Government and Inequality in America

Spring 2014

8:30-9:45, Gambrell 129

Professor; Christopher Witko

Office: 323 Gambrell

Office Hours: T,TR 10:00-11:30; and by appointment.

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**Course Description:** Why is America the most unequal affluent country on Earth? Is it conservative public opinion, US political institutions, weak labor unions or corporate dominance of the campaign finance system? How has the growing inequality in America compared with trends in other affluent countries? Is America still “exceptional,” or have common economic and political changes similarly affected other affluent nations? Does the “Occupy Wall Street” movement represent a major shift in American politics? Or will business continue as usual? We will consider each of these questions in the course.

**Course Learning Objectives:** At the end of the course students will be familiar with: 1) the interrelationship between the government and the economy; 2) competing theories explaining how the distribution of wealth influences the representative process; 3) the ways that public policy and politics may influence the distribution of wealth, and; 4) how American inequality compares to other affluent nations, and; 5) the political and policy factors that explain some of the similarities and differences with other countries. You will also have opportunities to improve your critical thinking, argumentation and writing skills with class readings, discussions and assignments.

**Prerequisites:** Introduction to American Politics or permission of instructor.

**Required Texts and Readings:**


Electronic Sources: It is 2014! We will use a variety of electronic sources including blogs, data sets, newspapers, periodicals and academic journals. In many cases an exact url is given; most academic journal articles are available via the USC library e-journal portal. If you have any trouble finding the materials send me an e-mail and I will point you in the right direction. In addition, I recommend that you set a google news alert to alert you when there is a news story with the term “income inequality” in it. I will show you how to do this in class if you are uncertain.

**Grading:**

For each of the assignments below you will be given a letter grade, corresponding with a number from 0 (F) to 4 (A). These grades will be averaged using the percentages above to calculate your final course grade:

**Grading Scale:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>90-100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>85-89</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>80-84</td>
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<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>75-79</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>70-74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D+</td>
<td>65-69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>60-64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>0-59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Methods of Evaluation and Percentages of Final Grade**
- Exams – There will be a midterm (20%) and a final exam (25%).

- In class writing assignments (15%) – In many days of the class we will have a brief (1-2 paragraphs) writing exercise on the readings that will be graded as pass/fail. The proportion of passes will constitute your grade (e.g. if you pass 7 out of 10 assignments that would be a 70, or C).

- Term Paper (25%) - This will be a 10-15 page double-spaced paper that can take a variety of forms depending on your particular interests. I will distribute a hand-out with more detailed instructions early in the semester and you should consult with me soon to develop a topic.

- Participation (15%) - Attendance and participation are required. While some classes may be primarily lecture, much of the class will involve discussing the readings and current issues. Therefore, student participation is crucial to the success of the class and for achieving the learning outcomes.

Policies and Procedures:

*****Please note that the following policies/statements are taken verbatim or very close to verbatim from the website of the Center for Teaching Excellence and are consistent with university rules and procedures*****

Academic Integrity

Assignments and examination work are expected to be the sole effort of the student submitting the work. Students are expected to follow the University of South Carolina Honor Code and should expect that every instance of a suspected violation will be reported. Students found responsible for violations of the Code will be subject to academic penalties under the Code in addition to whatever disciplinary sanctions are applied. Cheating on a test or copying someone else’s work, will result in a 0 for the work, possibly a grade of F in the course, and, in accordance with University policy, be referred to the University Committee for Academic Responsibility and may result in expulsion from the University.

Attendance Policy

When you miss class, you miss important information. If you are absent, you are responsible for learning material covered in class. If you are absent when an assignment is due, you must have submitted the assignment prior to the due date to receive credit. If you miss more than 10% of the classes, whether excused or unexcused, your grade will be dropped one letter grade.

Expectations for Classroom Behavior

All cell phones and pagers are to be turned off or silenced during class (not on vibrate). All cell phones are to be put away out of view during class; there is no text messaging, web browsing, etc, during class. There will be no eating during class time. Failure to adhere to these classroom rules may result in your being dismissed from class and/or an academic penalty. Please be respectful of each other, the instructor, and any guest presenters while in class. We are all here to learn! Any disrespectful or disruptive behavior may result in your referral to the Office of Student Judicial Programs.

Assignment Submission

Assignments are always due at the beginning of class on the day noted. Late assignments will be accepted only in cases of emergency.

Midterm Exams

Makeup exams will be allowed only with pre-approval of the instructor or with an acceptable, documented reason. Acceptable reasons for makeup exams include severe illness, family emergencies or other unavoidable events including dangerous weather conditions and car accidents. Exam format for makeup exams may be different than the
original exam and will likely utilize a short answer format. An oral examination may also be utilized if deemed appropriate by the instructor.

Final Exams

Students who are absent from any final examination will be given the grade of F on the course if they have not offered an excuse acceptable to the instructor. Re-examinations for the purpose of removing an F or raising a grade are not permitted. If the absence is excused, students will be assigned a grade of I, and may complete the course under the conditions specified by the instructor in the "Assignment of Incomplete Grade" form. A student with excused absence from a final examination in one semester may take the deferred examination at the next regular examination period provided the examination is taken at the convenience of the professor. The examination must be taken within one calendar year from the time the absence was incurred. Deferred examinations will be granted only in case of absence certified as unavoidable because of documented illness or other cause, rendering attendance at final examinations impossible.

Accommodating Disabilities

Reasonable accommodations are available for students with a documented disability. If you have a disability and may need accommodations to fully participate in this class, contact the Office of Student Disability Services: 777-6142, TDD 777-6744, email sasds@mailbox.sc.edu, or stop by LeConte College Room 112A. All accommodations must be approved through the Office of Student Disability Services.

