GOV 94tr: The Politics of Economic Inequality

Spring 2021. Thursday 12:45 - 2:45 pm

Instructor: Professor Thomas F. Remington (tremington@fas.harvard.edu)

Inequality in the distribution of income and wealth has been rising in the United States and throughout the world in recent decades. In this seminar, we will investigate the political factors contributing to economic inequality in the United States, other developed democracies, transition countries, and globally. The first half of the seminar will focus primarily on the United States and the second half will examine inequality in comparative and global perspective. We will review economic and political theories explaining rising inequality, and consider the consequences of economic inequality for political equality, racial divisions, social mobility, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in exacerbating inequality. Throughout the course, we will seek to relate political to economic factors that affect economic inequality, identifying commonalities and differences across countries.

It is assumed that each student has taken Gov 20, Foundations of Comparative Politics, or an equivalent course, and Economics 10a (microeconomics) or equivalent.

Readings: All will be available on Canvas or through Hollis.

Course requirements:

There will be a mid-term exam and a final exam, each worth about 30% of the final grade, both online take-home exams. In addition, each student will submit six two-page response papers, which will have a 30% total weight toward the final grade. Attendance and quality of participation will also be taken into account in determining the final grade.

The response papers should each be approximately two pages, double-spaced, in length (700-800 words). You may choose which weeks in which to write the response papers, but you must submit at least six by the end of the semester. Each response paper should select a single, central idea from that week’s readings and summarize it briefly. Use the idea to tie together the readings from that week’s assignment, and offer your own analytic comment on it. For example, you might show how the idea offers insight on other issues, whether it is flawed logically or empirically, or how it relates to other authors’ work. Each response paper must be turned in before the beginning of the class in which those readings will be discussed.

We will use Zoom breakout rooms for short group discussions during class sessions. In addition to our two-hour weekly seminar, we will have a one-hour weekly “remote coffee hour” by Zoom where we will discuss the course material’s relevance to current issues. We will also invite guests from Harvard and elsewhere for open-ended discussions. Attendance at these coffee hours is required.

You must comply with the Harvard College Honor Code:
Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity – that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one’s own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs.

This means that you may study with other students in preparation for exams. **However,** you may not provide help to or seek help from any other person when taking an exam or writing your paper. Likewise, in writing the short response papers, you must do your own work. When using a direct quotation or paraphrase, be sure to provide an appropriate bibliographic reference to the source.

Schedule of topics and readings:

**Jan. 28.** Trends in US Economic Inequality and Effects on Inequality on the COVID-19 pandemic

Emmanuel Saez, "Striking It Richer: The Evolution of Top Incomes in the United States,” October 13, 2018. [Canvas]


**Feb. 4.** Inequality and Social Mobility in the US


**Feb. 11.** Labor and the Social Effects of Inequality

David Weil, *The Fissured Workplace*, ch. 1 (pp. 1-27 [on Canvas]
Neil Irwin, “To Understand Rising Inequality, Consider the Janitors at Two Top Companies, Then and Now,” *New York Times*. September 3, 2017. [Canvas]


**Feb. 18.** Economic vs. Political Determinants of Inequality

David Autor, Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz, "Extending the Race between Education and Technology." *SEII Discussion Paper #2020.01:* (January 2020) [Canvas]

Luigi Zingales, “Towards a Political Theory of the Firm,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31:3 (Summer 2017), 113-130. [Canvas]

**Feb. 25.** Political Sources of Rising Inequality in the US: Interest groups

Jacob Hacker and Paul Pearson, *Winner-Take-All Politics* (2010), chs. 4-6. [Canvas]


**Mar. 4.** Inequality and polarization


Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches*, 2nd ed. (MIT Press, 2016), chs. 4-6. [Canvas]


**Midterm exam:**
Thursday, March 4, 5 PM. Midterm exam posted to course Canvas site
Monday, March 8, 5 PM. Completed midterm exam must be uploaded to Canvas

**March 11.** Inequality trends in the developed world

OECD, *In It Together: Why Less Inequality Benefits All* (2015), ch. 1. [Canvas]
Rakesh Kochhar, "Middle Class Fortunes in Western Europe," Pew Research Center. (April 24, 2017) [Canvas]


**March 18. Inequality in Transition Countries 1: Russia, China, Germany**

Thomas Remington, “Market Transitions and Inequality,” (unpublished ms.) [Canvas]

**March 25. Inequality in Transition Countries 2: China: Rents and Inequality**


**April 1. Geographic Convergence, Divergence, and Mobility.**


**April 8. Piketty and responses**

Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the 21st Century* (chs. 6-8). [online through Hollis]


**April 22. Globalization**

Branko Milanovic, *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization*, chs. 1-2. [Canvas]
Branko Milanovic, *Worlds Apart*, ch. 1. [Canvas]
