

POLITICS 111
WHAT'S LEFT?
LEFT GOVERNMENTS IN POWER IN EUROPE AND NORTH
AMERICA

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Introduction

During the long postwar boom, roughly from 1945 to 1975, parties of the Left were frequently in power in Western Europe and North America. These “social democratic,” or “labor” parties could even be considered the natural parties of government in many countries, and in a very real sense, they constructed the postwar settlement in democratic capitalist societies. They tended to have broadly similar constituencies and programs. Their members and voters came primarily from the working class, and the parties often had ties to organized labor. Broadly speaking, this type of Left was ambivalent about the benefits of capitalist markets and sought to intervene to protect disadvantaged groups. By the early 1980s, however, the social democratic or labor Left was in crisis. In country after country it had been ousted from power by newly-resurgent Right-wing governments. More importantly, key elements of its ideology no longer seemed viable (economically or electorally) in a more globalized world economy. And its core constituency of the manual working class was both shrinking and defecting to parties of the Right. Under these circumstances, democratic parties of the Left, have everywhere engaged in a reconsideration of their ideology and program. Most of these parties have undergone something of a transformation, adopting more market-oriented policies, emerging as “responsible” economic managers, offering “modernization,” and appealing to more middle class groups.

By the end of the 1990s, parties of the Left were back in power across most of North America and Western Europe. This course examines these newly modernized Left parties, which self-consciously describe themselves as New Democrats, New Labour, *Die Neue Mitte*, and the Third Way. The focus of the course is the practice of the contemporary Left in power, with particular attention paid to the French Socialist governments of the past two decades, the two terms of the Clinton Presidency in the United States, and the first term of the Blair government in Britain. We will investigate how these parties evolved in the directions that they did, how they have governed, and how they have performed. Throughout, the course will examine and evaluate what it means to be a Left government at this point in history – after the fall of communism and during a period of intense international economic integration – and how this contemporary Left

compares to its predecessors.

Requirements

This colloquium has two main goals. The first is to encourage student discussion and participation through small seminar-style classes for first and second year students. As a result this is not a lecture class and it depends upon students doing the reading in advance of class and coming prepared to talk. There are about 150 pages of reading a week. The second goal of this colloquium is to get students involved in conducting research, and writing it up as early during their time at Oberlin as possible. Conducting research about contemporary politics in foreign countries poses a series of problems. One cannot rely on published books and articles because much of the subject-matter is very recent; one needs access to local newspapers, government information, and so on. For this reason, an important aspect of the research for this course will be use of online, web-based, information sources.

I would like you to regularly check the section of my web site linked to this course. There you will find some useful links to help you in your research, more information on the requirements, and updates to the syllabus: occasionally I may cut or add or move around readings. Check here before you do the reading each week: www.oberlin.edu/~chowell/Courses/Politics111.htm

There are three graded requirements for this course. First, students will write brief comments (from a paragraph or two to a page or two) about the readings each week. These comments will raise questions about the material, offer critique where appropriate, and comment on points of interest. They are designed to help us get class discussion going. For more information about what I want from these weekly comments see the last page of this syllabus. Comments are due by 2.00pm each Tuesday before class, and, along with class participation, are worth 25% of the grade. Second, students, either individually or in groups, will track some aspect of contemporary Left politics using online resources, and make a presentation to the class on that topic. If there is a British election in May 2001, this assignment will be linked to the election. This requirement is worth another 25% of the final grade. Third, each student will write a research paper on a topic of their choice (within the broad subject-matter of the course). Students will present proposals for their research project on March 7th in class. A draft of the paper will be due April 25th, and the final paper will be due at the end of the semester. This assignment is worth 50% of the grade. Late work will be penalized in the interests of equity.

Course Readings

There are multiple (usually three) copies of all the assigned readings on reserve at the library. In addition you will need to buy one book, Anthony Giddens *The Third Way*, which is a seminal text for the new left and which you will read all of in the third week of the course. It is available at the Oberlin Bookstore, or any major online bookstore. Please buy it immediately.

CLASS SCHEDULE:

February 7 Introduction

No reading

February 14 The Collapse of Social Democracy

Perry Anderson, "Renewals" (pages 5-24) in *New Left Review* [2000].

Frances Fox Piven, "The Decline of Labor Parties: An Overview," (pages 1-19) in Frances Fox Piven, ed., *Labor Parties in Postindustrial Societies*.

Donald Sassoon, "Introduction," (pages 1-16) in Donald Sassoon, ed., *Looking Left*.

Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy*, chapter 1 (pages 7-46).

Gosta Esping-Andersen, *Politics Against Markets*, chapter 1 (pages 3-38).

February 21 The Theory of the Third Way

Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way*, all (pages 1-155).

