



## What is the Canon in American Politics? Analyses of Core Graduate Syllabi

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### ABSTRACT

Many core graduate-level seminars claim to expose students to their discipline's "canon." The contents of this canon, however, can and do differ across departments and instructors. This project employs a survey of core American politics PhD seminar syllabi at highly ranked universities to construct a systematic account of the American politics canon. Our results offer valuable insights into the topics and literature that political scientists consider important and on which future scholars base their work. Our article breaks down the literature into a comprehensive list of topics and subtopics, which allows us to identify both an overall field canon and one for each topic, to assess whether some topics receive more attention than others, and to identify which topics are most clearly defined. We explore the extent to which diverse perspectives and methods are (or are not) taught to young scholars, and, although we identify sets of frequently assigned readings and authors within each topic, we also find considerable variation between seminars.

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## Introduction

What constitutes the "canonical" literature in American politics scholarship? Core graduate seminars purport—implicitly or explicitly—to expose students to the foundational readings within the subfield while covering a broad range of topics from Congress to voting to identity politics. But the readings assigned in these seminars can vary wildly; students at one institution may thus find themselves exposed to a different "canon" than those at another. Using an original dataset, constructed from 56 PhD-level syllabi provided by highly ranked political science departments, this article examines patterns and variations in the content of introductory graduate courses in American politics. We identify, among other things, the most frequently discussed topics as well as the most prevalent works and authors, and our results shed light on the contours of the subfield as it exists in practice today.

To begin, we find it instructive to explain the impetus for this somewhat unusual project. Early in our graduate careers, one of us (Diament) proposed compiling a comprehensive reading list in the field of American politics, in preparation for qualifying exams and potentially as a tool that would benefit the field at large. To accomplish this, we

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had to identify the canon: the list of works considered to be most foundational and defining for the subfield and the topics that comprise it. With this idea in mind, we sought to identify and organize the canonical literature within the subfield, across a wide variety of topics falling under the broad heading of American politics. But a universal standard for determining what comprises this canon did not readily present itself. Indeed, many, if not most, core graduate seminars claim to expose students to the discipline's quintessential works, but the specific content varies considerably across departments and instructors.

The end result is that each graduate student's foundational education derives at least in part from a particular perspective on the subfield of American politics and the discipline as a whole. Although undergraduate curriculum has received some attention (see Ishiyama, Breuning, and Lopez 2006), graduate coursework is arguably more influential in the "reproduction of power" in the field and the framing of new research directions, since this level of student is explicitly pursuing a career in political science. The American Political Science Association's (APSA) 2011 report, *Political Science in the 21st Century*, emphasizes the importance of graduate training in determining the categories through which the discipline's subject matter is viewed. The faculty who teach these seminars thus occupy a uniquely influential gatekeeping position, able to perpetuate or challenge prevailing modes of thought in the field, and, in the process, they may leave a lasting impression on new doctoral students. Students likely view these courses as their first major preparation for comprehensive exams and make a special effort to commit the reviewed works to memory. Moreover, these readings likely serve as the foundation upon which they develop their own research agendas; the theories and debates to which they are exposed at this formative time may become those to which they continue to speak throughout their careers.

This line of thinking led us to two main empirical questions: (1) Taken as a whole, what is the American politics "canon" as constructed by this diverse range of instructors, and (2) how much variation can one find in the "canon" being taught in different courses, at different institutions, and across different topics within the subfield?

## Methodology

To answer the above questions, we requested syllabi from the instructors of core (i.e., introductory) PhD American politics courses. In the fall of 2013, we identified these instructors at each of *U.S. News and World Report's* top-75 political science departments. Based on ratings from faculty working within the field, the *U.S. News* rankings constitute an admittedly imperfect but broadly representative sample of high-quality departments.<sup>1</sup> We then sent an e-mail to each instructor, requesting his or her most current version of the relevant syllabus. Within departments that offered a single, core American politics seminar, we contacted only the current instructor of that course. Some departments do not offer a single introductory course but rather a sequence of two or more courses (typically one for political institutions and one for political behavior); in such cases, we requested a syllabus from the instructor of each component course. We sent a total of 88 requests, and, during the subsequent months, we received 63 syllabi altogether for a fairly impressive response rate of almost 72%. Of the 75 schools to which at least one request was sent, 57 (or 76%) provided at least one syllabus. In the case of schools with a multicourse sequence, only those for which we received a *complete* sequence were included in the later analysis in order to avoid proportionally overrepresenting either

behavior or institutions. Thus, including only one course or sequence per represented department, we analyzed 44 core (single-course) syllabi, plus 6 two-course sequences for a total of 56 syllabi.

Once all syllabi were collected, we centralized their content in a spreadsheet with a line for each individual reading (6,266 in total). For each, we recorded the author(s), title, year of publication, and journal or book in which the reading appeared (if applicable), as well as the subject title for the week in which the reading was assigned. Finally, we labeled each reading according to the topic it covered. All three of us had to agree on a topic label before it was applied to a reading—a notably more stringent standard than dividing the work and checking intercoder reliability after the fact.

Table 1 summarizes and describes the topic labels used. Topic labels were derived largely from the syllabi themselves, based on the topic headings that instructors gave to the various weeks in their courses. However, there was also considerable variation in these weekly topics, and so we took our cues primarily from the most common among them (which also tended to be the broadest). In this way, our survey and organization of the literature

