INEQUALITY AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

Meets: Tuesdays, 12:45-2:45pm
Classroom: CGIS Knafel K401
Website: https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/106330
Instructor: Professor Theda Skocpol
   Email: skocpol@fas.harvard.edu
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Office Hours: Email Skocpol or Peck for appointment.

Since the founding of the United States, most Americans have cherished the ideals of political equality and democratically responsive government. Reformers and mass movements have repeatedly highlighted disparities between ideals and reality and sought to extend citizenship rights. The Civil Rights struggle and other rights revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s expanded the rights and participation of African Americans, women, and other formerly marginalized groups. Yet since the 1970s new threats have emerged. Disparities of income, wealth, and access to opportunity are growing more rapidly in the United States than in many other nations. Progress toward realizing ideals of equal opportunity and impartially responsive democracy may have stalled, and in some cases reversed. In recent years, forces reluctant to accept societal changes and institutional rules have gained clout and turned to violence and harassment to undermine U.S. democracy.

This seminar explores the impact of vast and rising economic inequality and shifting social inequalities on the workings of U.S. democracy and government. Substantive sessions consider how analysts have done (and can further undertake) objective, factually grounded research on important questions. We begin by surveying recent socioeconomic and political trends. Then we consider research about inequalities of electoral and civic participation, the responsiveness of government to different strata of citizens, the impact of monied elites and social movements, and the role of government policies in mitigating or exacerbating social inequalities and shaping citizen participation or disengagement.

Although the class covers important contributions to the literature, it is an active exercise, because each student must define and at least partially conduct a research project over the course of the semester. If you are not committed to doing this, do not apply to the course. Late submissions are not acceptable in this class (except in documented medical or personal emergencies), so please examine course deadlines carefully and make sure you can meet them along with other deadlines you face. Early in the semester, students should start thinking about research questions and, if desired, meet with Professor Skocpol to discuss possibilities. Each student will develop a research proposal -- the Research Prospectus -- to be handed in no later than Monday, October 31. Soon after that deadline, each student will meet with Professor Skocpol to consider refinements of the plan and ongoing research progress. At the end of the semester, two class sessions will be devoted to in-class Presentation of Preliminary Research Findings. The Final Paper for the semester, due Wednesday, December 14, can be either a full research report or a well-elaborated research design accompanied by indicative preliminary findings.
HOW TO ENROLL

Enrollment in Government 94oa is limited to at most sixteen undergraduates and is only open to sophomores and above. First-years should not apply. Note Prof. Skocpol offers this course every year, so anyone unable to enroll this year will have another chance next year.

Slots in Gov 94oa are assigned as follows:

- At the outset, four slots are allotted to Prof. Skocpol to assign at her discretion.
- Over the course of Wednesday, August 17, through Tuesday, August 23, the Government Department Undergraduate Services team administers a lottery (across all Gov 94-- seminars) and will award up to twelve of the remaining Gov 94oa slots.
- On Wednesday, August 17, the Gov UG team will post a link to the lottery form for Gov 94-- seminars at https://undergrad.gov.harvard.edu/gov-94-seminars. The form asks students to list their first and second preferences among all Gov 94-- seminars offered this semester.
- Note, because Gov 94-- seminars are a requirement for Government concentrators, they are given preference in the lottery. However, non-Government concentrators are welcome to enter it.
- Deadline for students to submit their lottery form online is 6:00pm (ET) on Monday, August 22.
- On Tuesday, August 23, the Gov UG team will run the lottery and, by late afternoon (or early evening at the latest), will email results to instructors and students and will post the results at https://undergrad.gov.harvard.edu/gov-94-lottery-results.
- If the lottery ends up awarding fewer than twelve slots in Gov 94oa or if any of the students awarded a lottery slot indicate they will not be enrolling, Prof. Skocpol can then award those slots at her discretion (up to max enrollment of sixteen).

Best approach for students especially interested in enrolling in Gov 94oa:

- Between Wednesday, August 17, and Tuesday, August 23, email Prof. Skocpol (skocpol@fas.harvard.edu) asking to be considered for a discretionary slot in case you are not admitted by lottery. In your email, introduce yourself (name, concentration, and year) and briefly say why you want to take the course.
- Before the 6:00pm (ET) deadline on Monday, August 22, submit your Gov 94-- seminars lottery form at https://undergrad.gov.harvard.edu/gov-94-seminars.
- Stay tuned for lottery results to be announced on Tuesday, August 23, by late afternoon or early evening.
- If you have been lotteried in and want to enroll, just submit a petition in your my.harvard to enroll. Prof. Skocpol will approve it and you can then enroll.
- If you have been lotteried in but decide not to take the course, email Prof. Skocpol to let her know so she can offer your slot to another student who didn’t lottery in but wants to enroll.
- If you have not been lotteried in, email Prof. Skocpol again restating your desire to be considered for a discretionary slot. If a slot is available, she will let you know you can submit a petition in your my.harvard and she will approve it, and you can then enroll. If no slot is available, she will let you know your rank on a waiting list and, if a slot opens up, will email you inviting you to submit a petition in your my.harvard, which she will approve, and you can then enroll.
- Note, course registration deadline is Friday, August 26 (by 11:59pm ET).
COURSE ORGANIZATION AND REQUIREMENTS

This course will be conducted seminar-style, which means that students must attend regularly, do all the readings and preparatory activities each week, and come prepared for an intensive discussion.

Discussion Memos on Assigned Readings

Over the course of the semester, each student will write four discussion memos of roughly 1000 words each (two pages, single-spaced) on the assigned readings for various weeks. Discussion memos should synthesize the findings and scholarly disagreements from each week’s readings and indicate how each reading contributes hypotheses or evidence relevant to the overarching question posed for the class each week.

Posted to a Discussion page on the course website, memos will be shared with all class members and will serve to spark and orient the in-class discussion. So that everyone can read them before Tuesday’s class meeting, memos are due by noon on Mondays.

Schedule of Memo Assignments:

- **Memos #1 and #2.** Everyone will submit memos for Week 2 (due Monday, September 12) and Week 3 (due Monday, September 19). This will ensure that everyone jumps into the group discussions early, and it will allow Professor Skocpol to give feedback on early memos.

- **Memo #3.** For the third memo, students will be assigned to three teams of 4-6 students each to write individual memos for Weeks 4, 5, or 7. Teams for these weeks will also help lead the seminar discussion for their week. The idea is to have a few students circulating ideas to orient the discussion for these class sessions.

- **Memo #4.** For the fourth memo, students will be assigned to three teams of 4-6 students each to write individual memos for Weeks 8, 10, or 11. As with Memo #3, teams will also help orient the class discussion for their week.

- **Assigning Memos #3 and #4.** Students should come to the Week 2 class, on Tuesday, September 13, prepared to list their preferences among Weeks 4, 5, and 7 for Memo #3 and among Weeks 8, 10, and 11 for Memo #4 so the teams can be assigned.
Developing the Research Project

Research projects for the seminar may embody further investigations of topics covered in the seminar readings and discussions or they may formulate and address new questions about inequality and American democracy in other issue areas or at state or local levels.

- **Research Prospectus.** Early in the semester, Professor Skocpol will hand out and post on the course website guidelines for a good “research prospectus” to help students develop their individual research ideas and, in due course, draft the required research prospectus. A book assigned as background for this class is Christopher Howard’s *Thinking Like a Political Scientist: A Practical Guide to Research Methods* (University of Chicago Press, 2017). A core assignment for the seminar is a 6-8 page, double-spaced, **Research Prospectus, due to the course website on Monday, October 31, by 11:59pm.** For this assignment, each student will formulate a researchable question, define hypotheses to investigate, and spell out a research design for collecting and analyzing appropriate evidence. In other words, what question do you propose to ask and why; and how do you propose to do the research to investigate your question?

- **Individual Meetings.** Each student will meet with Professor Skocpol to discuss the development of their research project. Students are encouraged to schedule a first meeting early in the semester. Another meeting is **mandatory for all students,** right after the Research Prospectus is submitted (due no later than Monday, October 31). Additional meetings can happen in person or by Zoom as needed. Professor Skocpol’s assistant, Abby Peck, maryabigailpeck@fas.harvard.edu, will set up the mandatory appointments and students may contact her at any time to schedule other appointments with Professor Skocpol.