February 28 The French Socialist Experiment

David Cameron, "The Colors of the Rose" (pages 1-59) *Center for European Studies Working Paper*.

Mark Kesselman, "Socialism Without the Workers" (pages 11-41) in *Kapitalistate* [1983].

George Ross and Jane Jenson, "France: Triumph and Tragedy" (pages 158-188) in Perry Anderson and Patrick Camillar, eds., *Mapping the West European Left*.

Chris Howell, "The Fetishism of Small Difference: French Socialism Enters the Nineties" (pages 26-39) in *French Politics and Society* [1991].

Peter Hall, "From One Modernization Strategy to Another" (pages 1-32) Conference Paper [1996].

April 11

New Labour in Power in Britain

Colin Hay, *The Political Economy of New Labour*, chapter 4 (pages 105-144).

Chris Howell, "From New Labour to No Labour?" (Pages 201-229) in *New Political Science* [2000].

Noel Thompson, "Supply-Side Socialism," (pages 37-54) in *New Left Review* [1996].

Tony Blair, *New Britain: My Vision of a young Country*, chapters 1-6 and 34-35 (pages 3-56 & 291-309).

Tony Blair, "The Third Way: New Politics for a New Century," (pages 1-20) *Fabian Pamphlet* [1998].

April 18

Evaluating New Labour in Britain

Chapters by David Coates (pages 1-15) and Martin Burch and Ian Holliday (pages 80-91) in David Coates and Peter Lawler, eds., *New Labour in Power*.

Sylvia Bashevkin, "From Tough Times to Better Times: Feminism, Public Policy, and New Labour Politics in Britain," (pages 407-424) in *International Political Science Review* [2000].

Peter Mair, "Partyless Democracy," (pages 21-35) in *New Left Review* [2000].

Packet of articles (by Kenny & Smith, Marquand, Hay, Crouch, and Freedon) evaluating New Labour in *Political Quarterly* [1997 & 1999].

April 25 & May 2

Research Presentations & The British Election

Reading of student research drafts; discussion of British General Election.

May 9

Conclusion and Alternatives

No reading

Weekly Reading Comments

This assignment is not complicated, but it is easy to misunderstand. The purpose of these sets of comments is threefold. First, I want to know that you have read the assigned material ahead of class so that I can structure the class on the assumption that we have a shared starting point, and so that we can set about discussing the reading rather than having me simply lecture on it. This class is reading-driven because I am trying to expose you to a wide range of different viewpoints and approaches to political economy, and that requires that I do everything I can to encourage you to do the reading. Second, I need to know ahead of time if some part of the reading was consistently misunderstood so that I can concentrate on going over that material in class. It is often the case that one author or piece of reading is open to multiple interpretations, and if several students interpret it differently for me, we will need to discuss that. I may be expecting you to get something from the reading when you in fact take away something quite different. There may also be language and concepts that you don't understand, so the written comments are an opportunity to let me know what you would like me to explain in class. Third, your reaction to the reading plays a central role in helping me decide how to organize class discussion. I am particularly interested in which readings resonated with you, and why, and which readings you found weak, irritating, ignorant, or whatever, and why. The critiques of the readings are the best place to start a class discussion – and it means I can call on you to explain your reaction.

What does this mean for the comments you write? It means that, at a minimum, I want the comments to demonstrate that you did the reading. That means a brief summary of the main themes and arguments presented in the reading. You can do this by writing a paragraph on each reading, or by drawing out some themes and using your comments to illustrate how each reading addressed those themes. You do not need to summarize/discuss every reading if you do not want to. I want a sense that you have done all the reading, but if you found some of the reading particularly insightful or heinous, then, by all means, focus on them in your comments. Beyond your summaries, I would like you to identify terms, concepts or words that you did not understand (even after using a dictionary!), or would like me to go over in class. Finally, along with your summary and questions, please offer comments, critiques and reactions to the readings. Again, you might do this for every reading, or just for a few; you might organize your comments around a generalized critique of the readings for that week, or point to surprising similarities or differences among the readings.

The “product” should be written comments ranging from a couple of paragraphs to a couple of pages. These can be e-mailed to me or placed in the box outside my door. Here is how I grade the comments. I DO NOT make detailed comments on them and hand them back to you, unless you request them for some reason. If you hand in comments that demonstrate that you have done the reading, or the great bulk of it, regardless of the quality of those comments, you get a tick. If I receive no written comments, or your comments appear to be about reading for another class, you do not get a tick. On rare occasions your comments may be so insightful that I give you a double tick. In the past this has been true for only a handful of students, or less, each week, and it only happens for comments that go beyond summary and questioning to offer reaction and critique. So, in grading terms, not handing in written comments is not a good idea because the main determinant of the grade is handing them in regularly rather than their quality.