**Table 1.** Topic labels.

Label	Description
Biopolitics	Use of physiological factors to explain political behavior. Includes neuroscience, genetics, and evolutionary psychology.
Bureaucracy	The various federal executive agencies, as well as bureaucratic and organizational dynamics more generally.
Campaigns & Elections	Activities of political campaigns and their influence on mass attitudes and elections.
Classics in Political & Democratic Theory	Noncontemporary works discussing politics, democracy, and similar topics.
Congress	Operations and development of the U.S. Congress, as well as the interactions of congresspersons with their constituents.
Courts	The U.S. Supreme Court, as well as other federal and state courts.
Founding	Documents related to the founding of the United States. Subtopics: <i>Original</i> (documents written around the time of the founding), <i>Analysis</i> (contemporary works about the founding).
Identity Politics	Studies of political behavior primarily emphasizing social identities. Subtopics: <i>Gender, Intersectionality, LGBTQ, Race &amp; Ethnicity, Religion</i> .
Interest Groups	Influence of pressure groups on the political process, forms of influence they may employ, and their formation and maintenance.
Local & City Politics	Politics on the municipal level, including urban politics.
Media	Effects of news media on citizens' political behavior, as well as the study of the media as an institution.
Methods	Works primarily concerned with <i>approaches</i> to the study of politics. Includes discussion of broad methodological perspectives (e.g., rational choice) as well as more specific techniques.
Participation	All forms of political participation, including voting (i.e., the decision to vote), volunteering, protesting, and social movements.
Parties	Political parties as organizations and within government.
Policy Making	Dynamics in the creation of public policy. Subtopics: <i>Federalism, Interbranch Relations, Policy-Making Process, Statebuilding &amp; Political Development</i> .
Political Culture	Collective values, practices, and norms that broadly characterize polities; influence of sociocultural forces in politics.
Power, Inequality, & Representation	Disparities in the influence of different individuals and groups over government and politics and implications for democracy.
Presidency	Operations and development of the U.S. presidency. Includes works that examine the executive branch as a whole but with emphasis on the president.
Public Opinion, Ideology, & Preferences	Mass public attitudes, ideology, issue positions, and partisanship. Includes most of the political psychology literature.
Public Policy	Implementation and effects (distinct from creation) of public policy.
State Politics	Government and politics at the state level, including all branches of government.
Voting	Citizens' vote <i>choice</i> (treated as distinct from the decision to vote at all).

captures not just *what* is taught but also the predominant context in which different works are taught. Finally, because some subject areas tend to be more unified than others, we further divided some broad topics into subtopics; in our analyses below, we make clear whether we are treating subtopics as distinct or lumping them together under the broader topic heading. Further discussion of our topic labeling process can be found in the supplemental appendix.

### Findings

We first make a quick assessment of the week-to-week organization of core seminars. Using the week titles of the assigning professors—as opposed to our topic codes for each reading—Table 2 summarizes the breakdown and distribution of topics across weeks for the 50 schools from which we received a core syllabus or complete sequence. In this portion of the analysis, each school represents a single case, which means some syllabi are only a quarter in length, while others contain two quarters’ or semesters’ worth of weeks. This yields a “master syllabus” length of 13.76 weeks.

Every core course/sequence includes at least one Congress week, while over 80% of syllabi have presidency, parties, public opinion, and courts weeks. In fact, Congress and public opinion are often taught for multiple weeks. A master syllabus would include material from the top 13 or 14 topics, which here includes power and inequality and potentially campaigns and elections. We thus find fairly widespread agreement—though far from unanimity—in the topics addressed in introductory seminars. This is an important point, as the categories within which this material is presented may have potent downstream effects on how researchers conceptualize the subfield and the discipline (see APSA 2011).

**Table 2.** Frequency of subjects across weeks (core and complete sequences).

Week Subject	Courses/Sequences with at Least One Week on Subject (max = 50)	Average Number of Weeks Taught in a Course/Sequence
Congress	50	1.46
Public Opinion	43	1.42
Parties	44	1.1
Presidency	46	1.04
Courts	42	0.86
Participation	37	0.86
Voting	36	0.86
Bureaucracy	35	0.76
Interest Groups	37	0.76
US Founding and PS Foundations	24	0.54
Identity Politics	25	0.52
Methods	22	0.48
Power, Inequality, & Representation	21	0.46
Campaigns and Elections	17	0.44
Policy-Making Process	18	0.42
Media	17	0.36
Political Culture	15	0.32
Representation	16	0.32
Interbranch Relations	10	0.24
Political Development	8	0.16
Subnational	8	0.16
Federalism	5	0.1
Public Policy	2	0.08
Political Psychology	2	0.04

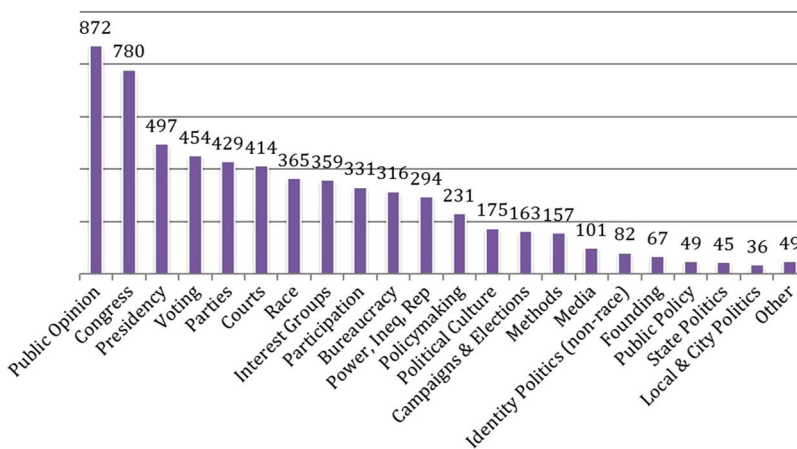
**Table 3.** Top-21 assigned works.

Rank	Reading	Author (Date)	Total
1	<i>An Economic Theory of Democracy</i>	Downs (1957)	54
2	<i>Congress: The Electoral Connection</i>	Mayhew (1974)	44
3	<i>The American Voter</i>	Campbell et al. (1960)	41
4	"The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics"	Converse (1964)	40
5	<i>Presidential Power</i>	Neustadt (1960)	40
6	<i>The Logic of Collective Action</i>	Olson (1965)	40
7	<i>The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion</i>	Zaller (1992)	32
8	<i>Pivotal Politics</i>	Krehbiel (1998)	30
9	<i>The Semisovereign People</i>	Schattschneider (1960)	30
10	<i>Going Public</i>	Kernell (1986)	28
11	<i>The Federalist Papers</i>	Hamilton et al. (1999)	28
12	<i>Why Parties?</i>	Aldrich (1995)	27
13	<i>Legislative Leviathan</i>	Cox & McCubbins (1993)	26
14	<i>Retrospective Voting in American National Elections</i>	Fiorina (1981)	24
15	<i>Partisan Hearts and Minds</i>	Green et al. (2002)	24
16	<i>Veto Bargaining</i>	Cameron (2000)	23
17	<i>Setting the Agenda</i>	Cox & McCubbins (1993)	23
18	"The Origins and Maintenance of Interest Groups in America"	Walker (1983)	23
19	<i>Unequal Democracy</i>	Bartels (2008)	22
20	<i>The Rational Public</i>	Page & Shapiro (1992)	22
21	<i>Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America</i>	Rosenstone & Hansen (1993)	22

