This course will survey the literature on American political development from the Founding to the late twentieth century. The readings will encompass a wide sampling of work from intellectual, legal, economic, political, institutional, cultural, and social history. While most of the books will be drawn from what is commonly regarded as the American political development subfield in political science, we will also examine research in the closely related disciplines of history, sociology, and economics.

There are three important goals for this course. The first is to give the student an opportunity to become familiar with some of the most significant research and writing in the subfield. To that end, only one book will be assigned as required reading each week. However, we will read that book in its entirety. A second and related goal is to place the argument and content of that book in a larger historical context so that we can see both what has been brought into sharper focus and what has been relegated to the shadows. While we will not attempt to cover all of American political history in this course, much of that history will be covered in the weekly sessions. Finally, we are particularly interested in analyzing how each author conducted his or her research, including the kind of evidence that was collected, the manner in which that evidence was presented to the reader, and the relationship of this evidence to the claims the author makes. In sum, we want to reconstruct how each book came to be written by dissecting each of its elements.

Course Requirements:

Because this course is designed as a general survey of the vast literature on American political development, a research paper will not be required. Instead, seventy-five percent of the course grade will be based on a take-home final conducted as if it were a small version of a doctoral qualifying examination. An additional ten percent will be allocated according to the amount and quality of individual contributions to class discussion. The remainder of the course requirements will be satisfied in the form of one or two page papers on the reading assigned for each week.

A student can choose to prepare a research paper of a (to be negotiated) length in place of the take-home exam. This research paper should be intended for presentation in a professional forum outside of Cornell and/or publication in a professional journal.

Weekly paper assignments:

There will be weekly paper assignments which will be due by midnight on the Sunday before the class session on Tuesday. These papers will address five primary questions concerning that week’s reading:

1) What is the author’s main point? Put another way: What is the primary question that the author is attempting to answer? The author will almost always include references to other scholars who have either failed to
address this question or who have offered alternative answers. You should also note these references as well.

2) What is the evidence that the author has collected and presented in preparing an answer to his or her question? In some cases, the author has "returned to the archives" and reanalyzed primary documents. In others, new empirical data has been gathered from sources that other scholars have not used in the past. Among other things, you should try to reconstruct the research "practice" of the author as this evidence was gathered: What, actually, did he or she do when conducting research for the book?

3) In almost all important books, the author either creates new terms for organizing evidence (such as "party state") or redefines old terms (such as "social movement"). What are the most central terms in this week’s readings? How and why does the author distinguish those terms from past usage?

4) What appears to be the least essential (and, often, the least interesting) section in the book? This question may seem to ask you for an opinion involving personal taste. However, the query has a follow-up: Why do you think the author included this section in the book? Every author wishes to entertain readers so that he and she will have many of them. But every author also wishes, at the very least, to protect his research from criticism by shoring up the weaker points of his argument. We are looking for those weaker points in this question.

5) If you were to investigate the same question, how would you go about it? This question asks you to reflect, in part, on the answers you have already given to the above questions. What we are looking for in this question is a very brief sketch of an alternative way of approaching the author’s primary question that might possibly lead to a different answer.

These weekly papers should not be more than five hundred words (single-spaced, two pages at most). You can, of course, write more than that but you will also have an opportunity to bring up things in class discussion as well.

Final exam:

The final exam will have seven questions divided into two parts. Students will answer two questions from each part. The exam will last seventy-two hours with the expectation that students will write for no more than twenty-four hours (roughly the format of the doctoral examinations in the Government Department). There is no minimum or maximum page limit on this exam. Students are expected to draw upon all the readings for the course in answering these questions but are not permitted to bring outside readings into their discussions.

Required books available at the Cornell Bookstore and on Olin Reserve:


First Session (August 25): Organizing class (no reading assignment).

Recommended:


Second Session (September 1): The Founding.

The United States Constitution is one of the three most important documents in American history (the other two being the Declaration of Independence and, more contentiously but nonetheless unavoidably, the Bible). David Robertson sets out to describe what the Founders “were really thinking” when the Constitution was written in an analysis that is simultaneously a narrative of composition and an exemplary study of collective “political reasoning.” In some ways, we are ultimately led to understand the Constitution as a layered text in which earlier decisions on language and the allocation of authority influenced later deliberations. Put another way, there was a path the Founders both created and then, often unconsciously, followed as they put together the Constitution. Robertson reconstructs that path through a detailed examination and interpretation of the records of the Philadelphia Convention in 1787. You should pay close attention to the psychological assumptions and interpersonal dynamics that Robertson relies upon in that reconstruction. This is not just a study of the proceedings in the Convention or the thinking of the Framers...it is also a theoretical contemplation on historical contingency arising out of social relations and human personality. It also proposes a very perceptive, if largely intuitive and implicit, theoretical framework for analyzing group deliberations of any kind.