- **In-Class Presentation of Preliminary Findings.** The final two class sessions, on Tuesday, November 29, and Tuesday, December 6 (during Reading Period), will be devoted to presentation of preliminary findings of the research. Students will present and mutually comment on their research designs and preliminary findings. About 15 minutes will be allotted for each presentation, with half for presenting and half for class questions and feedback. Slides and/or handouts are optional, i.e., you can just talk to give your presentation.

- **Final Paper.** Final papers developing the research as fully as possible should be about 20 pages long (double-spaced) and are due, with no extensions, to the course website by **11:59pm on Wednesday, December 14.** The final paper can be either a full research report or a well-elaborated research design accompanied by indicative preliminary findings. Late papers will lose one half-grade per day, unless the student has a medical or emergency excuse verified by the student’s Resident Dean and, if applicable, the University Health Services.
Grading

Thirty percent of the final course grade will be based on the quality of regular and informed participation in class discussions, including the memos you prepare on readings for certain weeks. Due by noon on Mondays to the course website, so that all class members can read them before Tuesday’s class, the memos will help structure class discussion.

Twenty-five percent of the final grade will be based on evaluation of the Research Prospectus (due Monday, October 31) and the in-class presentation each student does in the final class meetings of the semester on Tuesday, November 29, and Tuesday, December 6 (during Reading Period).

Forty-five percent will be based on evaluation of the final research paper for the class. The final paper is due to the course website no later than 11:59pm on Wednesday, December 14. Late papers will have one half-grade per day deducted from the grade otherwise earned.

Course Collaboration Policy

Some assignments in the course will explicitly ask students to collaborate with one another. When individual work is required -- above all, for the assignments to do with developing the research project -- each person is expected to present their own work. Discussion is always encouraged, but students should not exchange written outlines or texts unless they are engaged in an explicitly approved joint effort. Work presented by an individual student must always properly cite quotes and sources of evidence.

Resources for further guidance:

- Harvard Guide to Using Sources
- Academic Integrity and Academic Dishonesty section of the 2022-23 Harvard College Handbook for Students is on pages 36-38 of the handbook pdf.
ACCESS TO READINGS

Most readings are available online via HOLLIS or from external websites. Links are in the Course Outline and Reading List (next section).

There is no sourcebook for this course.

Required books are listed below.
All required books are available from the Harvard Coop Textbooks Department. From the Coop: “Students ordering through our website will have their choice of purchasing or renting new, used, or digital content. Additional value is offered when they apply their Coop membership (10% off for a $1 annual fee) to receive greater savings.” Note also that some books can be fully or partially accessed online via HOLLIS.


COURSE OUTLINE and READING LIST

Week 1 (Tue 9/06): Introductions. Overview of the Seminar.

No required readings for class but get started on readings for following weeks.


To Prepare Before Next Week’s Class:

- Memo #1 is due by noon on Mon 9/12 to course website (for Tue 9/13 class discussion).

- Students should come to the class on Tue 9/13 prepared to list their preferences among Weeks 4, 5, and 7 for Memo #3 and among Weeks 8, 10, and 11 for Memo #4 so the memos/discussion leader teams can be assigned.

Week 2 (Tue 9/13): Different Perspectives on Rising U.S. Inequality.

Orienting Question: How and why have economic and social inequalities changed over the past half century?

For all course members to read before Tuesday’s class, all students submit their first two-page memo (roughly 1000 words, single-spaced) to course website by noon on Monday, September 12. Discussion memos should synthesize the findings and scholarly disagreements from each week’s readings and indicate how each reading contributes hypotheses or evidence relevant to the overarching question posed for the class each week.


Bruce Western and Becky Pettit. “Incarceration and Social Inequality.” Daedalus 139(3) (Summer 2010): 8-19.


COURSE OUTLINE and READING LIST

Week 3 (Tue 9/20): Elite and Popular Dynamics in Contemporary U.S. Politics.

Orienting Question: How have elite influences and popular pressures contributed to rightward-tilted polarization?

For all course members to read before Tuesday’s class, all students submit their second two-page memo (single-spaced, roughly 1000 words) to course website by noon on Monday, September 19.


Week 4 (Tue 9/27): Monied Elites in U.S. Politics.