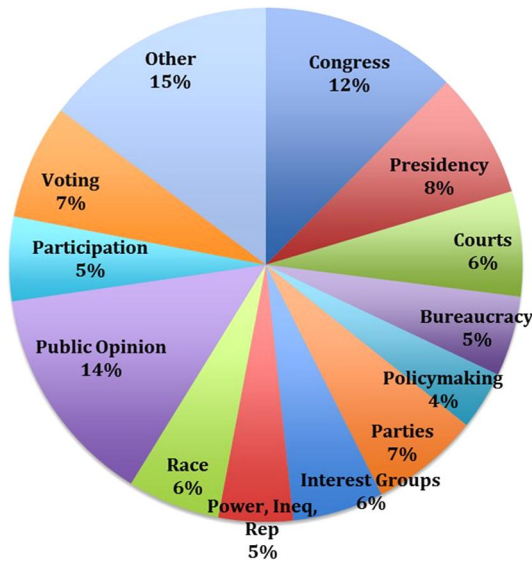
In the past, scholars have used citation counts to gauge the prolificacy of scholars (Masuoka, Grofman, and Feld 2007b) and works in the field (Sigelman 2006a). In the 100th issue of the American Political Science Review, Sigelman identified the top-20 most-cited pieces in the journal’s history. As an operational metric for the canon literature within the subfield, Table 3 summarizes our top 21 most assigned pieces (accounting for a tie), with Downs’ An Economic theory of Democracy coming in first with 54 entries. Unexpectedly, our results do not include a single article from the APSR top-20 list.

Instead, our results indicate most of the top-21 assigned works are books, which is somewhat surprising given the breadth of material covered in core American politics seminars. This finding suggests rankings that only examine citation rates among articles miss the overwhelming importance of books in promulgating key contributions in the field.

Turning to our own topic divisions, we first examine the volume of readings within each. Figures 1 and 2 show the frequencies and proportions of each topic out of the



**Figure 1.** Topic frequencies.



“Other” includes *Political Culture* (3%), *Campaigns & Elections* (3%), *Methods* (3%), *Media* (2%), *State Politics* (1%), *Local & City Politics* (1%), *Gender* (1%), *Founding* (1%), *Public Policy* (1%), *Biopolitics* (<1%), and *Identity Politics* (other than *Race* and *Gender*, <1%).

**Figure 2.** Proportions of readings by topic.

total 6,266 readings. One can see that subjects focused distinctly on one or the other of “institutions” or “behavior” occupy about equal shares: *Congress*, *Courts*, *Presidency*, *Bureaucracy*, and *Policy Making* total 35%, while *Participation*, *Voting*, *Public Opinion*, *Campaigns and Elections*, *Media*, and *Identity Politics* (all subtopics) total 36%. In general, it appears students receive a thorough grounding in both broad subject areas. And on the behavioral side, interestingly, a great deal of the literature deals with political attitudes *not* directly in relation to engagement with the democratic process—readings on *Public Opinion* outnumber those on *Participation* and *Voting* combined.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, however, the breakdowns in these figures illustrate that the oft-mentioned behavior/institutions distinction proves rather inadequate to describe the shape of the field. The staple topics of *Parties* and *Interest Groups*, for instance, total 13% of the body of readings and are difficult to place entirely under the heading of either behavior or institutions, as they deal with the operations and outputs of government institutions as well as the mobilization of groups and individuals outside those institutions. One can say the same of the growing body of literature on what we call *Power, Inequality, and Representation*, which necessarily involves the interplay between institutions, powerful interests, and mass behavior.

We also consider it worth highlighting the substantial shares of core readings occupied by *Power, Inequality, and Representation* (5%) and *Identity Politics* (over 7%). The APSA’s 2011 report makes special note of the need to address issues of inequality and the experiences of marginalized groups, subjects that do not neatly fit within the traditional categorizations of political science scholarship. That these topics are being addressed in a large proportion of assigned readings—and, moreover, that each has a full week of instruction devoted to it in more than a third of our syllabi—strikes us as an encouraging sign that training within the discipline is adapting to pressing issues in the political world.

Next, and perhaps more informatively, we turn to the canon within different subject areas. Certain authors and individual works appear consistently within particular topics across different syllabi. Along these lines, the 10 most prevalent works and authors (or combinations of authors) within the largest topic categories appear in [Tables 4 and 5](#), respectively.<sup>3</sup> These prevalent works make up (at least the core of) the canon literature within each topic—that is, those readings with the strongest and widest influence on new researchers' conception of the subfield and its most salient debates.

These raw numbers, however, do not immediately communicate the degree to which these commonly assigned works characterize their respective literatures (as presented in the available syllabi). To gain a sense of this, we calculate the proportion of readings within a given topic comprised by its 10 most frequently assigned works. Results are summarized in [Table 6](#). First, note that across topics a substantial portion of assigned readings are concentrated in this relatively small number of works—at least one fifth in all cases, with a mean of 35.1%. But the proportions occupied by the top-10 works also show a high degree of variation, ranging from 20.8% of the *Race* readings to 48.7% of the *Interest Groups* readings. The readings on both *Participation* and *Voting* also prove to be highly consolidated, with the top-10 works comprising over 40% in both cases. And along with readings on *Race*, those on *Public Opinion* are fairly diffuse in their focus—the apparent “classics” take up just 22.6% of works assigned on the topic.

A closer examination of the top works in [Table 4](#) reveals interesting variation between topics in the core readings' dispersion across time. Several major topics—including *Bureaucracy*, *Congress*, *Courts*, *Interest Groups*, *Participation*, *Presidency*, *Public Opinion*, and *Voting*—each count among their most assigned readings what we might term “old classics” or foundational readings published in the 1960s or earlier. *Voting*, perhaps unsurprisingly, stands out in this regard, with Downs' (1957) *An Economic Theory of Democracy* and Campbell et al.'s (1960) *The American Voter* assigned 54 and 41 times, respectively. This suggests widespread agreement on the importance of familiarizing graduate students with the first major works embodying the economic and psychological approaches to voting behavior—and, to a lesser extent, the sociological approach, with Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee's (1954) *Voting* assigned 15 times. The top readings on *Interest Groups*—which consist largely of Truman's articulation of pluralism and subsequent critiques—tell a similar story, with Truman's (1951) *The Governmental Process*, Schattschneider's (1960) *The Semisovereign People*, and Olson's (1965) *The Logic of Collective Action* all featuring prominently (though Schattschneider and Olson dominate, with frequencies of 30 and 40 compared to Truman's 14). As [Table 6](#) illustrates, these topics are also two of the most concentrated around their top-10 works—perhaps the early introduction of multiple foundational perspectives constrains a given literature's direction in the succeeding decades. This certainly appears to be the case when we look at some of the *Voting* topic's other top readings, with Fiorina (1981) following clearly in Downs' footsteps, while Bartels (1996, 2000) and Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau (1995) build upon the psychological approach pioneered by Campbell and colleagues.

