Collective choice problems occur when people with conflicting preferences and values must reach a common decision. When collective decisions are made by voting, the losing side often wonders whether the particular voting procedure somehow worked against them. Would different ways of posing alternatives or casting votes have resulted in different decisions?

In this class we will learn to think analytically about how voting rules and procedures affect the outcome of collective decisions. Voting processes are governed by a logic that can be tricky and subtle, and scholars who study collective choice mechanisms often employ abstract mathematical frameworks. We will learn some of the basic results from the theory of collective choice, with particular attention to majority rule voting. Our focus will be on applying the abstract theorems of social choice theory to real world political problems.

Course meetings: MW 11-12:15 in Haines 220

Office hours and contact info:
Kathleen Bawn W 2-4pm Bunche 3363 kbawn@ucla.edu

Preparation: You need to have taken Poli Sci 30. I assume that you have some experience with mathematical models in Political Science, in particular with using utility values to represent individual preferences, and that you are comfortable with basic ideas from game theory. Collective choice theory, like game theory, can be approached in a very abstract mathematical way. It can also be approached in a way that emphasizes real world applications, relying on graphs and diagrams, rather than formal proofs. In PS 171B, we will take mostly the latter approach. Our emphasis will be on the political implications, rather than the mathematical subtleties, of the major theorems of collective choice theory. That said, if you are uncomfortable with basic algebra -- i.e., with representing unknown quantities with variables, with manipulating equations and inequalities, with thinking of one variable as a function of another -- you will find this class very difficult.

Reading: There is one required book, Analyzing Politics (2nd ed.) by Kenneth Shepsle. There are a couple of supplementary readings, indicated on the course schedule below. These will be available through the course website.

Grading: Your grade is based on the following

Homework ................................................. 10%
Participation .......................................... 10%
Midterm 1 April 29 in class .......................... 20%
Midterm 2 May 29 in class .......................... 20%
Final exam June 12 8-11am ....................... 40%
Homework: There will be four homework assignments. The homework exercises will give you practice using the basic concepts of collective choice theory and applying them to political problems. These problems are similar to those that will be on the midterm and final. They are graded on the basis of effort.

In calculating the homework part of your final grade, I will drop your lowest score. This means that if sickness, or any kind of personal emergency, keeps you from turning in one assignment on time, that score will simply be the one that is dropped. Because the lowest homework score will be dropped, late assignments will not be accepted for any reason, no matter how compelling.

Study Groups: Many students find it very helpful to form study groups to discuss examples from lectures and the book, and to work on problem sets. It is fine to discuss homework problems with other students, but you must write up your answers alone. If I have reason to suspect that someone has simply copied the work of someone else, I will refer all students involved immediately to the Dean of Students.

Grading Disputes: If you have a good reason to believe that an exam was graded incorrectly, you may submit a grade dispute, but only through the following process. First, wait at least 24 hours but no more than one week after the exam is returned to you. Second, explain in writing why the assignment was not graded correctly. Third, return the exam to your TA, along with the written explanation. Three points bear emphasis. First, you should not attempt to dispute your grade unless you can clearly show that something marked incorrect is actually correct. Frivolous grades disputes (e.g. based on your opinion about appropriate levels of partial credit) will lower your participation grade. Second, if you ask for a regrade, your entire exam will be regraded, not just the part you are disputing. Regrade requests may result in a lower grade. Finally, if you make any attempt to dispute or negotiate about grades in person, rather than in writing, you forfeit your ability to request that the grade be reconsidered.
Course Outline and Reading Schedule

UNIT I. Introduction: Individual Goals and Collective Choices
Reading: Shepsle Ch 1-2, 6

Collective choice theory is based on the assumption that individual preferences and values should be taken seriously. This assumption only makes sense if we think people are minimally rational and have well-defined preferences. How reasonable is this? How can we think systematically and objectively about other people’s political beliefs?

Week 1: Individual Rationality, Uncertainty and Expected Utility (Shepsle Ch 1-2)
Week 2: Condorcet’s Paradox w/ Sincere and Strategic Voting (Shepsle pp 41-66 and 174-183)

UNIT II. What’s Good and Bad about Majority Rule Voting?
Reading: Shepsle Ch 3-4
Thomas Schwartz, “Votes, strategies and institutions: an introduction to the theory of collective choice.” (available on course website)

We are raised to think that majority rule voting is fair and reasonable. How true is that?

Week 3: May’s Theorem (Shepsle pp 76-81, Schwartz pp 318-321)
Week 4: Arrow’s Theorem (Shepsle pp 67-76, Schwartz pp 324-326)
Midterm 2 Monday of Week 5

UNIT III. Voting in the Spatial Model
Reading: Shepsle Ch 5

Many collective choices boil down to matters of degree. E.g., what fraction of society’s resources should be devoted to different goals? How much should one social goal be sacrificed for another? The spatial model allows us to compare individual preferences and evaluate collective choices on policy questions that involve matters of degree.

Week 5: Median Voter Theorem (Shepsle pp. 82 - 99)
Week 6: Majority Rule in More Than One Dimension (Shepsle pp 99-110)
Week 7: Agenda power (Shepsle pp 111-138)
Week 8: Unanimity and Veto Players (McCubbins, Noll and Weingast)
Week 9: Holiday/Midterm 2

Reading: John Aldrich, Why Parties? (excerpt)
Bawn, Cohen, Karol, Masket, Noel and Zaller “A Theory of Political Parties”

We don’t often see examples of chaotic social choices in the real world, but social choice theory nonetheless helps us understand reality by drawing our attention to a “dog that didn’t bark.” That is, thinking about coalitions that seem stable when they could be chaotic can help understand real world phenomena like political parties.

Week 10: Parties as Stable Coalitions