Required:


Recommended:

Most work in the subfield of American political development adopts a perspective that we might describe as “from the inside out” because the rest of the world is often just an incidental backdrop for events and transformations within the United States. There are occasions, such as the Second World War, in which that backdrop becomes quite intrusive but narratives and interpretations still strongly foreground things that happen within the American nation. As with the rest of the rapidly expanding global history genre, Sven Beckert’s Empire of Cotton reverses the interpretive telescope so that we view the United States (and every other nation for that matter) “from the outside in.” Events and transformations still occur within particular nations and societies but they are situated within a global context that interprets them as parts of a transnational, interdependent system. From that perspective, the United States appears to occupy a much less prominent place in the world. This is true even though Beckert has chosen to focus on cotton, a plant that many Americans might have claimed as their own.

**Required:**


**Recommended:**


Fourth Session (September 15): The Construction of Citizenship.

Much of the work in American political development stresses the importance of ideas in shaping politics and that emphasis on ideas often brings such research much closer to political theory than most studies of American politics. In Rogers Smith’s case, this focus on ideas as the wellsprings of politics attracts him to constitutional law because legal reasoning is one of the arenas in which ideas as logical systems are most intimately associated with the exercise of political power. As you read Civic Ideals, you might pay close attention to how he connects (1) abstract ideologies (liberalism, democratic-republicanism, and ascriptive essentialism) to (2) actual politics (in the form of motivations driving political actors as they make decisions) to (3) Supreme Court decisions (and, even more importantly, the majority opinions that justify those decisions). In many ways, Smith makes logical connections between these things by appealing to “reason.” However, when he offers normative prescriptions for how we should restrain our expectations for the American regime, he seems to urge us to consider the limits and peculiar (even though universal) tendencies of popular political reason in that (a) all nations must have an identity to which their people can subscribe and (b) that identity must have at least some ascriptive (and thus formally illogical) elements.

Required:


Recommended:


Fifth Session (September 22): Law and Institutional Development.

One of the most important areas of research in American political development is the study of institutions. Working firmly within that tradition, Justin Crowe analyses the origin and expansion of the federal judicial system from the Founding until the present. His analytical frame distinguishes between “policy,” “politics,” and “performance,” as well as invoking notions of “events” and “entrepreneurship.” But the most important distinction (and one that sets his work apart from more conventional histories of the federal courts), restricts the conception of institutional development to changes in formal authority, organization, and structure. To what extent does that conception shape the conclusions that he subsequently draws from that analysis? More fundamentally, does his analysis provide an explanation for how justices on the Supreme Court decide the cases that come before them and the legitimacy with which the American public accept those rulings? If so, what is that explanation? If not, is not there something missing in his account?

Required:


Recommended:


Sixth Session (September 29): Congress and Institutional Development.

One of the primary themes in the American political development subfield is institutional development and change. At the substantial risk of over-simplification, we might divide institutional theories into three broad types. One of these views institutions as “unique solutions” to collective problems of one sort or another. From this perspective, the narrative describing institutional development reflects on the “learning” of political
actors as they progressively discover and then implement that solution. Adopting an almost polar opposite position, a second view assumes that there are multiple solutions to collective problems and, thus, many different arrangements of power and authority that can be embedded in stable institutions. Which one of these potential solutions is actually arrived at is then explained, in many these interpretations, by critical conjunctures in which an institution is sent, often almost randomly, down a particular "path." The third and last theoretical frame places much less stress on the formal features of institutions (such as bureaucratic routines, rules and statutory authority) and, instead, emphasizes individual personalities and ideas. From this perspective, institutional arrangements and designs are primarily important in so far as they enable political action by their most active and influential members. In some treatments, institutions even become merely what these agents make of them. Which of these three theoretical frames best describes the one adopted by Jenkins and Stewart’s Fighting for the Speakership?

Required:


Recommended:


David Mayhew, America’s Congress: Actions in the Public Sphere, James Madison through Newt Gingrich (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002).


Seventh Session (October 6): Context, History, and Outcomes (I).

There are several ways in which historical events and processes have been theoretically framed in the subfield of American political development. In a narrative form, for example, they have been described as a sequence of events that appear to exhibit a logical order even if their underlying causal relations and mechanisms are left largely unspecified. Such narratives are often very close to what we conventionally categorize as “history.” An alternative method of framing historical events has been to view them as part of a larger pattern. Such frames usually take the form of a “linear process” (e.g., the steady expansion of central state authority) or “cycles” (e.g., Walter Dean Burnham’s notion of “critical elections” spaced over roughly 32 year periods). Explicit comparison with the experiences of other nations has been less common in American political development and, where comparisons have been made, has usually been restricted to brief references as opposed to full scale treatment (e.g., with research into primary materials for both the United States and the other nation). This week we examine a fourth
alternative in which historical events drawn from different periods in American political development are treated as distinct “comparative cases” for the purposes of theoretical analysis and explanation. This approach in effect treats these periods “as if” they occurred in separate (albeit very similar) nations.

Required:


Recommended:


Eighth Session (October 20): Context, History, and Outcomes (II).

