Letter from the Chair of the Politics Department

by Chris Howell, Professor of Politics

This is the first of what I anticipate will be an annual alumni newsletter. For many years, faculty members in the politics department have kept in contact with their former students—and alumni have kept in contact with each other—through informal networks, reunion weekends, and chance meetings away from Oberlin. Our hope is to use electronic media to create tools that will make these contacts easier and more systematic. As a faculty member who was hired a “mere” two decades ago, I am frequently struck by the number of astonishingly accomplished alumni who graduated before my time and about whom I wish I knew more and had an opportunity to meet and learn from. My own area of research, teaching, and political interest lies in labor unions, and every few months I learn about another distinguished alum working in the labor movement whom I’d love to meet or have talk to my students.

At present we are debuting three tools for keeping in better contact with alumni of the Department of Politics (once Government). The first is this annual newsletter, which will contain news about the department and its faculty and students. We intend each newsletter to have essays written by faculty or students (and perhaps by alumni; call me to volunteer!) on issues of topical interest, both at Oberlin and beyond. The second tool is an alumni news link located on the politics department home page: http://new.oberlin.edu/arts-and-sciences/departments/politics. We urge you to share what you have been up to using the alumni information form; feel free to update it as frequently as you wish. Periodically, we will publish a full list of alumni news on the politics home page. The third tool is a politics department Facebook page, which is maintained by politics majors (in deference to the incompetence in social networking on the part of current faculty!)

Please keep in contact with us, even if only to drop a line, to share what you are up to, or to tell us about some exciting venture that our students should know about.

Search for Oberlin Politics Majors on Facebook, join the group, and then use it to find and keep in contact with your friends from Oberlin. This group offers almost unlimited opportunities for customization and ways of keeping in contact by graduating cohort, career, and interest.

The letter from the chair should be akin to the state of the union—or in this case, the state of the politics department. Well, the state of the department is good! In the last five years, the politics department has overtaken English, biology, and history to become Oberlin’s largest department in terms of both majors and students taught every year. We currently have 12 full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty members, and two visiting faculty members. We underwent the decennial program review process in 2007-08 and received very strong reviews for both the quality of our teaching and the scholarship of our faculty. Over a third of politics faculty have won Oberlin’s college-wide teaching award, and over the last decade, 50 Oberlin graduates have received PhDs in political science and public administration, 10 more than our nearest rival, Wesleyan.

I’d also like to use this opportunity to trumpet the national and international reputations that our faculty members have earned in their respective fields. In the last five years, two professors have received book awards and one a conference paper award. Symposia and volumes have been organized to celebrate the scholarship of politics faculty. My colleagues have given keynote addresses at international conferences and have been elected to leadership positions in professional organizations. These achievements all testify to the importance of the intellectual contributions that our faculty members have made to the discipline of political science.

In short, I am proud to be a member of the Oberlin Department of Politics, and I am very aware that I follow in a long line of distinguished faculty members and even more distinguished alumni. Please keep in contact with us, even if only to drop a line, to share what you are up to, or to tell us about some exciting venture that our students should know about. This is my last year as chair of the department; Harry Hirsch takes over this summer. Please feel free to contact either of us if we can answer any questions or concerns about the politics department at Oberlin.
Invited Essay

President Obama: What Have You Done for Me Lately?

By Ronald Kahn, James Monroe Professor of Politics and Law

Why has President Obama had a difficult time during his first year? At first glance one could say the problem is a lack of political skill, strategy, and personal qualities such as toughness. However, such a view is misleading at best and downright wrong at worst. The problem with this view is that it does not take into account the long-term structural changes that have occurred in American political institutions and politics over the centuries. Stephen Skowronek ‘73, the Pelatiah Perit Professor of Political and Social Science at Yale University and Oberlin politics (then government) major, analyzes presidents who come into power promising a new direction for the country at a time when the nation is demanding change; he calls them reconstructive presidents. They include Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, and now, one can argue, Barack Obama.

Skowronek argues that each successive reconstructive president has a more difficult time securing the level of reform they promised because of what he calls the waning of political time. That is, with each passing decade the American government becomes “thicker” in terms of the number and resources of interest groups, the power of congressional committees and legislators to mute or veto substantial reform, political party fragmentation, the acceptance of the Senate’s cloture rule requiring a supermajority to pass legislation, and the decentralizing of power to state and local interests.

Because of this thickening, and biennial congressional elections, the window of opportunity for each successive president to transform the people’s call for reform at presidential election time is reduced.

The extremism of demands made by the right and left is fueled by cable news and media sources that allow citizens to hear only the news they prefer to hear. The prominence of these demands leads to a less-satisfied citizenry when reform efforts must lead to compromises. In other words, one has an expanded expectation that the president will deliver, but with a thicker government, the chances for radical or even substantial reform declines, even as our nation’s problems grow in number and complexity. Major new efforts to meet problems only occur when the president can make a doom and gloom argument, as Bush II did after 9/11 and Bush II and Obama did when a new depression was feared.

