focus upon (but not limited to) the United States
and other advanced industrial democracies.

The seminar has three overarching goals. The first is to familiarize students with the academic
literature on and debates about political institutions and constitutional design. The second is to
give students experience in engaging in evidence-based policy debates, including writing policy
memos, working in teams, and making presentations, all important skills in the world beyond
UCSB. The third is to provide students with a flavor of graduate-level instruction and hence with a
more interactive learning experience than can usually be obtained from even upper division lecture
courses in political science at UCSB.

2 Course Requirements

First and perhaps most obviously, because this class is a seminar, it will fail without adequate
student participation. Most classes will be loosely organized into two sessions. In the first part
of the class, we will discuss the normative and empirical issues raised by the theoretical readings,
which consist of academic articles and book chapters. In the second part, we will discuss a case
study, where we will apply what we have learned to a contemporary example of institutional choice,
debating the pros and cons of different institutional arrangements for a particular country. The
case studies will draw from the previous week’s theoretical readings, so as to give you time to digest
the theoretical debates. Readings for the case studies will primarily consist of a few opinion pieces
or news articles. To encourage participation, a large portion of your grade will be based upon it.
This includes verbal participation during the actual class period, and written participation in the
form of assigned Gaucho Space forum postings. Some of these required Gaucho Space postings are
described below. Note that the quantity of participation does not necessarily equal the quality, and
I will weigh both when assigning you a participation grade.
Second, students are required to serve as a moderator for one theoretical set of readings from Weeks 2 through 10 (meaning, the theoretical readings for one of these weeks). The moderator has two jobs. First, to write and share with the class a short (1-2 page) critical commentary on the readings that poses discussion questions for the class. In this short commentary, you might identify what you think are the key debates, points of controversy, or theoretical or empirical concerns — the things that you think we should talk about in class, in other words. This critical commentary should be posted to the appropriate forum on the course Gaucho Space page by 12:00pm on the Tuesday of the week when the readings will be discussed. The rest of the class is then responsible for posting one response to one moderator’s critical commentary, and one response to one comment by another student, by 12:00pm on the day of class that week (Thursday). These response postings will serve as part of your participation grade. The second job of the moderator is then to come to class prepared enough to help steer class discussions.

Third, for one of the weeks between Weeks 3 through 9, you will be part of a 2-3 student team making a policy recommendation to the class about the case study in question. Specifically, you yourself will write a short (circa 3-5 page) policy memo arguing either for or against the proposed institutional changes in that week’s case study. I will randomly assign one or more students to write in favor, and one or more students to write opposed. Your memo should be posted to the appropriate forum on the course Gaucho Space page by 5:00pm on the Monday of the week when the case study will be discussed. You and your teammates are then responsible for reading each other’s memos and coming up with a consensus recommendation to make to the class. You will present your recommendation via a 5-10 minute PowerPoint (or equivalent) presentation. I encourage you to meet with me, either in office hours or by appointment, to discuss your presentation in advance of class. After our first class meeting, I will ask you for your preferences over weeks for both serving as a moderator and the policy recommendation; I will do my best to give you one of your top choices, while assuring a (relatively) even distribution of students over weeks.

Fourth and finally, as a final project, students will write an approximately eight-to-ten page policy memo about a political institutional reform, either in the United States or another country, as their final project. There are no exams in this course, so this final project doubles as both a final exam and a more conventional term paper. The policy memo is due by 5:00 p.m. on Wednesday, 12 June, although you may of course turn it in earlier if doing so better fits your schedule. You may begin working on the memo at any time after the fourth week of class, when I will hand out a detailed prompt. The short, earlier policy memo and the feedback you receive on it should help you with this longer, final policy memo.

3 Grading

Grades for the course will be calculated as follows.

- Class participation, including Gaucho Space postings. (30%, of which roughly 20% is for in-class participation, and 10% for Gaucho Space postings)
- Service as moderator, including written critical commentary. (10%)
- Short policy memo and in-class presentation. These two components will be weighed equally. (25%)
- Final project (longer policy memo). (35%)
4 Required Reading Materials

Readings for the course are available in two ways. First, I have put our three core texts on reserve at the library (labeled [LIB] in the schedule below). These texts are: Dahl’s *On Democracy* (2nd edition from 2015, although 1st edition from 1998 almost always acceptable as an alternative); Lijphart’s *Patterns of Democracy* (2nd edition from 2012); and Levitsky and Ziblatt’s *How Democracies Die* (2018). These texts can be alternatively obtained from many online vendors, often used (and hence inexpensively), if your budget allows it. Second, all other readings are available from the course Gaucho Space site; these readings are labeled [GS] in the schedule below. Note, however, that to access some of these readings, you will either need to be on a university computer or to have your home computer configured for off campus access.

5 Syllabus

Week 1: Organizational Session

- *Preferences for participation (moderator, policy presentation) due by Friday, April 5 by 12:00pm.*

Week 2: Democracy and Institutions: What Does It Mean to Design and Sustain a “Democratic” Government?

- The Economist, 2014, “What’s Gone Wrong with Democracy?,” 1 March. [GS]
- *Discussion of Policy Memos*

Week 3: Constitutions

- Case Study: Deliberative or Direct Democracy in the United States?
Week 4: Executive-Legislative Relations: Presidentialism vs. Parliamentarism

- **Case Study: A Constitution for Israel?**

Week 5: Legislatures

- Geoff Allen and Heather Stoll, 2019, “A Number Most Convenient? The Causes and Representational Consequences of Legislative Size.” Work in Progress. [GS]
- **Case Study: Does the United States Need a Parliament or a Stronger Presidency?**

Week 6: Vertical Relations: Centralization vs. Decentralization, Federalism vs. Unitarianism


• *Case Study: Reform the Organization of the United States Congress?*

**Week 7: Electoral Systems: The Big Picture**


• *Case Study: A United Kingdom? Devolution and Scottish Independence*

**Week 8: Electoral Systems: The Devil Is in the Details**


• Case Study: Proportional Representation for Canada?

Week 9: In the Trenches: Electoral Administration and Governance


• Excerpts from the Commission on Federal Election Reform, 2005, “Building Confidence in U.S. Elections: Report of the Commission on Federal Election Reform,” Letter from the Co-Chairs (p. ii) and Executive Summary (p. iv-v); skim Section 1, Goals and Challenges of Election Reform (p. 1-7), and Summary of Recommendations (p. 79-87) (http://www1.american.edu/ia/cfer/). [GS]

• Susan Hyde, 2010, “Experimenting in Democracy Promotion: International Observers and the 2004 Presidential Election in Indonesia,” Perspectives on Politics 8 (2) [GS]

• Pippa Norris, 2014, Why Electoral Integrity Matters, Chapters 1 and 10 [GS]

• Case Study: Following California’s Lead? Micro-level Election Reform in the United States
  – Charles, Lane, 2018, “This Solution to Gerrymandering is Worse Than the Problem,” The Chicago Tribune, April 3. [GS]

Week 10: Democracy in Crisis, and the Limits of Constitutional Engineering?

• Robert Dahl (and Ian Shapiro), 2015, On Democracy, Chapters 12, 15–17. [LIB]
• Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, 2018, *How Democracies Die*, Chapters 5 and 9 (optional: Chapters 7–8). [LIB]
• Adam Przeworski, 2018, *Why Bother with Elections*, “Conclusion.” [GS]