Although he explicitly states that the notion of historical cycles is not intended to constitute the theoretical backbone of his book, Stephen Skowronek’s The Politics Presidents Make does, in fact, make a recurring pattern of presidential performance the centerpiece of his framework. But there is also a linear trend as well, a trend that promises or threatens (depending on your point of view) to undermine the robusticity of the cycles he describes. In addition, he has attempted to reconcile “structure” and “agency” in explaining the (commonly perceived) success and failure of presidents. As if that were not enough, Skowronek has brought study of the presidency back into the mainstream of institutional analysis in political science.
Ninth Session (October 27): Individuals, Inventions, and the State.

From one perspective, Richard John’s Network Nation is a history of the emergence and development of the telegraph and the telephone as national systems of communication. However, this history is also a finely crafted analysis of the relationship between politics and economics in what, he would argue, is a too easily accepted “laissez-faire” interpretation of the nineteenth century political economy. Even more than that, he urges us to ponder individual personalities that are much more complex than the conventional “homo economicus” view of inventors and entrepreneurs. Those often quirky personalities shape, sometimes decisively, the unfolding of what we might otherwise see as the “technological imperatives” of what become socially essential devices and the systems in which they are embedded.

Required:


Recommended:
Monetarism is an economic theory that, ceteris paribus, links changes in the money supply to changes in the health and productivity of the national economy. The chief exponent of monetarism was Milton Friedman who, along with Anna Jacobson Schwartz, attempted to demonstrate that linkage in the book that we will read this week. We are particularly interested in four things: (1) the way in which monetarist theory and explanations provide a framework for the book as a whole; (2) the manner in which "ceteris paribus" events (such as war) are integrated into the monetarist interpretations; (3) the role assigned to institutions as determinants of the supply of money (even when the people who lead those institutions do not realize the effect their decisions will have); and (4) the place of politics (e.g., the organized competition for power over institutions) in the operation of the economy. With respect to this last point, we are most interested in the relevance, as the authors see it, of the terms of political contestation to the "real" explanations for changes in the national economy. All great books have an overarching theory of some kind that bind their parts together but few exhibit a theoretical framework as lean, cleanly articulated, and supple as the one in A Monetary History of the United States.

Required:


Recommended:


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Eleventh Session (November 10): The New Deal.

*Fear Itself* is primarily organized around three concepts: "liberal democracy;" the New Deal; and a composite of these two, "the New Deal as liberal democracy." "Liberal democracy" is presented as a universal political theory, one that we should attempt to realize in our own time. The New Deal, by contrast, denotes a political regime with many, disparate programs and policies inevitably rooted in a particular historical period. From the combination of the two ("the New Deal as liberal democracy"), Ira Katznelson urges us to draw lessons as we do politics in the present. On the one hand, this might be a difficult task in that such lessons demand a comparison between distinct cases and the New Deal is clearly interpreted as unique and thus, perhaps, beyond comparison. On the other hand, there could very well be aspects of a unique historical experience that can, unlike the experience as a whole, be generalized to other periods, including our own. What might be these aspects and how might we apply them to other cases?

**Required:**


**Recommended:**


Twelfth Session (November 17): Paradox as a Research Problem.

A few of those working in the subfield of American political development have made explicit comparisons between the United States and other nations a prominent theme in their work. The most common comparisons set up advanced industrial European nations as a foil for identifying what the United States did not become: a highly-regulated welfare state. As Monica Prasad points out, those comparisons and the foil that they construct should, at the very least, be seriously revised and even, perhaps, be inverted. In addition to the way she makes her argument, we are interested in two things: (1) the almost exclusive emphasis on comparisons with European nations; and (2) her suggestion that a massive “unintended consequence” explains many of the peculiarities of American political development since the late nineteenth century. What other (non-European) nations might provide apt comparisons for American political development? How does she explain the disjunction between the intentional designs of political actors (such as agrarian radicals in the United States) and the massive unintended consequences of the policies that they helped to enact?

Required:


Recommended:

Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006).


As the title suggests, “reputation” is the most important analytical concept in Carpenter’s book. In fact, the concept organizes most of his theoretical description of the emergence of the Food and Drug Administration as he explicitly pits his own interpretation up against more conventional explanations of government regulatory behavior. One of the most striking results is the way that Carpenter comes to view the relationship between, on the one hand, “science” as a logical system of knowledge and discovery and, on the other, political attitudes toward its application and relevance to society. As he would certainly maintain, the contrast between them does not rest on the rationality of the former and the, for want of a better term, emotional content of the latter. But “science” and “political attitudes toward science” are nonetheless distinct. Wherein lies the difference?
Fourteenth Session: (December 1): The American South as a Comparative Research Problem.

Although, as Robert Mickey notes, there are few works in American political development that explicitly invite comparisons with the historical experiences of other nations, they often do so in creative and somewhat surprising ways. With respect to Paths Out of Dixie, we might ask three distinct questions: (1) what are the analytical terms that enable cross-national comparison and how are their definitions crafted for that purpose; (2) how far can we pursue these comparisons before they begin to peter out (in the sense that the comparative differences begin to swamp attempts to trace parallel trajectories); and (3) how does the cross-national comparative frame influence the construction of the internal examination of the American experience. With reference to this last question, please consider the ways in which the analytical narratives in the middle portion of the book are shaped by the comparative theoretical ambitions stated and restated in the first and last chapters.

Required:


Recommended:


