The proposition that politics is the "comprehensive science," as claimed by Aristotle, provokes debate at Bowdoin as elsewhere. Some argue that it is not a science, others that it is not comprehensive. Still others look with jaundiced eye on anything that smacks of politics. Yet the basis for the claims and counterclaims both rest on the pervasiveness of matters political throughout society; on the perennial quest of human beings for the discovery and application of a common set of purposes regarding their common life; and on the multiplicity of skills needed to explore and understand such matters. Generations of students have found the study of politics a fascinating endeavor for these very reasons.

The study of politics in the Department of Government and Legal Studies at Bowdoin has traditionally provided a liberal arts background in government for careers in teaching, public service, journalism, business, and law. As the largest major on campus, the Department graduates a diverse group of students each year. While a small percentage pursue graduate work in political science, more go on to law school or enter the work force in either the public or private sectors. Our program is therefore designed both to accommodate and serve the specialized needs of budding political scientists and to contribute to the broad liberal arts education that will prepare our students to be informed citizens and knowledgeable leaders in their communities and professions.¹

Course offerings at Bowdoin are divided into four subfields: Political Theory, American Politics, Comparative Politics, and International Relations. Every major is expected to complete an area of concentration in one of these fields.

**1000-level** courses include both first-year seminars and introductory lecture courses. All such courses are designed to provide students (primarily first-years and sophomores) an introduction to a aspect of government and legal studies. **2000-level** courses (limited to 35 students) are designed to introduce students to or extend their knowledge of a aspect of government and legal studies. The courses range from the more introductory to the more advanced. Courses at the **3000-level** provide students (generally seniors, but also juniors) opportunities to do advanced work within a specific field of concentration. Enrollment is limited to 15 students in each seminar.

The major consists of nine courses, with no more than two taken at the 1000-level, and no more than one of these a first-year seminar, distributed as follows:

¹ Hard and fast numbers on the career paths of Bowdoin Government majors are elusive. Since 2014, however, the Department has conducted an exit poll of majors, to assess (among other things) their projected career path. 77 percent of the classes of 2014-2016 had post-graduate plans in place as of graduation. 44 percent of the students with paid jobs were in the field of business. Other top fields were the legal profession, consulting, the health sector, and government work. Very few majors had immediate plans for graduate school.
1. A field of concentration—selected from the four noted above—in which at least four courses, including one 3000-level course and no more than one 1000-level course, are taken.
2. At least one course in each of the three fields outside the field of concentration.
3. A grade of C- or better must be earned in a course. Courses used to fulfill major requirements must be taken on a graded basis (not Credit/D/Fail).
4. One semester of independent study work (at the 4000-level) may be counted toward the nine-course departmental requirement and the four-course field concentration. Students seeking to graduate with honors in government and legal studies complete two consecutive semesters of independent study work and have their thesis approved by the department.

The Department is committed to several core curricular principles:

1. Very few courses have pre-requisites. (As of spring 2016, 16 of 142 courses had an attached pre-requisite). We encourage students to take Introductory lecture courses where appropriate, but no mid-level course requires an Introductory course. Students come to the study of government with a variety of backgrounds and preparations, and we advise our students to follow a path through the major that best fits their needs and interests.
2. We are committed to offering a range of first-year seminars (FYS) on a yearly basis. We regularly offer six to eight such seminars a year. We find this an ideal path for students into the Government Department, and many students who take a FYS in the department decide to continue taking our courses as a declared major or minor.
3. We encourage students to pursue an interest in off-campus educational opportunities, most often a study away program in the junior year. These opportunities can be the basis of subsequent independent study projects and Honors theses. We allow two of the nine courses in the major to be completed off-campus (except for the 3000-level seminar requirement, which must be completed at Bowdoin).

We outline each of the four subfields in Government as follows:

**Political Theory**

Political theory courses at Bowdoin explore the fundamental issues of political life—human nature, justice, authority, virtue, freedom, equality, natural rights, democracy, and history—through a careful examination of what the greatest minds have thought about these issues. The courses range from broad surveys (Classical Political Philosophy, Modern Political Philosophy, Contemporary Political Philosophy, and American Political Thought) to thematic courses (Liberalism and Its Critics, Religion and Politics, and Eros and Politics) to advanced seminars on individual thinkers (Rousseau, Jefferson, Tocqueville, and Nietzsche). The courses are designed to provide students not only with a deeper understanding of the history of political thought from Plato to Rawls but also with the ability to read complex philosophical texts and write rigorous analyses of them.

