

Professor Oppenheimer's HNRS 209J - Fall, 2009 (as of 8/20/09)

[www.bsos.umd.edu/gvpt/oppenheimer/209j/](http://www.bsos.umd.edu/gvpt/oppenheimer/209j/)

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class: TuTh 11 -12:15 : KEY 0126

### *WHY IS GOOD GOVERNMENT SO DIFFICULT TO ACHIEVE?*

In most corners of the globe, people are downtrodden but their politicians prosper. People everywhere with sufficient money are usually able to satisfy their private needs quite easily: just go to the super market and plop down your credit card. Not so for their collective needs: security, good schools, clean environments. What makes politics such a hard and deadly game for the people to win? Must it be so, and if not, what can we do about it? That is the pursuit of this course. We will examine in depth just a few small puzzles which have been solved since, and in part because of, John Nash's (A Beautiful Mind) contributions to game theory. We will complement these with readings about the political world. Specifically we examine:

1. What might constitute the metric for evaluating a government.
2. The pitfalls of collective action and how to overcome them;
3. The relation between the aims of politics and both
  - A. The possibility violent and deadly structure of political competition;
  - B. The strange properties of democracy;
  - C. The limits and properties of voting;
4. The effect of design on institutional performance.

The course will use trivial (i.e. algebraic) mathematical tools to develop approaches to understanding these and other aspects of our political worlds. We will illustrate the models by reference to serious case histories of political problems. The course should be useful to all who have an interest in social and political problems.

So the course is about governmental institutions and political behavior. What are governments? What can we expect from governments? What is political behavior? Of course, we know what governments are! They are the organizations to which we pay taxes and from which we get parks, schools, wars, and armies. What is political behavior? We know that too. Political behavior is what a politician engages in to win an election. It is also voting, lobbying, and speaking out, or going to court to force the government to deliver on one's social security check. Since these types of political activity are common, we do not devote much time to identifying them. Rather, we seek some general properties of all governments and of all political behavior. Not just any properties: those which give you leverage to evaluate and predict governmental and political performance. In the same spirit, in order to assess what we get from our form of government, we see what one can expect from other forms of government. Thus, we shall be as interested in political behavior during a revolution as in an American election. We shall be as concerned with governmental institutions in modern America as in other places.

Any subject can be looked at from many different points of view. Any single viewpoint filters questions and answers. For example, one could ask, "What are the many types of government which can exist?" Not us. We shall develop a framework to generate hypotheses about political behavior in general. Let me give you a sample of some of our questions:

1. In what ways does human selfishness and reasoning effect politics and determine the nature of political outcomes?
2. Why do we need political institutions at all?
3. How do property rights, and the distribution of income and wealth limit what we can expect as outcomes from our political institutions?
4. Do democratic rules change the outcomes of political processes and if so, how?
5. Can we achieve social justice and if so, how?
6. What is the responsibility of a citizen?
7. What problems exist when we apply our normal notions of ethics to politics?

In answering these sorts of questions, we utilize a general theoretical argument: a general theory of behavior to analyze the questions above. The theory is based on the same psychological assumptions used to explain market behavior in economics but we will be applying that psychology to non-market events and problems. Of course, we must spend some time checking the theory against reality to see how it fares.

The course involves two types of reading: theoretical and case oriented. The theoretical readings cover material that has won a number of Nobel Prizes in Economics over the last 20 years. The approach includes materials from political science, economics, sociology, and political philosophy. They will help us obtain general answers to questions about politics and government. This literature includes current theoretical formulations known as public choice (a part of political economy) as well as readings that give us a set of political events we can talk about and to which we can apply our theoretical tools.

### STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES AND GRADING

Students will be expected to do quite a bit of reading, participate in class discussion, some problem solving, and write 4 papers with the following maximum lengths: 1 short memorandum (10 points) of 1 page; 2 medium (5 pages - 20 points each), and 1 longer (10 page - 40 points) paper. These analytic (rather than research) papers are supplemented by two quizzes (10 points each). The 5 page papers should be inspired by the topics discussed in the class and readings. The last paper can be an informed pulling together of the earlier papers if that is logically in play. Roughly the paper topics can be described as follows:

- A. What makes for good government? (Everyone) (10 points)
- B. Everyone does 2 papers, one each on a topic somewhat covering: (20 points)
  - a. What about the problem of collective action threatens the achievement of good government?
  - b. What about the ethics of political participation and the nature of political leadership threatens the achievement of good government?
  - c. What about the mechanics of choice in a democracy threatens the achievement of good government?
- C. Final paper: Given your understanding of what makes for good government, and what constitute the major threats, what proposals might you have for the advanced democracies (or just one if you prefer) to improve governance. Or develop a criticism of the perspectives taken in the material for the course (40 points), etc.

All papers are to be handed in electronically by midnight on the day due. Any received with a time stamp after midnight will be penalized. Papers will be 'marked up.' (Word is the preferred format for this, but word perfect or PDF is also acceptable. Standard 1" margins, 12 point fonts, double spaced for page estimation, please.) Everyone is to do 2 short papers from group B, and from either group C or D. Students must hand in their chosen paper topics' group in class, in the fourth class: Sept. 10. If there is a very uneven distribution of choices, there may be a lottery for assignments: although priority will be given to those who get their choices in earlier. Class participation and performance is worth 30 points (at least one letter grade) and will be based on your knowledge of the assignments and participation in the discussion each week. On top of that, I will expect students to stay informed of 'the news.' We will have occasional discussions of current events in class.

Students can work on the essays in teams and even write jointly authored papers: *but*, if you write together, you must

I will try to meet any extraordinary needs of any student. Such needs can arise out of either preexisting or new conditions. All students should ask themselves if they have any special pre existing condition which should be considered by me in the grading (or other procedures) in the course. Such conditions may include personal, social, physical, emotional or other impairments. Students who wish preexisting conditions to be properly considered must inform me NO LATER THAN 10 days after the beginning of the semester or after being enrolled in the class. The student may be asked to submit documentation regarding the condition, and a personal statement of how it impacts in the academic performance in the course, in writing. It may be required that the student register with the office for students with disabilities. If a newly arising condition develops during the course, official and personal documentation WILL be required. Further, when ever possible, the student is obligated to inform me of the conditions as they arise, and not after the consequences (e.g. missed exams) occur.

indicate the names of the individuals you work with and I will expect more quality and work in jointly authored papers.

**GRADES:** The grades in the course will NOT be curved. You get what you earn. The scale is 0 - 100: 0-39 = F, 40 - 54 = D, 55 - 69 = C, 70 - 84 = B; 85 and above is an A. The top and bottom 5 points of the grade are for +/-.

**Appeals:** ALL GRADED PAPERS, ETC. SHOULD BE KEPT IN CASE YOU THINK WE MADE AN ERROR IN ASSIGNING A GRADE, AND FOR ANY FUTURE NEED SUCH AS GRADE CORRECTION, OR LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION. No grade can be disputed unless your papers accompany your protest. Any disputation must be in writing: You must tell me how / where you think you were wrongly graded, and you should be able to show in your appeal that the difference accounts for more than 1/10 of the value of the assignment. Smaller errors on my part will not be considered unless they are simple cases of addition. In protesting the grade your entire assignment will be regraded (not just the section under dispute). This can (but is certainly not likely to) lead to a *decrease* in your grade on the assignment). You can choose the individual who will regrade your assignment. Regrading requests should therefore be not undertaken capriciously.

### ASSIGNMENTS:

The course is broken up into 'topics.' Assignments for each topic include reading, writing, and perhaps some other sorts of projects to be spelled out in class. Each topic has a set of 'suggested essay topics.' Even if you don't chose to write an essay for that week, you should think about the topics as possible paths through the readings. They will also give us some common focus to the discussions and readings.