Other sets of most assigned readings prove far more recent on average. *Race* appears very reliant on recent work, with its earliest top reading published in 1989. Similarly, *Bureaucracy* includes only one work published prior to the 1980s, suggesting that its enduring core perspectives developed much later in the history of the discipline. The relative recency of canonical *Bureaucracy* scholarship—dominated by work written from the

**Table 4.** Title Frequencies by Topic.

		Campaigns		Congress	
Bureaucracy		Campaigns		Congress	
21	"Congressional Oversight Overlooked" (McCubbins & Schwartz 1984)	12	"Strategic Politicians & the Dynamics of US House Elections" (Jacobson 1989)	12	Congress: <i>The Electoral Connection</i> (Mayhew 1974)
19	"Administrative Procedures as Instruments of Political Control" (McCubbins et al. 1987)	8	"Candidate Positioning in U.S. House Elections" (Ansolabehere et al. 2001)	8	<i>Pivotal Politics</i> (Krehbiel 1998)
16	<i>Bureaucracy</i> (Wilson 1989)	5	<i>The Message Matters</i> (Vavreck 2009)	5	<i>Legislative Leviathan</i> (Cox & McCubbins 1993)
12	"The Science of 'Muddling Through'" (Lindblom 1959)	5	<i>Presidential Primaries &amp; the Dynamics of Public Choice</i> (Bartels 1988)	5	<i>Setting the Agenda</i> (Cox & McCubbins 2005)
11	"The New Economics of Organization" (Moe 1984)	4	"The Effects of Negative Political Campaigns" (Lau et al. 2007)	4	"The Institutionalization of the U.S. House of Representatives" (Polsby 1968)
9	"The Politics of Bureaucratic Structure" (Moe 1989)	4	<i>Strategy and Choice in Congressional Elections</i> (Jacobson & Kernell 1983)	4	<i>Home Style: House Members in Their Districts</i> (Fenno 1978)
9	"Regulatory Regimes, Agency Actions, & the Conditional Nature of Congressional Influence" (Shipan 2004)	4	<i>The Spectacle of U.S. Senate Campaigns</i> (Kahn & Kenney 1999)	4	"Constituency Influence in Congress" (Miller & Stokes 1963)
8	"The Dynamics of Political Control of the Bureaucracy" (Wood & Waterman 1991)	4	<i>In Defense of Negativity</i> (Geer 2006)	4	<i>Information &amp; Legislative Organization</i> (Krehbiel 1991)
7	"An Assessment of the Positive Theory of 'Congressional Dominance'" (Moe 1987)	4	"Campaign Communications in U.S. Congressional Elections" (Druckman et al. 2009)	4	<i>The Logic of Congressional Action</i> (Arnold 1990)
7	"Legislatures & Statutory Control of Bureaucracy" (Huber et al. 2001)	4	"The Effect of TV Ads & Candidate Appearances on Statewide Presidential Votes" (Shaw 1999)	4	<i>Parties and Leaders in the Postreform House</i> (Rohde 1991)
Courts		Interest Groups		Methods	
17	<i>The Supreme Court &amp; the Attitudinal Model Revised</i> (Segal & Spaeth 2002)	40	<i>The Logic of Collective Action</i> (Olson 1965)	40	<i>Analyzing Politics: Rationality, Behavior, &amp; Institutions</i> (Shepsle 2010)
17	"On the Nature of Supreme Court Decision-Making" (George & Epstein 1992)	30	<i>The Semisovereign People</i> (Schattschneider 1960)	30	<i>Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory</i> (Green & Shapiro 1994)
15	"Decision-Making in a Democracy: The Supreme Court as National Policy-Maker" (Dahl 1957)	23	"The Origins & Maintenance of Interest Groups in America" (Walker 1983)	23	"The Study of American Political Development" (Orren & Skowronek 2002)
13	<i>The Hollow Hope: Can Courts Bring about Social Change?</i> (Rosenberg 1991)	19	"Buying Time" (Hall & Wayman 1990)	19	"The Behavioral Approach to Political Science" (Dahl 1961)
13	<i>The Choices Justices Make</i> (Epstein & Knight 1998)	14	<i>Lobbying &amp; Policy Change</i> (Baumgartner et al. 2009)	14	"Human Nature in Politics" (Simon 1985)
10	"Toward a Strategic Revolution in Judicial Politics" (Epstein & Knight 2000)	14	<i>The Governmental Process</i> (Truman 1951)	14	"Studying Institutions: Some Lessons from the Rational Choice Approach" (Shepsle 1989)
9	"The Influence of Stare Decisis on the Votes of United States Supreme Court Justices" (Segal & Spaeth 1996)	11	"Lobbying as Legislative Subsidy" (Hall & Deardorf 2006)	11	"The Methodology of Presidential Research" (King 1993)

(Continued)



Table 4. Continued.