**Comparative Politics**
Comparative Politics is a field of study and a methodology within political science. The subfield of comparative politics focuses on power and decision making within national boundaries: the rules and institutions that govern states and the social groups they comprise. Some scholars focus on politics in a single country, others specialize regionally, while others investigate variation in patterns of authority cross-nationally. As a method, comparative political science strives to make propositions that can be tested empirically, through qualitative or quantitative analysis, and which hold validity across all systems or within well-defined limits. Topics central to the field include the origins of democracy and dictatorship, reasons for economic growth and stagnation, sources of social conflict, and avenues for participation and representation.

**American Politics**
Topics of study include the major governing institutions and actors—Congress, the Presidency, the courts, public bureaucracies, state and local governments, political parties, the media, and interest groups—and the primary modes of political participation, including lobbying, social movements, elections, public opinion, and voting. Typically, students in this field draw on several approaches when conducting these studies. Institutional studies focus on how rules and enduring governing structures shape political processes and outcomes. Behavioral analyses examine how individuals—from activists to the public—think about and engage in political activity.

We adopt no single methodological approach to the study of American politics. Some courses focus on the historical development of American institutions and policy; several courses document the jurisprudence surrounding key questions and controversies; other courses focus on statistical relationships between variables and the predictive and explanatory power of these models.

**International Relations**
International relations is the study of relationships in the international political world, including matters of war and peace, global economic development or crisis, and transnational issues such as terrorism or environmental degradation. Traditional areas of study include international law, international institutions, security studies, states and non-state actors, nuclear weapons, cyber warfare, international political economy, international cooperation, foreign policy, eras of warfare, and conflict resolution. To the benefit of both subfields, topics in international relations often interconnect with areas in comparative politics, with comparative politics bringing nuance to issues like war and development, while international relations can paint a “big picture,” of politics across state borders and between diverse populations.

We define the learning goals for our majors as follows:

1. **Substantive Knowledge of Government and Politics**: Students should gain an understanding of essential concepts and theories in all the four major subfields of the discipline (American politics, international relations, comparative politics, and political theory) and be able to employ these concepts and theories independently in analyzing empirical events. In that sense, we seek to graduate students who can describe in analytical terms the actions undertaken by political actors in the domestic and international arenas. We expect our students to concentrate in one of these subfields, however, and to therefore be more proficient in questions derived from that study. A capstone seminar in their concentrated subfield will be the principal course used to
assess the degree to which this disciplinary learning objective has been met. (Students can also meet this requirement with an advanced independent study or by completing an Honors project.)

2. **Critical Analysis and Argumentation**: Students should be able to critically analyze readings in government and politics. They should additionally be able to formulate clear oral and written arguments that address issues in dispute in the discipline of political science and defend their arguments with adequate evidence. These goals can be expanded as:

   a) Effective writing—we seek to graduate students who can write clearly and effectively. Specifically, we want students to be able to articulate a clear thesis, to support it with logic and evidence, and to present it in clear, grammatically correct prose. It is also important that students understand and make use of appropriate citation.

   b) Analytical thinking—we seek to expose students to a variety of perspectives on politics and approaches to political science designed to foster their ability to assess and evaluate competing viewpoints.

   c) Critical reading—we seek to help students learn how to read and evaluate a text. Specifically, we want students to be able to identify the main thesis question or hypothesis and to evaluate the author’s use of evidence and logic in support of the thesis or hypothesis.

   d) Library and research skills—we seek students learn how to locate and to utilize effectively the rich array of paper and electronic resources available to them.

These two main goals are assessed in the process of completing the major requirements:

- 1000-level courses serve as introductions to broad concepts of government and politics. Students also have many opportunities in these courses to begin developing skills in critical analysis and argumentation. Our FYS cultivate these latter skills.
- 2000-level courses reinforce these objectives, advancing knowledge of government and politics and further developing skills of writing, argumentation, and analysis.
- 3000-level courses allow students to master concepts and ideas in very specific areas of the discipline. These courses also advance critical analysis and argumentation skills through numerous writing assignments and a heavy emphasis on class discussion and debate.

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2 In the aforementioned exit survey, we also asked senior majors to assess their level agreement with the claim that majoring in Government at Bowdoin helped them to “think analytically,” “write effectively,” “communicate well orally,” and “develop and use research skills.” This is not the ideal way to evaluate our learning goals, but the percentage of majors from the Classes of 2014 through 2016 answering “strongly agree” or “agree” to the above claims, respectively, were: 98%, 95%, 89%, and 85%.