Diversity

In order to learn, we must be open to the views of people different that ourselves. In this time we share together over the semester, please honor the uniqueness of your fellow classmates and appreciate the opportunity we have to learn from one another. Please respect each others’ opinions and refrain from personal attacks or demeaning comments of any kind. Finally, remember to keep confidential all issues of a personal or professional nature that are discussed in class.

Instructional Methods

The course will be taught using multiple instructional methods. These methods will include lecture, group discussion and oral presentations with an associated critical discussion.

Recommended Study Habits

Readiness to learn means that you will come to class with questions and insights and prepared to discuss the relevance and application of course materials. I have found that students who do well in my class also:

Check Blackboard often for announcements and up-coming assignments and quizzes.

Highlight the textbook or take notes as you complete reading assignments to help you prepare for quizzes.

Form small study groups to prepare for the exams.

Get the phone numbers/ email addresses of at least two classmates whom you can contact if you have questions or need help studying.

Expectations of the Instructor

The instructor is expected to facilitate learning, to answer questions appropriately, to be fair and objective in grading, to provide timely and useful feedback on assignments, to maintain adequate office hours, and to treat students as he would like to be treated in their place.
Amending the Syllabus/Rules

Amendments and changes to the syllabus, including evaluation and grading mechanisms, are possible. The instructor must initiate any changes. Changes to the grading and evaluation scheme must be voted on by the entire class and approved only with a two-thirds majority vote of all students present in class on the day the issue is decided. The lecture schedule and reading assignments (daily schedule) will not require a vote and may be altered at the instructor’s discretion. Grading changes that unilaterally and equitably improve all students’ grades will not require a vote. Once approved, amendments will be distributed in writing to all students via Blackboard.

Course Outline: These are the topics we will cover and the readings. If I add/change/remove readings I will let you know in class or via e-mail or blackboard.

Section 1. Course Introduction

1/14/14 - Course Introduction – Income Inequality and the American Dream

1/16/14 - The Case for and Against Income Inequality

Readings:

1) “Income Inequality is it Good for Everyone?” http://www.cnbc.com/id/100361302

2) “Income Inequality is Bad for Society, Really Bad.”
   http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2012/01/24/income-inequality-is-bad-for-society/

1/21/14 – Income Inequality, Poverty and Social Mobility

1) “Air Conditioning, Cable TV, and an Xbox: What is Poverty in the United States Today?”
   http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/07/what-is-poverty

2) “Social Mobility in America: Its all About the Poor.”
   http://www.motherjones.com/kevin-drum/2012/01/social-mobility-america

3) “A Family Affair: Intergenerational Social Mobility across OECD Countries.”

Section 2. The “Great U-turn” and growing inequality in affluent nations

1/23/14 – Measuring Increasing Income Inequality in America

1) “Striking it Richer”

2) http://www.psmag.com/magazines/january-february-2013/gini-coefficient-index-poverty-wealth-income-
   equality-51413/

3) “A Second Opinion on the Economic Health of the American Middle Class”
   http://ntj.tax.org/wwwtax/ntjrec.nsf/009a9a91c225e83d852567ed06212d8/30212f14664082b1852579b5006
   904e1/$FILE/A01_Larrimore.pdf

Assignment: TYPED PAPER TOPIC DUE

1/28/14 - How Current Inequality Compares to Past Inequality in America

Readings:
1) “U.S. Income Inequality: Its Worse Today than it was in 1774.”


1/30/14- How Does the U.S. Compare to Other Wealthy Nations?

Readings:


2/4/14 - Economic Causes of Inequality: Skill-Biased Technological Change

1) Cowen, Tyler. “Why is Income Inequality in America so Pronounced? Consider Education.”


2/6/14 - Economic Causes II: Structural economic shifts – Deindustrialization


   http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Projects/BPEA/Fall%202013/2013b%20elsby%20labor%20share.pdf


2/11/14 - Economic Causes III: Structural economic shifts – Financialization

1) Bruce Bartlett. 2013. “Financialization as a Cause of Economic Malaise.”


Section 3. Changes in American Politics and Policy and Inequality


2/18/14 – Political Change and Inequality

1) Hacker and Pierson, p. 41-91.

2/20/14- The Decline of Labor and Rise of Business

Assignment: ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY DUE

2/25/14 – Political Parties and Polarization

1) Hacker and Pierson, p. 137-190.

2/27/14 – MIDTERM REVIEW AND PAPER MEETINGS

3/4/14 – MIDTERM EXAM IN CLASS

3/6/14 – Go over Midterm

3/18/14 - Representation in Congress


3/20/14 – Representation in the Executive Branch and Bureaucracy


3/25/14 – Oligarchy in the USA?


ASSIGNMENT: PAPER OUTLINE DUE

Section 4. Policy Change and Inequality

3/27/14 - Deunionization


4/1/14 – Social Spending and Programs


4/3/14 – The Minimum Wage

1) Declining Value of the Minimum Wage is A Major Factor Driving Inequality  


4/8/14 – Taxes


4/10/14 - Class Differences in Opinions and Unequal Representation


ASSIGNMENT: EXCHANGE PAPER DRAFT WITH TEAM

4/15/14 – Class Bias in Turnout and Inequality


Assignment: RETURN PAPER WITH COMMENTS TO TEAM MEMBERS

4/17/14 – Aggregate Public Opinion and the Puzzle of Non-response


4/19/14 – Why the public “non-response” to rising inequality?

1) TBA

4/22/14 - Student presentations –

Assignment: FINAL PAPERS DUE at BEGINNING OF CLASS – NO EMAILED PAPERS ACCEPTED
4/24/14 – Student presentations

FINAL EXAM – Thursday May 1st, 9 a.m.