

**Political Science 494: Special Topics in Political Science  
Interest Groups and Political Participation  
Mr. McFarland  
Fall 2008  
Monday 330–600**

This class is intended to be a more advanced class than Political Science 225, which is in large measure, a factual course about the activities of contemporary American interest groups. On the other hand, this class is not so clearly oriented to study for the Ph.D. examinations in Political Science as is POLS 566. As such Political Science 494 is more difficult and more theoretical than POLS 225, but not as oriented to academic professional issues as 566.

There are five paperbacks assigned as reading for the class, since it is a more advanced class than the three paperback 225. However, the books are relatively short, except for *Bowling Alone*. In addition the presidential and congressional election of November 4 will be discussed.

The class will meet once a week on Monday afternoon in 209 Douglas Hall. The class grade requirements will be four papers of five to six pages, due periodically in the semester, but there will be no regular final examination. The exact directions for each paper will be announced later. The first paper will be an analysis of “the logic of collective action.” The second paper will consider Putnam’s civic engagement theory with an option of comparison to Facebook/MySpace as civic engagement. The third paper will in some way analyze U.S. public interest lobbies or transnational advocacy groups. The fourth paper topic is still undecided.

The class is likely to have a small enrollment, and therefore attendance will be taken with penalties for a great deal of unexcused absence. If there is a graduate student presence in the class, somewhat different requirements may pertain to the graduate students, particularly if they are doctoral students preparing for Ph.D. examinations.

The first topic in the class is the logic of collective action. This book by Mancur Olson, Jr., is a classic in the theory of interest groups and political participation. Based on assumptions that individuals act in their own self-interest, Olson argues that the logic of collective action implies a major limit on the prospects for democracy because of the inevitable power of oligarchy (rule by the few) ruling through interest groups. Olson also implies that in most cases, an individual vote has no effect. This book upset political scientists greatly, and it led the instructor to spend five years in Washington to do research on interest groups. Olson’s point about voting has not yet received a consensual answer from political scientists, although a number of different types of answers have been set forth.

The second book in the class is Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Putnam’s book is about political association and “civic engagement,” the extent to which individuals are engaged in contemporary American society, as opposed to an individual’s solitary pursuits in his/her work life, suburban living, and modes of entertainment,

particularly watching television. Putnam believes that face-to-face interaction among individuals builds social trust, which is a foundation for forming political groups to influence government. Putnam observes, however, that old style neighborhood groups are disappearing, groups such as lodges, parent-teachers associations, and group recreation such as bowling leagues or card playing. Instead individuals are spending more time alone in commuting, or by themselves or with their families in watching television or “bowling alone.” Putnam is concerned this will lead to a decline in democratic participation. Recently the civic engagement theory has been the best known academic theory in political science and sociology as far as the non-academic world is concerned, and has been widely discussed among leaders of American society. But, as is easily seen, the actuality of Putnam’s theory can be readily criticized. One important question is: to what extent does the rise of Facebook/MySpace provide a new form of civic engagement, since it leads to social interaction, although such interaction is not initially on a face-to-face basis? We will see what students in the class have to say about this; at present the instructor does not know much about it.

Civic engagement theory tends to disparage public interest lobbies as elitist, Washington, upper-income organizations, and as not a very good form of political participation for democracy. On the other hand, public interest lobbies and their cousins, transnational advocacy groups [e.g. Amnesty International, Doctors Without Borders] are a means to deal with the power of special interest groups in domestic policy, or to confront the power of foreign governments in the areas of human rights or transnational environmental pollution. This is the research the instructor engaged in as a result of the upset caused by Olson’s book. The book *Environment, Inc.: from Grassroots to Beltway* by Chris Bosso is an excellent summary of the history and current lobbying activities of American environmental groups from the standpoint of political science research. Secondly, Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink’s *Activists Beyond Borders* describes and analyzes the new interest groups (transnational advocacy networks) that organize political action and lobbying across international borders, such as action for the environment or on women’s issues. The public interest groups and the transnational advocacy networks are new forms of interest groups and new forms of political participation for the last generation of politics and into the politics of the Twenty-First century. As such they provide an antidote to the problems caused by the logic of collective action. Yet the critical student must consider limitations on the extent of their influence and that they be something of a new form of elitism, in contrast to the ideals of the civic engagement theory.

The instructor’s own *Neopluralism: The Evolution of Political Process Theory* shows the coherent pattern in the development of interest group theory as related to the theories of power and political participation in the study of American politics. The first five chapters of my book can be seen as a summary of these ideas as worked out in the years 1961-2003. Full treatment of the book depends on what questions come up in the course of the class. The instructor will present unpublished material from his forthcoming book *Creative Political Participation*, which treats new forms of participation opposing the logic of collective action, political corruption, and major corporations, while working for a sustainable environment and transnational justice.

The instructor can be reached through e-mail [amcfarla@uic.edu](mailto:amcfarla@uic.edu) I reply daily Monday through Friday, sometimes on Sunday, but never on Saturday.

The paperback texts for the class should be available at the CCC bookstore or from amazon.com  
Used copies are likely to be available.

### **Political Science 494: Fall 2008 Schedule**

August 25: First class, organizing, initial discussion of class and the logic of collective action.

The instructor will attend the national meeting of the American Political Science Association on Aug 28 and 29. The historic Democratic nominating convention will meet during this period. Handout regarding the collective action book. First paper instructions will be handed out.

September 1: Labor Day. No class.

September 8: The logic of collective action. Try to read as much of the book as you can. It is a short book. The handout will help.

September 15: *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* . Chapter 1-9, pp. 15-180. Trends in Civic Engagement in the United States. **The first paper about the logic of collective action is due. Extensions may be given to late enrollees.**

September 22. *Bowling Alone*. Chapters 10-15, pp. 183-284. Reasons for Decline in Civic Engagement.

September 29. *Bowling Alone*. Chapters 16-24, pp. 287-414. Effects of the Decline in Civic Engagement.

October 6. *Environment, Inc.: From Grassroots to Beltway*. Chapters 1-3, pp. 1-83.

October 13. *Environment, Inc.* Chapters 4-6, pp. 84-157. **The second paper about civic engagement is due.**

October 20. *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Chapters 1-3, pp. 1-120.

October 27. *Activists Beyond Borders*. Chapters 4-6; 121-217

November 3. Catch-up session, to be announced.  
Discussion of the election of November 4 (no reading).

November 10. Discussion of the election of November 4 (no reading).  
**The third paper about public interest groups and advocacy networks is due.**

November 17. *Neopluralism: The Evolution of Political Process Theory*.  
Chapters 1-6, pp. 1-103. Optional reading, Chs. 7-10.

November 24. Xerox of some of the instructor's unpublished work on political participation.  
December 1. Last class meeting: conclusions.

December 4. **The fourth paper is due (topic to be announced).** This is the Thursday of the last day of classes. There is no final examination during the week after this. Paper to be delivered to instructor's office. Paper may be turned in on December 1.