The readings vary greatly in length. The easier the reading, the more pages I tend to feel I can assign. **BE SURE TO READ THE ENTIRE ASSIGNMENT AT LEAST ONCE SUPERFICIALLY SO THAT YOU HAVE AN IDEA WHAT IT IS ABOUT, BEFORE COMING TO THE FIRST CLASS FOR WHICH IT IS ASSIGNED!** Note, there IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR PLUGGING AWAY AT THE MATERIAL ON A REGULAR BASIS! The material is cumulative and if you do not keep up with it, you are likely to fall irretrievably behind. Contact me EARLY if you are having undue difficulty. All reading is to be done *before* class. Readings beyond the books are on line (\$) either findable in the UMD on line library, the download page of the course website, or via google. They are essential to the course.

The following books are required reading in this course and are available in the book stores for purchase - NOTE THAT IF YOU, AS A STUDENT, HAVE A SERIOUS ECONOMIC PROBLEM IN PURCHASING THE BOOKS, you should CONTACT ME, as I may have a few extra copies for loan.

De Waal, Frans (2000) Chimpanzee Politics, Johns Hopkins, paper, ISBN: 0-8018-6336-8 [\$18.95 232 pp.]] -

This is an interesting alternative take on politics.

Philip Gourevitch and Errol Morris The Ballad of Abu Ghraib Penguin

Kitman, Marvin. George Washington's Expense Account. New York: Grove Press 0-8021-3773-3

Oppenheimer, Joe (current) Political Laws: The Principles Behind the Chaos That Is Politics (on downloads page or <http://www.bsos.umd.edu/gvpt/oppenheimer/209j/opbk.pdf>.) (Here after Op Bk)

Piven, Frances Fox and Richard A. Cloward, Piven (1977). Poor People's Movements. New York: Vintage.

ISBN: 0-394-72697-9 – this is a controversial work, one which takes on the politics of welfare programs in modern democracies. It is an interpretation to be reckoned with.

Sen, Amartya (1999). Development as Freedom. New York: Random House. ISBN 0-385-72027-0. This is a major statement by a recent Nobel Prize Winner as to what might be reasonable goals for society.

### SCHEDULE OF READINGS, ETC.:

There are 28 scheduled classes: Sep 1, 3, 8, 10, 15, 17, 22, 24, 29; Oct 1, 6, 8, 13, 15, 20, 22, 27, 29, Nov 3, 5, 10, 12, 17, 19, 24; Dec 1, 3, 8, 10

### INTRO

SEP 1 - 10: KNOWLEDGE, GOOD GOVERNMENT AND TWO PROBLEMS: COLLECTIVE ACTION AND SOCIAL CHOICE

Required: \$Oppenheimer book ms (here after called Op Bk), Preface and Intro: pp. iix - 13.

Game Theory Predictions

Sen, Chapters 1, 3, & 4

\$ Oppenheimer, Joe and Norman Frohlich (2007). "Demystifying Social Welfare: Foundations for Constitutional Design." Maryland Law Review, Vol. 67, No. 1: 85-122.

\$ UN Millennium Development Goals: <http://un.by/en/undp/milleniurgoals/>

Initial Written Exercise (10 points) - due 9/12: Write a 1 page essay describing a policy or social problem that interests you and relates to the ideas regarding 'what makes for good government'. I will expect you to be following these concerns in the news discussions we have and would hope you stay focused on them for your papers.

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PART 1: THE PITFALLS OF COLLECTIVE ACTION AND HOW TO OVERCOME THEM

SEP 15 - 24: THE BASIC THEORY

Required:

\$Op Bk, Part I, the logic of collective action, Intro, Chap 1 & 2 (pp. 20-45)

Paper Topic #A1: Written Exercise - due 9/ 28. Write a 5 page essay broadly on how the theory of collective action threatens your conception of a good government on a topic but focused on a question also of the following sort:

- A. What limitations do you see to the theory of collective action posed in S&B?
- B. Does the theory of collective action explain of why there are so many problems with public participation in politics? Why?
- C. Which policy problems can be usefully analyzed with this theory? How?
- D. What are the goals we ought to use government to achieve and why these particular goals? How does this relate to the concept of public goods and how does the theory of public goods help us understand the problems of government?

