Introduction to Political Economy

POLs1465 - Spring 2021

Professor: David Skarbek
Email: david_skarbek@brown.edu
Office hours: Fridays at 3pm
Seminar times and location: MWF 2-2:50pm on zoom

Learning Goals and Objectives:
This class investigates topics in political economy. Scholars working in political economy do so with several valuable approaches, including grand historical narratives, detailed studies of economic regulation, formal models of politics, and comparative institutional analysis. This class focuses on comparative institutional approaches – understanding how institutions and mechanisms structure and affect economic and political activities – with a dash of simple formal models along the way.

We will discuss a collection of models and mechanisms to understand how individuals and groups respond to a variety of social dilemmas and to see how these change under varying institutional settings. We will discuss the collective action problem, prisoner’s dilemma, coordination problem, knowledge problem, preference falsification, path dependence, information cascades, signaling theory, sorting models, Arrow’s impossibility theorem, and voting models.

Course Time Allocation:
Over 14 weeks, students will spend 3 hours per week in class (42 hours total), 3 hours preparing for, and participating in, discussion section (42 hours), 5 hours per week doing course reading, weekly assignments, and other out-of-class work (70 hours total). The paper will require a minimum of 30 hours of work (30 hours total).

Assessment:

50% - discussion papers. You will submit four discussion papers. Each one should briefly summarize that week’s topic / readings and raise several questions. You can choose which weeks to do. These discussion papers should identify the central arguments and themes in the reading, evaluate the strengths and weaknesses in the arguments and evidence presented, assess whether or not the reading fosters greater understanding of the topic, and highlight discussion questions for the seminar that emerge from the reading. Each paper should be about 3 to 4 double-spaced pages. Email it to me at least 24 hours before our discussion.

50% - final paper. You will write a 10-15 page paper that applies one of the ideas / models / mechanisms that we’ve learned in class to a new example found “in the wild.”
Schedule

I will post the lectures on Canvas.

We will have discussions on Fridays at 2pm EST on zoom.

Please complete activities before that week’s discussion.

Week 1: Introduction and Methods

Readings:


January 20: Lecture

January 22: Lecture

Week 2: The Collective Action Problem

Readings:


January 25: Lecture

January 27: Lecture

January 29: Discussion
Week 3: Prisoner’s Dilemma

Readings:


February 1: Activity - [https://ncase.me/trust/](https://ncase.me/trust/)

February 3: Lecture

February 5: Discussion

Week 4: Tragedy of the Commons & Coordination Problems

Readings:


February 8: Activity - [https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/h-day/](https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/h-day/)

Activity - [http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b037hmwr](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b037hmwr)

February 10: Lecture

February 12: Discussion
Week 5: Preference Falsification

Readings:


February 15: No Class Held.

Optional Activity – [https://www.breaker.audio/rationally-speaking/e/29292106](https://www.breaker.audio/rationally-speaking/e/29292106)

February 17: Lecture

February 19: Discussion

Week 6: Availability Cascades, Conspiracy Theories, & Threshold Effects

Readings:


February 22: Activity - [https://ncase.me/crowds/](https://ncase.me/crowds/)

February 24: Lecture

February 26: Discussion
Week 7: Signaling Theory, Sorting, and Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

Readings:


March 1: Lecture

March 3: Activity - [https://ncase.me/polygons/](https://ncase.me/polygons/)

March 5: Discussion

Week 8: Winner-take-all Markets & Path Dependence

Readings:

Frank, R. & Cook, P. (1996). *The winner-take-all society: Why the few at the top get so much more than the rest of us*. Chapters 1 and 2.


March 8: Lecture

March 10: Discussion

March 12: Discussion
Week 9: Choosing in Groups

Readings:


March 15: Lecture

March 17: Activity - [https://ncase.me/ballot/](https://ncase.me/ballot/)

March 19: Discussion

---

Week 10: Market Failure

Readings:


March 24: Lecture

March 26: Discussion
Week 11: Government Failure

Readings:


March 29: Lecture

March 31: Discussion

April 2: Discussion

Week 12: Gerrymandering

Readings:


April 5: Activity - http://www.redistrictinggame.org/game.php

April 7: Discussion