Ironically, the thickening of American government, and the institutional changes explored above, are part of the reason why a moderate-conservative Supreme Court in a conservative era has been a venue for social change. Cases that have greatly expanded rights such as Brown v. Board of Education (1954) in the Eisenhower years, the 1970’s gender rights cases, and Lawrence v. Texas (2003), a recent gay rights case, are, in part, a product of the Supreme Court breaking log-jams in social policy caused by the failure of government to act because of structural roadblocks, as well as the special qualities of the Supreme Court and our Constitution. Though these structural problems limit Obama’s ability to achieve substantial social reform, they also make his choices of Supreme Court justices that much more important, if we are to keep the Supreme Court open as a venue of social change.

Alumni Speakers on Campus:

In 2009-10 several politics department alumni returned to Oberlin to give talks.

Ursula Lawrence ’00 returned to campus in November 2009 to speak on her work as lead organizer for the Writer’s Guild of America, East. She gave a presentation titled “How to Take Three Semesters of Marxist Theory and STILL Make it in the Movies (sort of).”

Carolyn A. Kubitschek ’70, founding partner of Lansner Kubitschek Schaffer & Zuccardy, gave a talk in March 2010 titled “So You Want to be a Lawyer?”

Alan Houston ’80, professor of political science at the University of California, San Diego, returned to Oberlin to deliver the John D. Lewis Memorial Lectureship, March 16-17, 2010. While on campus he visited classes and gave two lectures: “Ben Franklin on Population and Immigration” and “Ben Franklin on Religious Toleration.”

The politics department is always delighted to hear from alumni. It is even nicer to see you in person! If you are in Oberlin for Commencement/Reunion weekend, please join us for the Politics Department Open House. This year (2010) it will be in Rice Faculty Lounge from 10:00 a.m. to noon on Sunday, May 30. The politics department also greatly benefits from gifts to the department. The Politics Gift Fund is used primarily to support speakers and student events on campus. In the past year we have helped to fund a juvenile justice conference, a student Asian-American politics conference, and speakers on a wide range of issues, including the prospects for Middle East peace and immigration reform. The following URL allows you to contribute directly and online: http://www.oberlin.edu/giving. When you reach this page, click the “Give Online” link on the left. To direct donations to the politics department, choose Option “1. c. Other” and type “Politics Department” in the empty box on the right. Thank you.
Marc Blecher:
On leave in 2008-09, Marc finished and published the third edition of China Against the Tides, as well as four articles on Chinese labor politics, urban political economy, and politics generally. (His personal favorite documented and analyzed—wait for it—the unionization of Walmart in China!) Back in the classroom in the fall of 2009, Marc’s China survey course was made much livelier by having four students from China enrolled! He’s still enjoying his new grandson and visits to his London flat.

Harry Hirsch:
Harry completed a term on the executive council of the American Political Science Association and has delivered several papers on First Amendment issues at conferences. He published an essay, “The More Things (Don’t) Change,” about being gay in the academic world, and has taught classes on the First Amendment, American political thought, and gender and sexuality.

Chris Howell:
Chris is finishing up his four-year term as chair of the politics department and is looking forward to spending more time on his research and teaching. Next fall he will teach a new first-year seminar, “Socialism: Real and Imagined.” In the last year he published two articles on industrial relations reforms in France, Britain, and Sweden, and he is currently working on a coauthored book that will assess the trajectory of European industrial relations over the last two decades.

Ron Kahn:

Sonia Kruks:
On leave in 2008-09, Sonia served as a Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies at Durham University in England. She is working on a book manuscript on the political philosophy of French feminist and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir. She recently presented papers that examine Beauvoir’s ideas on topics such as revenge, political action, and the place of ethics in politics. Sonia continues to teach a wide range of political theory courses in areas that include theories of power, democratic theory, and postmodernism and politics, as well as the history of political theory.

Kristina Mani:
Kristina has been working on a book manuscript on the economic roles that Latin American militaries have played in their national economies since the 1930s, and she presented related papers at conferences last summer. Happily “stabilized” with Bonine, she spent a week on a U.S. Navy ship briefing Southcom officers on the politics and militaries of Latin America. She’s developing a new seminar for Oberlin students, Power and Resistance in Latin America, to accompany other courses she teaches in IR and Latin American politics.

Mike Parkin:
Mike’s research on how American candidates use new media such as entertainment TV and the internet has recently appeared in several scholarly publications, including the American Political Science Review. He was interviewed by NPR, CBS News Radio, and others on topics ranging from how vice presidential candidates are picked to the value of campaign ads in a close race. In the classroom, Mike teaches courses on media and politics, political psychology, campaigns and elections, and quantitative research methods.

Eve Sandberg:
Eve completed her elected chair duties for the feminist theory and gender studies section of the International Studies Association and was an invited participant of the United Nations International Research and Training Institute’s discussion on gender and security best practices. Eve published a 20-page report with recommendations for improving access to professional social science association conventions for those with disabilities/special needs. Following a medical leave, Eve is now working to complete her manuscript, Foreign Aid, Decision-Making in Zambia, and Zambian Women.