Recommended Readings: Axelrod, Robert. (1984). The Evolution of Cooperation. Basic Books. New York. This is a beauty. (But, don't forget that tit-for-tat is not defined for more than 2 persons.) Olson, M. The Logic of Collective Action. Harvard, 1967. This is the classic which started this line of research. A great read. Ostrom, E., J. Walker and R. Gardner. 1992. Covenants With And Without The Sword: Self Governance is Possible. American Political Science Review 86: 404-417. Schelling, Thomas C. (1973) "Hockey Helmets, Concealed Weapons, and Daylight Savings: A Study of Binary Choices with Externalities." Journal of Conflict Resolution, v. 17, No. 3 (September), pp. 381 -428 is a very interesting synopsis of some of the early findings.

Quiz: Sep 29 on the logic of collective action

SEP 29- OCT 1: RELATED TOPICS - POLITICAL IGNORANCE & ETHICS

SEP 29: IGNORANCE

Required Reading: \$Op Bk, Part I, the logic of collective action, Chap 3 (pp. 21-50 only)

Paper Topic #A2: Written Exercise - due 10/3. Write a 5 page essay broadly on how the theory of political ignorance threatens the conception of a good government but focused on a question also of the following sort:

- E. What are the implications of rational ignorance for citizenship and governmental quality in a democracy?
- F. When if ever is it rational for the average political subject to spend effort to gain political information? Why?
- G. Can you think of any design changes to democracy that could improve the information accrual of the citizen?

Oct 1 - the moral obligations of the individual to the group

Required Reading: \$Shavit, Ari, On Gaza Beach, NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS, vol. XXXVIII, No. 13 (July 18, 1991). pp. 3 - 6.

Paper Topic #A3: Written Exercise - due 10/5. Write a 5 page essay broadly on how the theory of moral behavior threatens your conception of a good government on a topic but focused on a question also of the following sort:

- H. How can one justify anyone making an effort to make the world better given that the likelihood is so small that the individual will be able to make a difference.
- I. How can one justify 'doing nothing' for the group given that the likelihood is so small that the individual will be able to make a difference?
- J. Why ought one to vote?

Recommended Reading: A more general view of the problems involved is by Saul Alinsky, Reveille for Radicals. Also see his Playboy interview. Again, the Heym novel, The Wandering Jew is a serious reflection on some of these issues. Also, see Oppenheimer, (1985) "Public Choice and Three Ethical Properties of Politics," Public Choice, 45: 241-255. Nagel, Thomas (1979). Mortal Questions has other interesting essays on specific issues of political morality. Deak, Istvan. "Memories of Hell," NY Review of Books, XLIV, 11 (June 26, 97): 38-43 is yet another interesting view of the problem as witnessed in concentration camps in WWII. Zentropa (vhs).

PART 2: THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE AIMS OF POLITICS FOR THE NATURALLY DYSFUNCTIONAL AND OFTEN VIOLENT AND DEADLY STRUCTURE OF POLITICAL COMPETITION

OCT 6 - 15: LEADERSHIP: THE THEORY

AT THE TOP:

Required: Kitman (Introduction and Part IV including all of 1775 and 1781 to the end, plus what ever you find of interest between)

\$ Remnick, David. "Dons of the Don," NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS, July 16, 1992. pp. 45 - 50.

\$ Michels, Robert Political Parties, Part One (A), Chaps. 1-2, (B) 2-3 at <http://socserv.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3ll3/michels/polipart.pdf>

§ Olson, Mancur (1993) "Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development," *American Political Science Review*. Vol. 87, No. 3 (Sept.): pp. 567-576.

Recommended: Frohlich, Norman and Joe A. Oppenheimer (1978), *Modern Political Economy*, Chap 3 & 4. Frohlich, Norman, Joe A. Oppenheimer, and Oran Young (1971), Political Leadership and the Supply of Collective Goods. Princeton University Press. Schappera, *Government and Politics in Tribal Societies: The pros are not only in the U.S.* Frohlich, Norman and Joe A. Oppenheimer (1978), *Modern Political Economy*, Chap 3 & 4. Hardin, R. *Collective Action*. Johns Hopkins Univ Press, Baltimore, Md. (RFF), Chaps. 2-5. Riordin, Plunkitt of Tammany Hall (St. Martin's) - A great read about a wonderful political leader. Royko, *Boss* - just so you don't think the Plunkitts disappeared after WWI.

