Politics of Inequality

Version: April 1, 2017

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Office Hours: Mondays 2–5pm
Encina Hall, Rm. 441
Schedule Once.

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Office Hours: Thursdays 2-4pm
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Sign Up.

Lectures: Mondays and Wednesdays 9:30-11:20am
Encina Hall West, Rm. 202

Sections: Fridays
11:30am-12:20pm
160-328

Fridays
12:30-1:20pm
160-328

1 Course Description

This course is about the distribution of power in contemporary democratic societies: who governs? Is there a “power elite?” Or, does public policy making incorporate the diverse interests that exist in democratic societies? What is the relationship between income and power? What are the political consequences of increasing income inequality? What are the implications of racial and ethnic inequities for the quality of democratic representation? Which policies increase political inequality? What are effective remedies for unequal influence? Finally, which institutions move democratic practice furthest towards full democratic equality?

This course will address these questions, focusing first on the local distribution of power (in San Francisco, CA, and in other American cities), and then in state and national governments, in a broadly comparative context. For each level of government, we will examine the distribution of power, its relationship to income and sociodemographic distributions, and sustaining policies and institutions.

Students will have the opportunity to work with income and labor force surveys in a mid-term assignment, and in a final paper, to examine different dimensions of American inequality and their implications for the quality of American democracy.
2 Learning Goals and Course Requirements

This course has the following learning goals:

1. Students will read, discuss, and reflect on current political science research about the quality of political representation in the US, and in other contemporary democracies.
   • Discussion Papers (20%)
     Beginning in the second week of the quarter, discussion questions will be circulated early in each week. In preparation for section, each student should prepare a brief response to these questions (max. 2 pages; due by noon, on Thursdays) that explicitly reference the readings assigned for that week, and provide some analysis. These papers are intended to assess comprehension of course material, and to provide an opportunity for reflection on key topics prior to section meetings. Papers should be well-written, with appropriate professional/academic style, full citations, etc..

   • Class and Section Participation (10%)
     Students are expected to have read all course materials before class and section, and should be prepared to analyze them in detail. Students who do not effectively contribute to class and section discussions—i.e., those who are absent, do not raise on-point questions or comments, or are unprepared—will not receive full credit for participation.

2. Students will work with income and labor force surveys to develop a hands-on understanding of the American national income distribution and standard measures of income inequality.
   • Assignment: American Income Inequality. (30%)
     For this assignment, students will use the 2014 Current Population Survey Annual Social And Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC) to calculate measures of income inequality for the US and for each state. This hands-on assignment will guide students, step-by-step, through an analysis and comparison of income distributions, with the goal of providing insight into the challenges of assessing overall economic well-being and the effectiveness of government responses to poverty and inequality. This assignment is due on May 14.*

3. Students will develop their own empirical projects, focusing on some aspect of the politics of income inequality in the US, developing and testing their own hypotheses, or evaluating an implication of existing research.
   • Final Paper. (Topic Memo, 10%; Final Paper, 30%)
     Students will use the measures of income inequality, developed in the Assignment, in a test of a working hypothesis that is informed by the existing political science literature, or its implications. Topic memos should clearly state a research question, identify three pieces of existing research on the topic (and a brief discussion of their insufficiencies), and outline a strategy for empirical analysis. Students will be encouraged to meet with their instructor or section leader to review their topic memo, before proceeding with the larger project. (A list of suggested topics will be posted on Canvas early in the quarter.) Topic memos will be due on May 26; final papers will be due on June 12.*
3 Grading Policies

Regarding late work:

**Late discussion papers** will not be accepted; students will be assigned a grade of ‘0’ for papers that are not submitted on time.

**Late assignments, topic memos, and final papers** will be penalized at a rate of one-third of a letter grade per day late, for a maximum of three days, at which point students will be assigned a grade of ‘0.’

