Political Science 2800  
Introduction to Canadian Politics  
Winter 2015  

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Office Hours: Tuesday and Thursdays, noon until 2 p.m. or by appointment  

General Information  

The principle objective of the course is to provide a general overview of the institutional traditions, processes, and mechanisms employed within Canadian political process and to explore how these dynamic elements have changed and influenced patterns of public debate, agenda-setting, governance, and techniques of problem-solving/implementation over time.

There is much controversy over the role of the state, or whether outside societal pressure matters more than the power of state elites when it comes to patterns of political and policy decision-making. The course is designed to offer critical insights on the role of Canadian institutions, state-society structures, and interconnected processes in shaping public discourses, as well as political-policy outcomes.

The central task of the course is to expand students understanding of how interconnected and interactive state-society traditions and processes have influenced historical political-policy traditions within Canada. Context matters and emphasis will be placed upon understanding how the constitution, government structures, diverse political economies, cultures, party traditions, social movements, and other forces have shaped discourses, patterns of mobilization, ideas, definitions of problems, as well as the actions of various actors who compete for power and influence in the Canadian political game.
Students will gain a general knowledge of Canadian politics and the different factors that influence what appears on the radar screen, what problems are defined, and then resolved. Emphasis will be placed on introducing students to key causal factors (ideas, interests, and institutions) that are thought to have influenced patterns of politics and decision-making in Canada. We will draw upon both historical and contemporary issues in an effort to inform debate, and make it easy for students to apply their knowledge.

**Mark Distribution**

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**Required Textbooks:**

Stephen Brooks, Canadian Democracy (Seventh Edition)

**Lecture Themes:**

I. **Introduction**

2. Canadian Democracy, Chapter 1.

II. **Societal Context**

1. Canadian Democracy, Chapters 2-4.
III. Structures of Governance

1. Canadian Democracy, Chapters 5-9.

2. Herman Bakvis and Grace Skogstad, editors, Canadian Federalism: Chapters 1. (On reserve).

3. Herman Bakvis, Gerald Bauer, and Douglas Brown, Contested Federalism: Chapters 1. (On reserve).

IV. Citizen Engagement, Technical-Political Decision-making, and the Struggle for Balance

1. Canadian Democracy, Chapters 10-16.

Policies

Supplementary instructions that constitute part of this syllabus are available online at http://www.mun.ca/posc/courses/policies.php. This includes information about campus support services, a statement about equity and instructions regarding accommodations for students with disabilities. Students are expected to review this online information and to be familiar with this course’s policies surrounding academic honesty, classroom demeanour, the conduct of examinations, the requirement to use a university email account and the use of recording devices in classrooms.

Tips for Succeeding in Political Science at MUN
eTips (www.arts.mun.ca/etips/) is a website created by MUN political science students with tips about how to do well in political science courses. In addition to written tips there are audio clips and YouTube videos about research and writing, life in the classroom, undergraduate planning and tips for applying to graduate programs. Check out this 24/7 support tool and consider submitting tips of your own to share with others.

Paper Assignment and Topics

The research paper should be about 12 double-spaced pages in length, and will be due on March 21, 2015. Research papers require footnotes/endnotes and a bibliography that meet academic
standards. Be sure to hand in a hard-copy as emailed papers will not generally be accepted.

The objective of the exercise is for students to gain new critical insights on some aspect of Canadian politics through researching and writing a paper informed by the literature, but influenced by independent analysis and thought. Be sure to state your objective, the argument being defended, and the conclusion you have reached as a result of your analysis. Start early, pick a topic that interests you, be sure to rely upon credible, peer-reviewed research, and have fun in the process. Writing an academic paper involves telling a story or narrative that is integrated, and supported by evidence. Learning how to tell a story is a critical skill for everyone.

Examples of research topics:

1. Discuss the pros and cons of a Cabinet-parliamentary system and how it has shaped patterns of decision-making/politics in Canada. While advocates believe the pillar makes it easier to get a consensus; critics argue it is not very democratic. In approaching the topic, it might a good idea to focus on one or two issues to help flesh out critical insights. For example, public backlash over Meech Lake, the recent dissolving of parliament during Harper’s minority government, issues of transparency in debates over Muskrat falls hydro development have all raised questions about the significance of executive power.

2. Discuss the pros and cons of Canadian Federalism and how this pillar shapes the way we define problems and then resolve them. Does federalism push territorial problems at the expense of issues of gender, and class? Does federalism inhibit democracy and citizen engagement? Again, you might focus on an issue to tell this story. Equalization, health care, national policies, environmental policies all provide interesting stories on federalism and opportunities to apply your knowledge.

3. Describe one of Canada’s National policies and how these shaped political-policy traditions in the country. Be sure to describe the factors (ideas, interests, institutions) that influenced the rise of these frameworks, what the objective was, who the winners and losers were, and how these created national unity problems.

4. Describe Canada’s party system, why it has not been very integrated, and the challenges this has created for politicians in the country. As demonstrated by Danny Williams and his campaign across the federal Conservatives, federal and party systems are not the same and often compete for power. What are the advantages and disadvantages of such an approach to conflict resolution?

5. Discuss the pros and cons of changing the electoral system in Canada. Does the electoral system create a form of political competition that is too territorial? Would an new system unify the country? Why has it been so difficult to reform the old system?

6. Why has it been so difficult to bring about constitutional change in Canada? Be
sure to discuss recent experiences with Meech Lake and the Charlottetown Accord and challenges associated with process.

7. Why have there been so many protest parties and movements in Canada? Focus on one of these protest movements and describe the key factors that help to explain the tradition of radicalism in Canada.

8. Discuss the role of interests groups in Canada, whether they enhance or pose a threat to democracy. It might be easier to focus on a particular interest group (business, labor, environmental, multi-cultural) and discuss how they operate, the strategies/objectives involved, and how they are influenced by the larger political system.

9. Discuss whether it would be a good idea to abolish the crown. Be sure to discuss the role of the crown, its role within the larger institutional system, and the pros and cons associated with such “big bang” changes.

10. Discuss whether the Prime Minister has too much power and whether there is a need for change. Given the recent scandals in the Senate, new questions have been raised about the power of the PMO. But also, whether in health policy, environmental policy, or the decision to dissolve parliament, critics have raised concerns about the increasing power of the executive branch of government. On the other hand, Canada has a reputation for making policy changes more quickly than counties like the U.S. What are the pros and cons of concentrated executive power?

11. Discuss how the Charter has changed Canadian politics and traditions of public policy decision-making. Has this been a good thing?

12. Discuss whether there are ideological differences between political parties. Be sure to give examples. Is this a good or bad thing for democracy?

13. Discuss how the media shapes agenda-setting and problem definition. Be sure to discuss biases and whether corporate concentration is a problem. Is there a need/role for a public broadcaster? How has the social media impacted on how news is reported?

14. Discuss why it has been so difficult to adequately address First-Nations issues and problems in Canada. Be sure to describe current processes and mechanisms relied upon to address these issues. Are the problems more connected with problem-definition (agenda-setting) or with implementation (resources, knowledge, capacity)?

15. Discuss how the courts have influenced political and policy decision-making in Canada. Has this been good or bad for democracy?

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19. Fracking has attracted much attention in the country. Why has it been so controversial and what are the different approaches that have been adopted to either address the issue (or delay it through the imposing of a moratorium).

20. Obesity is problem that has been difficult to resolve in the Canadian political process. Why has it been so difficult? How has the issue been addressed in the Canadian political system?