#### AT THE BOTTOM:

Required Reading: Piv and Clow Ch 5. (264-326) & Intro chap

Paper Topic #B1: Written Exercise - due 10/21. Write a 5 page essay on how the nature of political leadership threatens the achievement of good government focusing on a topic such as one of these:

- A. Do you think it is useful to think of politicians as 'public good entrepreneurs'? Why?
- B. Given rational ignorance, and the need for incentives, can one expect different sorts of individuals to compete for democratic leadership positions than those who compete for leadership in non-democratic societies? Why?
- C. Do your favorite and least favorite political hero fit this theory differently? What differentiates them?
- D. How do your favorite and least favorite presidential candidate fit this theory?
- E. How would you write an ethics of leadership?

Recommended Reading: Chong, Dennis (1991), Collective Action and the Civil Rights Movement. Chicago: Chicago University Press. Mason, T. D. (1984), "Individual Participation in Collective Racial Violence: A Rational Choice Synthesis," *APSR*, 78 (December), 1040-1056. Autobiography of Malcolm X; Peter Matthiessen, Sal Si Suedes.

OCT 20 - OCT 29: LEADERSHIP POLICY, IMPLEMENTATION & RESPONSIBILITY:

Required Reading: Philip Gourevitch, Errol Morris (2009), The Ballad of Abu Ghraib

[www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/03/24/080324fa\\_fact\\_gourevitch](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/03/24/080324fa_fact_gourevitch)

[www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/05/10/040510fa\\_fact](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/05/10/040510fa_fact)

[www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/05/03/slideshow\\_040503](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/05/03/slideshow_040503)

Abu ghraib implications

§ The § Meltdown

§ - Berlin, Isaiah (1971) "The Question of Machiavelli," New York Review of Books, XVII, No. 7, Nov. 4: 30 - 32.

Recommended: Battle of Algiers, Aleksandr Isaevich Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago: 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*; Shakespeare's history plays.

Paper Topic #B2: Written Exercise - due 11/6. Write a 5 page essay on how the nature of political leadership threatens the achievement of good government focusing on the moral obligations of political leaders such as one of these:

- A. What are the obligations of a ruler to care for people in other countries and why?
- B. What aspects of the US system get in the way of being able to hold the leaders responsible for the sorts of policy issues (specify) that bother you from the reading?
- C. How would you write an obtainable ethics of leadership? How could the leaders be held responsible?

Recommended: Carleton, Mark T. (1971). Politics and Punishment; the History of the Louisiana State Penal System Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press. An unbelievably powerful bit of American history in post bellum South documenting the rounding up of ex-slaves for work crews to work to death on Southern plantations as a way of reducing the political power of the ex-slaves. Chang, Jung (1991), Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China. Anchor-Doubleday: New York. A great read about three generations of women during the great revolution and the ensuing upheavals. Brown, Dee (1971) Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc. Here in the US it is often presumed that we are immune (except of course, for slavery) from the sorts of 'crimes against humanity. The question is not how the military, but rather the populace more generally can be involved in horrendous activity. Chang, Iris (1997) The Rape of Nanking. Basic Books. Here the question is how the military of one country can be involved in horrendous activity with no 'second' thoughts. Lang, Daniel. [1969] Casualties of war. New York, McGraw-Hill. Originally appeared in the October 18, 1969 issue of the New Yorker. On the structure of casualties in one family, and its causes during the Vietnamese Conflict. The Trials of Henry Kissinger, and The Fog of War are two documentaries that could be useful. Machiavelli, The Prince.

NOV 3-24- PART 3: THE STRANGE PROPERTIES OF AGGREGATION AND DEMOCRACY  
DEMOCRACY, ELECTIONS, AND NATIONAL INTEREST

Nov 3 - 12 - ELECTIONS AND VOTING

Required Reading:

§ Op Bk, Part I, Chap 3 pp. 50-56. Part II, Collective Choice, Intro and Chap 4 & 5: pp. 57 - 85.