Ben Schiff:

Politics Faculty and Staff:
Faculty:
Marc Jeremy Blecher, Professor
Stephen Crowley, Associate Professor
Paul A. Dawson, Professor
Harry Hirsch, Professor
Chris Howell, Professor
Ronald Charles Kahn, James Monroe Professor
Sonia Kruks, Robert S. Danforth Professor
Ji-Young Lee, Visiting Instructor
Kristina Mani, Assistant Professor
Maren Milligan, Visiting Instructor
Michael Parkin, Assistant Professor
David W. Orr, Paul Sears Professor of Environmental Studies
Eve Nan Sandberg, Associate Professor
Benjamin N. Schiff, William G. and Jeanette Williams Smith Professor
Harlan Wilson, Professor
Administrative Assistant:
Tracy Tucker
Student Major Representatives:
Daniel Abramson, Nell Peyser, Pichaya Winichakul
The Oberlin Initiative in Electoral Politics (OIEP)

By Professor Eve Sandberg

The purpose of this initiative is to identify students who have a strong interest in electoral politics, encourage them to pursue career paths such as elected office, and help prepare them through specific training, concrete experience, and academic inquiry and learning. Funded by a generous donation by Richard and Dorothy Cole ’56, the OIEP completed its 15th year of operation in 2009. Central to the OIEP is the Cole Scholars program, populated by students selected from a campus-wide competition who this year took courses in campaigns and elections with politics professor Michael Parkin. The students then completed their case studies in the field (completely supported for eight weeks by the OIEP for travel, housing, living expenses, etc.).

The 2009 Cole Scholars and their placements were: Daniel Abrahamson, New York Family Party, New York City; Tevi Abrams-Slep, Human Rights Committee, San Francisco; Claire Bogart, Cathy Allen Connections Group, Seattle; Anna Brown, Gavin Newsom for Gov., San Francisco; Peter Edmonson, Carnahan for Senator, St. Louis; Christine Martin, Annise Parker for Mayor, Houston; Tyler Robinson, Sam Yoon for Mayor, Boston; Ian Seeley, Progressive Politics (alliance), Minneapolis; Shayne Wells, Kareem Reed for Mayor, Atlanta.

In addition to their academic studies, the scholars were given training in public speaking, political mobilization, and political advertising of the Obama presidential campaign.

Please be aware that there is an alumni-support component to the OIEP. We are able to fund alumni who are planning to run for public office for campaign-related activities, such as attending a professional workshop on organizing a campaign or an educational workshop that will provide an alumna/us with greater depth of knowledge in an issue area. For an application contact Eve Sandberg, director of OIEP, at Eve.Sandberg@oberlin.edu.

Stay tuned for an interactive OIEP website in 2010 that will connect all Oberlin alumni working in campaigns and elections related fields.

Professor Ronald Kahn, a founder and mainstay of the OIEP has stepped down to serve now as an affiliate faculty member of the OIEP. Kahn has moved on to replicate the success of the Cole Scholars Program by focusing his energy on Oberlin College’s new Law Scholars Program.

STUDENT NEWS

Politics majors continue to be very successful in winning important fellowships for postgraduate travel and study. Devin Goure won a Beineke Fellowship (the first winner from Oberlin since 1985), which provides substantial financial support for graduate work. Devin has been accepted into the political science PhD program at Yale for the fall of 2010. Karin Drucker won a Truman Scholarship, awarded to juniors intending to pursue graduate work in the field of public service. Karin has worked on children’s health and juvenile justice issues while at Oberlin and intends to continue to pursue those interests post-Oberlin. Kehan deSousa and Kevin Brondum both won Fulbright English Teaching Assistantships; Kehan will undertake his year abroad in Slovakia while Kevin will be in Russia. Junior Daniel Abramson won a Coro Fellowship for public service leadership.

This year the politics department has seven honors students. They are listed below along with the title of their honors theses and their primary faculty advisers in parentheses:

Sam Cassanos: “Transnational Solidarity with the Palestinians: Knowledge, Praxis, and Agency in the Making of a Social Movement” (Crowley).


William Yon: “Overlapping Jurisdictions and its Effect on Sovereignty” (Schiff).

The politics department awards three each year. The Aaron Wildavsky Memorial Prize is awarded to our top graduating majors who specialize in American politics and public policy. The John D. Lewis Memorial Prize goes to our best seniors in political theory. The Comfort-Starr Prize in Politics is for excellence in the study of political science more generally.

In 2009-10, the Wildavsky Memorial Prize was awarded to Martina McLennan, Ben Hillengas, and Nora Frederickson. The Lewis Memorial Prize was awarded to Devin Goure and Matt Friberg. The winners of the Comfort-Starr Prize were Devin Goure, Leann Dameron, Nina Goepfert, Marina McLennan, Ben Hillengas, Sam Lewis, Marguerite Cawley, Nora Frederickson and Matt Friberg. And congratulations to all of our graduating seniors!

Mary Slattery served as Oberlin’s student delegate to the United States Military Academy Conference in November 2009, and Mary Page Terlizzi did the same for the Naval Academy Foreign Affairs Conference in April 2010.