Gov 94mh: Power, Politics, and the American City

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Class: Thursdays, 2:00 pm - 4 pm, CGIS-Knafel 050
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1 Description

As politicians bemoan gridlock in Washington, mayors and city officials are stepping up at the local level to address some of the US’s greatest social challenges. From education reform to housing affordability, city governments strive to experiment with policy levers, learning from each others’ successes and failures. In short, cities are where the action is.

Or so claim city advocates. In reality, much of the so-called “Metropolitan Revolution” is built on anecdote and celebrity cases. Does a new park or shopping district count as innovative change or merely window dressing? To what degree are large-scale policy initiatives possible at the city-level? More so, who is city policy designed to benefit and what forces shape it?

This course is designed to help reinvigorate the study of American cities as political entities by applying modern political science methodology to the foundational theories of urban politics. Pushing beyond anecdotal accounts, each class will explore an influential player in the urban context, combining existing theory with new data to address the fundamental question: Who governs the American city? And, more importantly, what does that power mean for the populace?

2 Objectives

This course is designed to help students transition from learning about politics to researching politics within the context of the American city. By the end of the semester, students will produce an original, executable research prospectus of their choosing. While targeted towards Juniors approaching their Senior Thesis, enrollment is open to all students through the Government Department lottery.

3 Class Structure

Classes are discussion-based and seek to blend canonical debates of urban politics with new data and research methods. Generally, the first half of each class
will be spent discussing the readings. The second half will be spent sharing research designs and working through potential tests to address the questions put forth in the student memos.

There are two books assigned for this course, both of which are available at COOP and on reserve at Lamont Library:


Additional readings will be available online or through Harvard Google Scholar.

4 Grading

There are four measures by which students are evaluated:

- 20% participation
- 25% memos
- 5% midterm draft
- 10% midterm paper
- 40% final paper

Participation consists of attendance and active, informed discussion during class hours. Students with weak participation marks will be notified early in the semester. Attendance is expected at each class.

Students are responsible for weekly, 500-word memos in which they will briefly synthesize the readings as well as propose a research question motivated by the readings. The research question will include a description of how they would test the question and what data would be necessary. These memos will be submitted each week by 2:00 pm on Wednesday. Of the 9 weeks in which a student may submit a memo, two may be skipped, for a total of 7 memos.

The midterm paper is a proposal for the final paper. The midterm paper will outline your question of interest, the relevant literature within the field, and your early stages of how such a question may be answers. Draft midterm paper of 4-6 pages is due Wednesday, March 2nd. The midterm paper of 6-8 pages is due Wednesday, April 6.

The final paper is a 20 to 25 page research prospectus containing your question, relevant literature, methodological design, and data sources. Research designs will be presented during the final two weeks of class in 15 minute sessions designed to garner peer feedback. The final paper is due at the Registrar’s assigned final slot.

5 Collaboration Policy

Students are encouraged to work together to understand and synthesize the readings and materials. However, memos must contain independent synthesis and unique research questions. Likewise, while research designs for the final project may be discussed, all written work must be independent. Sources used for all assignments must be properly cited.
6 Structure

1/28 Introduction: Power and Data  No readings/no memo
2/04 The Urban Context
2/11 Citizens and Exit
2/18 Elected Officials and Institutions
2/25 Chasing Capital, Keeping Capital  Midterm topic due
3/03 Race and Class
3/10 Neighborhoods and Geography  Midterm draft due
3/24 Fragmented Metropolis
3/31 Federal Urban Policy?
4/07 Rich City, Poor City  Class rescheduled for 4/4
4/14 Paper Presentations I  Midterm due 4/10
4/21 Paper Presentations II
5/14 Final Paper Due

7 Readings

Note: Readings subject to change.

1. **Power, Data, and the American City**
   (a) What are the objectives of this course?
   (b) How do we think about political inquiry?
   (c) What is the role of new data in the study of city politics?

   Notes: No reading/memos this week.

2. **The Urban Context**
   (a) What are the functions, interests, and players of a city government, broadly?
   (b) What are the unique features and dominant debates of city/local politics?
   (c) What are the capabilities of US Census data?

   Readings

Data: US Census Data


3. Citizens and Exit

(a) How can citizens exercise voice in a city?
(b) Does the ability to ‘exit’ empower the citizen?
(c) How has the citizen’s role changed over time?

Readings


Data: Citizen Behaviors


4. Elected Officials and Institutions

(a) What are the incentives and actions of politicians once in office?
(b) How do political structures shape the behaviors of elected officials?

Readings


**Data: Voting, Elected Officials**


5. **Chasing Capital, Keeping Capital**

(a) What is the influence of business power in city politics?

(b) How do agglomeration benefits balance capital mobility?

**Readings**


**Data: Tax Incentives**


6. Race and Class
(a) Why do many read ‘urban politics’ as code for ‘racial politics’?
(b) How do racial and economic cleavages affect political outcomes?
(c) How do these findings complicate the issue of ‘poor doors’ and inclusionary housing?

Readings

Data: Integration and ‘Poor Doors’

7. Neighborhoods and Geography
(a) Why does geography play an outsized role in the politics of a city?
(b) Should neighborhoods/communities have more or less political power?
(c) What defines a community and who speaks for it?

Readings


Data: Spatial Proximity


8. Fragmented Metropolis

(a) When do political surroundings within a region matter?

(b) Under what conditions is localism most efficient?

Readings


9. State and Federal City Policy?

(a) How do state and federal power affect city politics and city life?

Readings


Data: Intergovernmental Actions

10. Rich City/Poor City
   (a) What is the spectrum of urban challenges?
   (b) How do cities approach these challenges based on their political environments?

Readings


11. Paper Presentations I

12. Paper Presentations II