§ Sen, Amartya (1999). Development as Freedom. New York: Random House. Chapter 11 and 7 (to p. 284)

§ Miller, David. (1991). "Deliberative Democracy and Social Choice," Political Studies, 40 (special issue), 54-67.

Paper Topic #C1: Written Exercise - due 11/15. Write a 5 page essay relating the analysis of democratic choice procedures and institutions to the possibility of obtaining good government focusing on a question such as one of these:

- A. Do you think most issues are 1-dimensional? Why? What difference does this make to analysis?
- B. Do parties and campaigning 'reduce the political space? Do they do this by generating an agreement on values? What difference does this make?
- C. Do you think democratic outcomes are more stable than the predictions (why or what not, and what do you think is the cause of this)?

Recommended Readings: Hotelling, Harold (1929) "Stability in Competition," *ECONOMIC JOURNAL*: v. 39 (1), 41 - 57. Black, Duncan (1958) *The Theory Of Committees And Elections*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Part II is especially interesting from the point of view of history of science. Anthony Downs (1957) was one of the first to develop these ideas. See his An Economic Theory of Democracy New York: Harper and Row.

Nov 17 - 24 - A MORE GENERAL PROBLEM

Required Reading: Op Bk, Chap 6

\* Sen, Amartya (1999). Development as Freedom. New York: Random House. Chapters. 6 "The Importance of Democracy"

Paper Topic #C2: Written Exercise - due 11/30. Write a 5 page essay relating the theorems about democratic choice to the possibility of obtaining good government focusing on a question such as one of these:

- A. Do you think most of politics is like a mix of the divide the dollar game discussed in Sen and S&B and the collective action or public good games analyzed earlier? So what?
- B. What do you think is the seriousness of the Arrow problem (cyclic outcomes) in the functioning or long term justification of democracy?
- C. How do special majority rules (e.g. 2/3 rules) stack up with regard to the criteria put forward by May? Normatively do the differences matter? Why?
- D. What's special about majority rule?
- E. Given Sen's finding, and Arrow's discovery, why do democracies do better than dictatorships?
- F. What do you see as the gain from democracy?
- G. How would you explain the differential effects of democracy on the existence of famines, genocides, pluralism and economic justice?

Recommended: Arrow, Kenneth J. (1963). *Social Choice and Individual Values*, 2nd ed. Yale: New Haven. Sen, A.K. (1981) *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*. Oxford, Clarendon Press. Sen, "The Possibility of Social Choice," Nobel Prize Lecture (1998), in *Rationality and Freedom* (2002). 65-97 plus references (E-RESERVES); Miller, Gary J. and T. H. Hammond, (1990) "Committees and the Core of the Constitution," Public Choice. Vol 66, No. 3, 201 - 228. Miller, N. R. "Pluralism and Social Choice," American Political Science Review 77 (1983): 734-747. Gerald Mackie, *Democracy Defended*, Cambridge.

Dec 1 - quiz

#### DEC 1-10 – PART 4: ON THE POSSIBILITY OF IMPROVEMENT

Dec 1-3: are more than humans political, and does it tell us anything about governing?

Required Reading: de Waal, Introduction - through Chap. 3, chap. 5 and epilogue (pp. 10-149, 175-203, 211-215)

Recommended Readings: de Waal, Frans (1996). Good Natured: the Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass.

Landa, Janet. 1986. "The Political Economy of swarming in honeybees: Voting with the wings, decision-making costs, and the unanimity rule." Public Choice vol. 51, no. 1, pp. 25-38.

Dec 8-10 - Can We Improve Government?

Required Reading: Op Bk, Part IV.

Final Written Exercise (40 points) - due 12/16. (10 page) Final paper: Given your understanding of what makes for good government, and what constitute the major threats to its achievement, what proposal might you make for any of the advanced democracies to improve governance. Alternatively, develop a criticism of the perspectives taken in the material for the course to show why the threats have been overblown, etc.