"The Influence of Oral Arguments on the U.S. Supreme Court" (Johnson et al. 2006)	8	<i>Basic Interests</i> (Baumgartner & Leech 1998)	9	"The New Institutionalism" (Maich & Olsen 1984)	3
"Ideological Values & the Votes of US Supreme Court Justices" (Segal & Cover 1989)	8	"The Political Economy of Group Membership" (Hansen 1985)	8	"The New Look in Public Opinion Research" (Sniderman 1993)	3
<i>The Least Dangerous Branch</i> (Bickel 1962)	7	"Counteractive Lobbying" (Austen-Smith & Wright 1994)	7	"The Secret Existence of Expressive Behavior" (Abelson 1996)	2
Participation					
Parties					
<i>Mobilization, Participation, &amp; Democracy in America</i> (Rosenstone & Hansen 1993)	22	<i>Why Parties?</i> (Aldrich 1995)	27	<i>Agendas &amp; Instability in American Politics</i> (Baumgartner & Jones 1993)	17
<i>Voice &amp; Equality</i> (Verba et al. 1995)	20	<i>Partisan Hearts &amp; Minds</i> (Green et al. 2002)	24	<i>The End of Liberalism</i> (Lowi 1969)	16
"Beyond SES" (Brady et al. 1995)	18	<i>Southern Politics in State &amp; Nation</i> (Key 1949)	16	<i>Divided We Govern</i> (Mayhew 1991)	12
"The Myth of the Vanishing Voter" (McDonald & Popkin 2001)	15	"A Theory of Critical Elections" (Key 1955)	15	<i>Agendas, Alternatives, &amp; Public Policies</i> (Kingdon 1984)	9
"The Effect of Canvassing, Telephone Calls, & Direct Mail on Voter Turnout" (Gerber & Green 2000)	13	<i>Why Parties? A Second Look</i> (Aldrich 2011)	14	<i>Building a New American State</i> (Skowronek 1982)	8
<i>Who Votes?</i> (Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980)	12	<i>Dynamics of the Party System</i> (Sundquist 1983)	12	"Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, & the Study of Politics" (Pierson 2000)	8
"A Theory of the Calculus of Voting" (Riker & Ordeshook 1968)	10	"Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System" (APSA 1950)	11	<i>Protecting Soldiers &amp; Mothers</i> (Skocpol 1992)	7
"Does Attack Advertising Demobilize the Electorate?" (Ansolabehere et al. 1994)	9	"Resurgent Mass Partisanship" (Hetherington 2001)	11	<i>Divided Government</i> (Florina 2002)	5
"Rational Choice & Turnout" (Aldrich 1993)	9	<i>The Party Decides</i> (Cohen et al. 2008)	10	<i>The Price of Federalism</i> (Peterson 1995)	5
"Social Pressure & Voter Turnout" (Gerber et al. 2008)	8	<i>Critical Elections &amp; the Mainsprings of American Politics</i> (Burnham 1970)	9	"Separated Powers in the United States" (Clinton et al. 2012)	4
Political Culture					
Power, Inequality, & Rep.					
<i>Democracy in America</i> (Tocqueville 2003 [1835])	18	<i>Unequal Democracy</i> (Bartels 2008)	22	<i>Presidential Power</i> (Neustadt 1960)	40
<i>The Liberal Tradition in America</i> (Hartz 1955)	15	<i>Who Governs?</i> (Dahl 1961)	15	<i>Going Public</i> (Kemell 1986)	28

"Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, & Hartz" (Smith 1993)	13	"Two Faces of Power" (Bachrach & Baratz 1962)	14	Veto Bargaining (Cameron 2000)	23
"Tuning In, Tuning Out" (Putnam 1995)	12	<i>A Preface to Democratic Theory</i> (Dahl 1956)	13	<i>Power Without Persuasion</i> (Howell 2003)	15
<i>Bowling Alone</i> (Putnam 2000)	8	<i>The Unheavenly Chorus</i> (Schlozman et al. 2012)	12	"The Politicized Presidency" (Moe 1985)	13
<i>The Civic Culture</i> (Almond & Verba 1963)	5	<i>Affluence &amp; Influence</i> (Gilens 2012)	8	<i>The Politicized Presidents Make</i> (Skowronek 1993)	12
<i>The American Ethos</i> (McClosky & Zaller 1984)	4	<i>Civic Ideals</i> (Smith 1997)	8	"The Two Presidencies" (Wildavsky 1966)	10
<i>Democracy in Suburbia</i> (Oliver 2001)	4	"Measuring Representation" (Achen 1978)	7	"The President's Legislative Influence from Public Appeals" (Canes-Wrone 2001)	10
"Why is there No Socialism in the United States?" (Foner 1984)	3	"Inequality & Democratic Responsiveness" (Gilens 2005)	6	"Conceptual Models & the Cuban Missile Crisis" (Allison 1969)	10
"Why No Socialism in the United States?" (Lipset 1977)	3	"A Critique of the Elitist Theory of Democracy" (Walker 1966)	6	"The Institutionalization of the American Presidency" (Ragsdale & Theis 1997)	10
Public Opinion		Race		Voting	
"The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" (Converse 1964)	40	<i>Issue Evolution</i> (Carmines & Stimson 1989)	16	<i>An Economic Theory of Democracy</i> (Downs 1957)	54
<i>The Nature &amp; Origins of Mass Opinion</i> (Zaller 1992)	32	<i>Behind the Mule</i> (Dawson 1995)	10	<i>The American Voter</i> (Campbell et al. 1960)	41
<i>The Rational Public</i> (Page & Shapiro 1992)	22	<i>Divided by Color</i> (Kinder & Sanders 1996)	9	<i>Retrospective Voting in American National Elections</i> (Fiorina 1981)	24
<i>The Macro Polity</i> (Erikson et al. 2002)	21	<i>Why Americans Hate Welfare</i> (Gilens 1999)	8	"Partisanship & Voting Behavior" (Bartels 2000)	16
"Dynamic Representation" (Stimson et al. 1995)	19	<i>The Race Card</i> (Mendelberg 2001)	7	<i>Voting</i> (Berelson et al. 1954)	15
"A Simple Theory of the Survey Response" (Zaller & Feldman 1992)	15	<i>Uneasy Alliances</i> (Frymer 1999)	6	"Uninformed Votes" (Bartels 1996)	12
<i>Public Opinion &amp; American Democracy</i> (Key 1961)	12	"Cues that Matter" (Valentino et al. 2002)	5	"The Responsive Voter" (Lodge et al. 1995)	12
<i>Polarized America</i> (McCarty et al. 2006)	12	<i>Facing Up to the American Dream</i> (Hochschild 1995)	5	<i>The Responsible Electorate</i> (Key 1966)	10
<i>What Americans Know about Politics &amp; Why It Matters</i> (Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996)	12	"The New Racism" (Sniderman et al. 1991)	5	"Why are American Presidential Election Polls So Variable When Votes are So Predictable?" (Gelman & King 1993)	9
"Macropartisanship" (MacKuen et al. 1989)	12	<i>Mobilizing Public Opinion</i> (Lee 2002)	5	<i>The Reasoning Voter</i> (Popkin 1994)	9