Orienting Question: In what ways have wealthy actors of various kinds influenced elections and/or public policymaking?

For all course members to read before Tuesday’s class, selected students submit their third two-page memos (single-spaced, roughly 1000 words) to course website by noon on Monday, September 26 and help lead Tuesday’s class discussion.


COURSE OUTLINE and READING LIST

Week 5 (Tue 10/4): The Roots and Impact of Recent Social Movements.

Orienting Question: How can social movements affect changes, and what do we know and need to learn about recent upsurges?

For all course members to read before Tuesday’s class, selected students submit their third two-page memos (single-spaced, roughly 1000 words) to course website by noon on Monday, October 3 and help lead Tuesday’s class discussion.


Week 6 (Tue 10/11): The Changing Role and Impact of the Mass Media.

Orienting Question: How have changes in mass media and modes of political communication influenced American politics?

No memos this week. Spend time on your research plan.


COURSE OUTLINE and READING LIST

Week 7 (Tue 10/18): Do U.S. Social Policies Ameliorate or Reinforce Inequalities?

Orienting Question: What are the key features of the U.S. welfare state – and how does it both further and ameliorate inequalities?

For all course members to read before Tuesday’s class, selected students submit their third two-page memos (single-spaced, roughly 1000 words) to course website by noon on Monday, October 17 and help lead Tuesday's class discussion.


Orienting Question: What are the various ways in which public policies, once enacted, can influence downstream politics – and what are some of the most important effects of U.S. social programs?

For all course members to read before Tuesday’s class, selected students submit their fourth two-page memos (single-spaced, roughly 1000 words) to course website by noon on Monday, October 24 and help lead Tuesday's class discussion.

Chart from Theda Skocpol: “Varieties of Policy Feedbacks and Relevant Evidence.”


Alexander Hertel-Fernandez. “Policy Feedback as Political Weapon: Conservative Advocacy and the Demobilization of the Public Sector Movement.” Perspectives on Politics 16(2) (June 2018), 364-379.

Orienting Question: Why are taxes so controversial in US politics even though they are relatively low compared to many other advanced nations?

No memos due this week from students. Prospectus due Mon 10/31 by 11:59pm.


Week 10 (Tue 11/08): Understanding Christian Nationalism.

For all course members to read before Tuesday’s class, selected students submit their fourth two-page memos (single-spaced, roughly 1000 words) to course website by noon on Monday, November 7 and help lead Tuesday’s class discussion.

Orienting Question: What is this resurgent political movement; what are its roots and possible effects; and what research methods and data do we need to learn more


Week 11 (Tue 11/15): Abortion Struggles in U.S. Politics

For all course members to read before Tuesday’s class, selected students submit their fourth two-page memos (single-spaced, roughly 1000 words) to course website by noon on Monday, November 14 and help lead Tuesday’s class discussion.

Orienting Question: What kinds of inequalities are involved, and why is abortion an enduring and intense flashpoint in U.S. society and politics?


Week 12 (Tue 11/22): NO CLASS

Thanksgiving week. Work on your research project.

IN-CLASS PRESENTATIONS:
The final two class sessions will be devoted to presentation of preliminary findings of research projects. Students will present and mutually comment upon their research designs and preliminary findings.
- 15 minutes for each presentation. 7-8 min to present and 7-8 min for class discussion.
- Slides and/or handouts are optional, i.e., you can just talk to give your presentation.

Week 13 (Tue 11/29): Student Research Presentations – Session #1.
12:45-2:45pm in K401.

Week 14 (Tue 12/06): Student Research Presentations – Session #2 (during Reading Period).
TBD: Either 12:45-2:45pm in K401 or evening session at Professor Skocpol’s house.
Note, if held at Prof. Skocpol’s house, no slides capability, can only use handouts.
**FINAL PAPER DUE BY 11:59PM ON WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 14 TO COURSE WEBSITE:**

Final papers developing the research as fully as possible should be about 20 pages long (double-spaced) and are due, with no extensions, to the course website by **11:59pm on Wednesday, December 14**. The final paper can be either a full research report or a well-elaborated research design accompanied by indicative preliminary findings. Late papers will lose one half-grade per day, unless the student has a medical or emergency excuse verified by the student’s Resident Dean and, if applicable, the University Health Services.