If you feel strongly that your grade on an assignment, topic memo, or final paper, does not reflect the quality of your work, you may appeal in the following way: Write a memo that explains, in as much detail as possible, why you think you should have received a different grade. Submit this memo to your TA, along with your graded work, and a letter in which you formally request that the assignment be re-graded. If you and your TA cannot reach an agreement, the TA will pass the materials to the course instructor, who will evaluate the work, and your argument in favor of a different grade. The grade assigned by the instructor may be higher, lower, or identical to the grade that you originally received, but it will be final.

4 Laptop/Tablet/Phone Policy

Use of laptops/tablets/phones is not permitted during class and section meetings, unless otherwise noted in the syllabus or permission is provided by the course instructor. Students should have paper copies, or well-organized notes, for all required readings.

5 Students with Documented Disabilities

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oae).
6 Preparing for Class and Section

This course will draw on a variety of academic research, as well as contemporary multimedia materials (including documentaries and podcasts). Please note: The readings listed in this syllabus are not intended to provide a complete treatment of any particular topic. Often, these readings, in themselves and in the work they cite, have been chosen to reflect current frontiers in political science research on the politics of inequality. Other readings have been included because they are foundational, and/or because they offer a helpful framework for evaluating more current analysis. Material presented in lectures will provide a broader context for each topic, but will also focus attention on specific components of the analysis offered by the assigned readings. Students should be well-prepared for in-class discussion of assigned materials, and bring detailed notes to each class or section meeting.

Section meetings will provide an opportunity to connect academic readings and assignments to contemporary, often broader, discussions of economic and political inequality. To prepare for section, students should review all class notes and assigned readings for each week, and read, watch, or listen to the materials assigned for section.

7 Course Outline

Introduction

WEEK 1.


April 5. Representation and Influence

April 7. SECTION
- **Syllabus Quiz**

Part 1. The Long-Term Consequences of Local Distributions of Power

WEEK 2.

April 10. Focus on San Francisco


April 14. SECTION

- “Real Estate Wars: Inside the class and culture battle that’s tearing San Francisco apart.” Short documentary video, prepared by Business Insider.

WEEK 3.

April 17. Constructing Local Political Communities


April 19. Political Representation in American Cities


April 21. SECTION

- This American Life Episode 534: “A Not-So-Simple Majority.”

Part 2. Political Inequality and American Democracy

WEEK 4.

April 24. Income Inequality in the American States *

- “Analyzing Income Inequality Using Stata: A Self-Teaching Package.” (This is a memo that will be prepared and circulated by the course instructor.)

* N.B. Most of this class (and section on April 28) will be devoted to the analysis of income data and the practical measurement of income inequality. Students should bring their laptops, and be prepared to analyze the CPS dataset, posted on Coursework.
April 26. How Local Experience Shapes Attitudes about Poverty and Income Inequality


April 28. SECTION

- “Analyzing Income Inequality Using Stata: A Self-Teaching Package.”

**WEEK 5.**

May 1. Criminal Prosecution and Implications for Economic and Political Inequality


May 3. Politics of the American Safety Net


May 5. SECTION

- *This American Life* Episode 490: “Trends With Benefits.”

**WEEK 6.**

May 8. Evidence of Unequal Influence in National Politics


May 10. A Contemporary Power Elite?


May 12. SECTION

WEEK 7.

May 15. Why Hasn’t Democracy Slowed Rising Inequality in the US?

Part 3. The Politics of Inequality in Contemporary Democracies

May 17. Income Inequality, in the US and Abroad, and Over Time

May 19. SECTION
- TBD

WEEK 8.

May 22. Political Roots of Contemporary Income Inequality

May 24. How Electoral Rules Affect the Poor

May 26. SECTION
- N.B. There will be no section meetings this week. Instead, please watch *Inequality for All*, a documentary film available on iTunes, Amazon Prime, Google Play, and VUDU.
Part 4. Case Study: Education as a Remedy to Political Inequality?

WEEK 9.

May 31. Education and Democratic Citizenship


June 2. SECTION

• “Some Colleges Have More Students From the Top 1 Percent Than the Bottom 60. Find Yours.” NYT TheUpshot January 18, 2017.

WEEK 10.

June 5. The Politics of High Education and Income Inequality


Part 5. Conclusion

June 7. Who Governs, Revisited (Opportunities for Reform)