**Table 5.** Author frequencies by topic.

Bureaucracy		Campaigns & Elections		Congress	
Matthew McCubbins	42	Gary Jacobson	22	Keith Krehbiel	80
Terry Moe	35	Stephen Ansolabehere	11	Gary Cox	62
Barry Weingast	25	James Snyder	9	Matthew McCubbins	58
Daniel Carpenter	24	Charles Stewart	8	David Mayhew	58
Charles Shipan	22	Richard Lau	7	Richard Fenno	57
McCubbins, Noll, & Weingast	21	Larry Bartels	6	Cox & McCubbins	54
James Wilson	19	Lee Sigelman	6	Eric Schickler	38
David Epstein	12	James Druckman	5	David Rohde	36
Charles Lindblom	12	Robert Erikson	5	Barry Weingast	32
				Keith Poole	31
Courts		Interest Groups		Methods	
Jeffrey Segal	68	Mancur Olson	40	Kenneth Shepsle	14
Lee Epstein	60	Richard Hall	32	Karen Orren	9
Harold Spaeth	36	Jack Walker	31	Orren & Skowronek	8
Jack Knight	31	E. E. Schattschneider	30	Green & Shapiro	7
Segal & Spaeth	31	Beth Leech	30	William Riker	6
Epstein & Knight	26	Frank Baumgartner	20	Robert Dahl	5
Forrest Maltzman	26	Marie Hojnacki	19	Herbert Simon	5
Gerald Rosenberg	19	Jeffrey Berry	16	Gary King	5
Paul Wahlbeck	19	David Kimball	16	Morris Fiorina	4
Tracey George	17	David Truman	14	Theda Skocpol	4
Participation		Parties		Policy Making	
Sidney Verba	59	John Aldrich	45	Bryan Jones	19
Kay Lehman Schlozman	56	V. O. Key	37	Baumgartner & Jones	18
Henry Brady	46	Green, Palmquist, & Schickler	26	Theodore Lowi	18
Verba, Schlozman, & Brady (author order varies)	40	David Karol	25	David Mayhew	13
Steven Rosenstone	35	Hans Noel	23	Paul Pierson	12
Gerber & Green	27	David Mayhew	22	Theda Skocpol	10
Rosenstone & Hansen	23	John Zaller	21	Jacob Hacker	10
Michael McDonald	16	Martin Cohen	21	Craig Volden	9
Samuel Popkin	15	Morris Fiorina	17	John Kingdon	8
Norman Nie	14	Walter Dean Burnham	15	Stephen Skowronek	8
Political Culture		Power, Inequality, & Rep.		Presidency	
Robert Putnam	26	Robert Dahl	45	William Howell	43
Alexis de Tocqueville	18	Larry Bartels	25	Richard Neustadt	42
Louis Hartz	15	Bachrach & Baratz	14	Brandice Canes-Wrone	39
Rogers Smith	14	Martin Gilens	14	Samuel Kernell	38
Sidney Verba	7	Sidney Verba	12	Charles Cameron	26
Gabriel Almond	6	Key Lehman Schlozman	12	Terry Moe	26
Seymour Lipset	6	Schlozman, Brady, & Verba	11	Stephen Skowronek	25
McClosky & Zaller	4	Rogers Smith	9	Nolan McCarty	17
Eric Oliver	4	Samuel Huntington	8	James Barber	14
Richard Hofstadter	4			Lyn Ragsdale	13
Public Opinion		Race		Voting	
James Stimson	73	Donald Kinder	18	Anthony Downs	54
Michael MacKuen	65	James Stimson	18	Warren Miller	49
John Zaller	61	Paul Sniderman	17	Angus Campbell	45
Phillip Converse	51	David Sears	17	Phillip Converse	45
Robert Erikson	44	Edward Carmines	16	Donald Stokes	44
Robert Shapiro	39	Lawrence Bobo	16	Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes	42
Benjamin Page	38	Martin Gilens	13	Larry Bartels	36
James Druckman	37	Michael Dawson	13	Morris Fiorina	32
Page & Shapiro	31	Carmines & Stimson	12	Lau & Redlawsk	21
Stanley Feldman	27			Herbert Weisberg	19

**Table 6.** Top 10 Work Concentration by Topic.

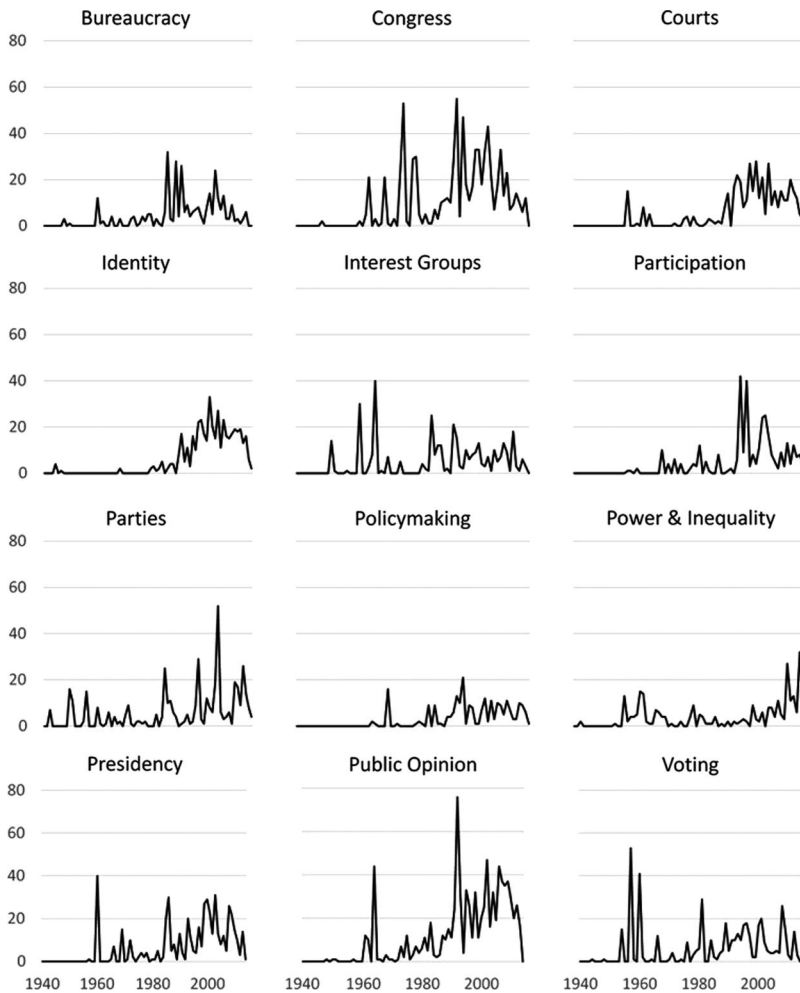
Topic	Proportion of Readings Including Top 10 Works
Bureaucracy	119/316 (37.7%)
Campaigns & Elections	54/163 (33.1%)
Congress	244/780 (31.2%)
Courts	117/414 (28.3%)
Interest Groups	175/359 (48.7%)
Methods	43/157 (27.4%)
Participation	136/331 (41.1%)
Parties	149/429 (34.7%)
Policymaking	91/231 (39.4%)
Political Culture	85/175 (48.6%)
Power, Inequality, & Representation	111/294 (37.8%)
Presidency	171/497 (34.4%)
Public Opinion, Ideology, & Preferences	197/872 (22.6%)
Race	76/365 (20.8%)
Voting	220/454 (48.5%)

