Strategic Models of Politics
PS 231, Fall 2013

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Teaching Assistant: Matthew Powers (mpower5@illinois.edu)

Lectures: Tuesdays & Thursdays, 3:30-4:50 p.m., Lincoln Hall 1002

Office Hours: Fridays, 3-5 p.m. and by appointment

Course Web Page: http://compass2g.illinois.edu

Midterm Exam: TBD, Final Exam: TBD, No class on: TBD

Description: This class introduces students to strategic models of political behavior and their implications for our understanding of politics. We will first examine several foundational topics in formal political theory, game theory, and social choice theory. We will then use insights from these fields to address major political questions, including: How do candidates choose platforms? Why do common resources tend to be overexploited? How does the electoral system shape politicians’ and voters’ behavior? Can voters hold politicians accountable? Why do countries fight wars?

Course Requirements: Students are required to attend classes, read the assigned material, and discuss assigned research articles. The final grade will be composed as follows: class participation and discussion of the assigned article 10%, problem sets 30%, midterm 30%, and final 30%. Class participation includes a (joint) presentation an assigned discussion article (including a few presentation slides) and regular summary/discussion of assigned discussion readings on Compass.

Attendance: Regular attendance is required. Notify me in advance if you will be absent. The University’s official policy on absences is at http://admin.illinois.edu/policy/code/article1_part5_1-501.html.
Email summaries: I will ask you to submit a two-paragraph summary/discussion of the readings assigned for each meeting to “Discussions” at Compass by noon on the day of the class (not necessarily two paragraphs per reading, just two paragraphs for all the readings assigned for a particular class). The purpose of these summaries is to facilitate your preparation for the class and to encourage you to participate in class discussion. You can also use these summaries as an opportunity to provide feedback on the assigned readings.

Class presentation: An important part of your participation requirement will be to present (jointly with several other students) a research article of your choice (from the discussion readings listed below.) The presentation should not be longer than 10 minutes; please also prepare (as a group) a few presentation slides. You can email your slides to me (or bring them to class on a memory key). Assignment to presentations will be done randomly at the beginning of the semester.

In-class behavior: All cell phones, laptop computers, and related devices must be turned off during class and stowed away.

Readings: I will base several lectures on the following textbook, I recommend that you buy it:


Some lectures will be based on a few chapters from the following textbook, but this one is not a required reading:

You can order both books online; both have been placed on reserve at the library. All discussion readings are posted on Compass.

**Course Outline:**

Below is a list of topics that we will cover; we will adjust our pace as we go. (*) denotes a discussion reading.

**Rational Choice in Politics**

*Concepts: Rational Choice, Preferences, Choice under Uncertainty, Expected Utility*

Chapters 1-2 in Shepsle and Bonchek (1997).

*Recommended:* Chapter 1 in Osborne (2004).

**Discussion: How Rational Are We? Voters, Pirates, and Terrorists**


**Strategic Dilemmas in Politics**

*Concepts: Games in Normal Form, Best Response Function, Nash Equilibrium*

*Recommended:* Chapter 2 in Osborne (2004).
Discussion: Classic Games in Politics


Illustration: Electoral Competition

Pages 110-123 in Shepsle and Bonchek (1997).

Recommended: Section 3.3 in Osborne (2004).

Collective Action Problems

Chapter 9 in Shepsle and Bonchek (1997).

Illustration: The Tragedy of the Commons

Chapter 10 in Shepsle and Bonchek (1997).


Zero-Sum Games and Pure Conflict

Concepts: Zero-Sum Games, Mixed Strategies

Recommended: Chapter 4 in Osborne (2004).
Taking Turns: Strategic Interaction over Time

Concepts: Extensive Games, Subgame Perfect Equilibrium, Bargaining

Recommended: Chapter 5 in Osborne (2004).

Illustration: Brinkmanship and the Cuban Missile Crisis


Illustration: Agenda Control and Strategic Voting

Chapter 6 and pp. 115-133 in Shepsle and Bonchek (1997).

(*) Chapters 3 and 11 in Riker (1986).

Recommended: Section 6.1 in Osborne (2004).

Illustration: Electoral Systems

Chapter 7 in Shepsle and Bonchek (1997).

Illustration: Bargaining and War


Recommended: Section 6.1 in Osborne (2004).

Cooperation and the Shadow of the Future

Concepts: Repeated Games, Cooperation under Anarchy

Chapter 8 in Shepsle and Bonchek (1997).