perspective of rational choice institutionalism—may reflect the impact of that perspective’s rise in the early 1980s. A similar effect can be seen in *Congress*: Following a lull in the 1980s, more recent *Congress* scholarship utilizes rational choice (new institutional) approaches. Rational choice also altered *Presidency*—as evidenced by the frequency with which work by Moe (1985), Cameron (2000), Canes-Wrone (2001), and Howell (2003) is assigned—but did so more recently than in other topics and less comprehensively. Indeed, the *Presidency* field—filled mostly by Neustadt (1960) and responses to him—includes a relatively diverse range of perspectives, including Skowronek’s (1993) historical institutional, Kernell’s (1986) statistical, and Barber’s (1977) psychobiographical approaches.

Top readings in *Public Opinion* imply yet another, different pattern in its canon literature’s development: Two clear perspectives dominate with Converse’s (1964) “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics” the single most assigned reading and Zaller’s (1992) *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* close behind (and if we consider Zaller and Feldman’s (1992) “A Simple Theory of the Survey Response” as providing the same perspective, taken together, the two works slightly surpass Converse in frequency of assignment). Indeed, Converse appears to have set the agenda for the core study of public opinion with other top readings (e.g., Page and Shapiro 1992; Zaller 1992; Zaller and Feldman 1992), to a large degree, serving as counterpoints or extensions to his original observations of the lack of coherent attitudes and ideological constraint among the public.

These observations, too, raise broader questions about the “age” of the different literatures represented in these syllabi. The proportions of assigned readings within different ranges of publication dates vary considerably across topics. Figure 3 presents these frequency distributions for the 12 most assigned topics.<sup>4</sup> These distributions, taken from a single snapshot of core syllabi constructed in a period of just a few years, cannot give us the overall proportions of topics studied within the subfield across time. They can tell us, however, when the currently canonical works within each topic were published; in other words, they provide a sense of how much a canon literature has *updated* over time and how much a given topic seems to rely on earlier foundational works.

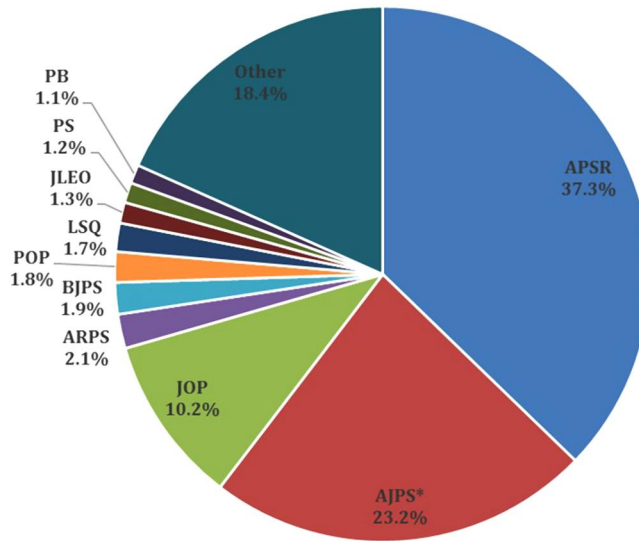
To an extent, the figures confirm conclusions we made previously based on the most assigned works. *Interest Groups*, *Voting*, and *Congress* all show clear spikes in their early decades, suggesting that most instructors still teach a set of foundational works on each



**Figure 3.** Publication date frequency distributions for the 12 most assigned topics, 1940–2014.

topic. In the latter’s case, however, we can see that works from more recent decades, beginning in the 1990s, far outnumber these classics, suggesting a more dynamic literature that has gone through more major theoretical updates. Contrast these with topics such as *Bureaucracy*, *Courts*, *Identity Politics*, and *Participation*, the large majority of whose core works come from the 1980s or later; either these topics were scarcely studied in earlier decades or newer works have almost entirely supplanted their predecessors in the canon. Other topics, such as *Parties*, *Presidency*, and *Public Opinion*, fall somewhere between these extremes. One can clearly pick out a few frequently assigned classics (e.g., Neustadt’s *Presidential Power* in 1960, Converse in 1964, the Zaller and Feldman perspective in 1992), but newer works with considerable staying power have emerged in practically every decade. In sum, each topic boasts an agreed-upon “canon” of sorts, but the extent of that agreement and the degree to which each core literature appears to have changed over time vary.

In some cases, we notice that spikes—periods in which several canonical works are developed in quick succession—occur when topics are characterized by parsimonious



**Figure 4.** Breakdown of articles by journal (N = 3,198).

debates in which two or more scholars or teams of scholars advance mutually exclusive explanations of the same question or narrow set of questions. Numerous canonical works in the *Interest Groups* topic, for example, were written during the 1950s and 1960s when pluralism was developed and subsequently debated. Similarly, *Congress* witnessed a spike in the early 1990s during debates over the factors that motivate the design of legislative institutions. This observation further highlights the importance of including a diverse set of perspectives in core graduate student training—engaging in energetic debate seems to promote major and lasting advances in American politics scholarship.

**Table 7.** Top-20 journals ranked by frequency of assignment (N = 3,198).

Rank	Title	Acronym	Number (Percentage)
1	<i>American Political Science Review</i>	APSR	1,191 (37.2%)
2	<i>American Journal of Political Science + MJPS</i>	AJPS	740 (23.1%)
3	<i>Journal of Politics</i>	JOP	325 (10.2%)
4	<i>Annual Review of Political Science</i>	ARPS	66 (2.1%)
5	<i>British Journal of Political Science</i>	BJPS	61 (1.9%)
6	<i>Perspectives on Politics</i>	POP	59 (1.8%)
7	<i>Legislative Studies Quarterly</i>	LSQ	55 (1.7%)
8	<i>Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization</i>	JLEO	40 (1.3%)
9	<i>PS: Political Science &amp; Politics</i>	PS	39 (1.2%)
10	<i>Political Behavior</i>	PB	36 (1.1%)
11	<i>Public Opinion Quarterly</i>	POQ	32 (1%)
12	<i>Political Research Quarterly</i>	PRQ	31 (1%)
13	<i>Critical Review</i>	CR	22 (0.7%)
14	<i>Journal of Political Economy</i>	JPE	21 (0.7%)
15	<i>Studies in American Political Development</i>	SAPD	20 (0.6%)
16	<i>Political Science Quarterly</i>	PolSQ	19 (0.6%)
17	<i>Journal of Personality and Social Psychology</i>	JPS	17 (0.5%)
18	<i>Presidential Studies Quarterly</i>	PreSQ	13 (0.4%)
19	<i>Quarterly Journal of Political Science</i>	QJPS	12 (0.4%)
20	<i>Political Psychology</i>	PP	10 (0.3%)
	Other		389 (12.2%)

Finally, our data allow us to explore the distribution of assigned articles across journals. Since journal articles account for 3,198 of the 6,266 readings in our dataset, it is valuable to understand which journals supply this material.<sup>5</sup> Previous work on journal strength, prestige, and impact (e.g., Giles and Garand 2007) uses a combination of citation frequency, who cites the articles, and surveys to establish their rankings. Here, we take a simpler approach to uncover which journals most commonly provide material in American politics seminars. Even though previous examinations focus on the field as a whole, while we are concerned with American politics, our results generally conform to previous rankings (see Figure 4 and Table 7).

Frequency of assignment and evaluations of prestige appear to be fairly correlated. This in itself comes as little surprise, but, nonetheless, the consistency of our findings with previous work on the subject suggests our data collection and analysis are robust and accurately depict the lay of the land in the American subfield.

## Conclusion and future directions

Our findings characterize an American politics subfield that enjoys substantial agreement on what works make up its essential foundations—and, notably, many fall within “nontraditional” topics such as inequality and identity politics. However, considerable variation remains in the readings assigned in introductory courses at different institutions, and the degree of consensus also varies widely across subject areas. We make no normative claims regarding the “right” amount of variation—rather, we hope in this article merely to draw attention to its potential effects. Some diversity of thought and emphasis among political science departments is undoubtedly crucial to maintaining an energetic and socially relevant discipline (see, e.g., APSA 2011). But at the same time, great divergence in perceptions of the key literature may lead to academic “tunnel vision,” making it more difficult for groups of scholars to speak to each other and to move the study of politics forward. This project offers a new way to gauge these dynamics, and to our knowledge it is the first of its kind within the social sciences. The uniqueness of our approach limits the comparative claims we can make, since no other work provides a standard for “consensus” on a field or subfield’s core literature, but we believe our findings to be valuable and informative in their own right. Indeed, based on our own expectations, we find the level of consensus across syllabi to be quite high. American politics is a mature and highly specialized subfield with a vast number of books and articles written on all of its constitutive topics on an annual basis. This makes the amount of agreement we see rather remarkable.

Political science is an enigmatic field in many ways—simultaneously ever-changing and yet rigid to accept the full spectrum of political thought (Parenti 2006). The data in this project should allow scholars to examine the nuances of this dynamic, such as trends in the rise of new material and changes in popular subject foci (Dryzek 2006). As Lowi (1992) and Sigelman (2006b) note, political science adapts in response to real-world political events, which necessitates that political scientists examine what topics are perennial and which are episodic. For instance, McClerking and Philpot (2008) argue that the reason Black politics has received more attention in political science journals is due to prolific social movement activity. Have other events increased (or decreased) attention to certain topics, and to what degree is such change gradual or punctuated? In the future, this

project's data may supply a preliminary sample with which to analyze changes in the discipline and the degree to which they align with world events. Moreover, future studies employing our approach may yield similar insights within other political science subfields and, more broadly, other academic disciplines. We searched extensively for similar studies across subfields and disciplines and were unable to locate many analyses that even loosely resemble ours in terms of objectives and/or approach. We thus believe that our study can serve as a guide for others.

Also of extreme importance is the rise of women and ethnic minorities—or lack thereof—in the academy. Political science as a “gendered institution” continues to inhibit the proportional publication of works about women in politics, and citation of works by women in the field (Tolleson-Rinehart and Carroll 2006). Whereas Young (1995) calculated the top-15-cited articles by women in the field, our data can identify the works by female political scientists most assigned in the classroom. Previous work has shown the myriad ways in which African American political science scholars are cited less (Dawson and Cohen 2002), and, to some degree, progress has even stalled since the 1980s on this front (Wilson and Frasure 2007). Research into the identity of assigned scholars—including through the dataset developed for this project—may help recognize pivotal works and moments when the field may have become more inclusive.

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## Notes

1. Our use of *U.S. News* rankings is bolstered by the work of Masuoka, Grofman, and Feld (2007a). They show school-based variables of interest—such as faculty membership in the Political Science 400, a school's placement record of their PhDs, and professional success of these past students—closely predict *U.S. News* rankings.
2. We additionally considered that differently ranked departments might yield somewhat different topic breakdowns, perhaps resulting from different levels of emphasis on teaching in their graduate instruction. However, separate pie charts for the top third, middle third, and bottom third of departments in our dataset appear virtually identical, suggesting that, if there is a difference, it at least does not show up in the core American politics curriculum.
3. In some cases, both a single author *and* a combination of authors including that author appear in the same top 10. When this occurs, the listed frequency for a single author *subsumes* the frequency for the team of authors, but the number for the author team indicates *only* the frequency of that specific combination of authors. For example, under “Public Opinion,” Benjamin I. Page appears 38 times as an author in our data, and this total includes the 31 times he appears as part of the author team Page and Shapiro. After much discussion, we determined that this procedure best reflects the contributions of the authors in the data.
4. For ease of presentation, we place the left bound of our horizontal axis at 1940, omitting the small minority of readings published before that date.
5. The remaining readings come from books (2,584), chapters in edited volumes (375), and other (109), which includes working papers, conference papers, newspapers, magazines, blogs, speeches, think-tank reports, and online-only content.



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