

PSCI 215W-1
Spring 2024

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Office Hours: M/W 12:30-
1:30 or by appointment.

American Elections

Course Description

What explains the current state of the American political system? How do elections and political campaigns work? Are voters manipulated by slick media-based election campaigns? What about campaign ads or social media? Do polls help or harm voters? Do differences in how states regulate voting matter? The goal of this seminar is to enhance our understanding of the contemporary political environment, how elections work, how politicians conduct campaigns, how campaigns and media coverage affect voters, and how we study election campaign dynamics. We will not only examine the academic literature on these topics but will also follow the ongoing events of the 2024 presidential primary campaigns. Through a combination of group projects, short assignments, and a research paper, we will arrive at an understanding of elections and campaigns. We also will consider the place of elections and campaigns in contemporary American democracy.

Class Meeting and Structure

The class meets in Meliora Room 218 on Monday and Wednesdays from 10:25-11:40. Students are expected to attend all classes, to complete all assigned readings and assignments on time, and to actively participate. Classes will include some lecture, informal discussions of the 2024 campaign, discussions of the assigned readings, and class activities/assignments.

Assignments and Grades

Students will be involved in two types of formal activities, as follows.

Small group assignments. For each assignment, students will be assigned to a different group. Groups will be provided with time in class to coordinate and work together but are expected to also work outside of class. Each student is expected to do their share, and it will be clear in each assignment who did what. Grades may differ among team members. Each of these assignments make up 10% of each student's grade. An overview of each assignment is as follows; more details will be provided in class. All assignments will be presented in class. There will no or only minor written components.

1. Teams of three will be assigned six states (two states for each person). For each state, the team will report about the election laws including rules around who is eligible to vote (e.g., felon disenfranchisement), registration rules, early/absentee voting rules, voter identification rules, polling place details, and historic turnout rates. Speculate on the causes and consequences of the differences between the states.
2. Teams of four or five will be assigned a misinformation intervention. Research how it works and what evidence exists on its behalf. Then test it by identifying an

- example(s) of misinformation and ask a small sample of individuals whether they believe it is accurate or inaccurate. For some individuals, provide the intervention and for others do not. Does it matter? Why or why not? What can be done differently, if anything, to improve it?
3. Teams of four or five will be assigned a Republican primary candidate. They will create a persuasive (video-based) ad for the candidate, using the techniques from the readings. The ad can be general or target a specific state/population.
 4. Teams of two will identify a set of five House Republicans who have held their seats at least from the 2018 election through the 2022 election. Identify how the Congressperson voted in the January 6th impeachment vote and whether they cast doubt or denied the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election (when they ran in 2022). Next, identify eight well known individuals or organizations that donated to each candidate in 2018. Then analyze whether and how much they gave in 2020 and 2022. Does it seem to matter how the candidate acted in 2020 and 2022? Discuss the findings. Are they surprising?

Research paper. Each student will complete a roughly 12- to 15-page research paper. The paper will require data collection in the form of a survey or experiment. The data can come from a sample of friends and/or family (with roughly 100 responses, although this will vary). There are five parts of the paper to be completed throughout the semester. The parts will be edited and combined at the end of the semester for the full paper. The paper overall makes up 45% of each student's grade.

Note that the due dates are always two days prior to a class meeting and should be submitted to the professor and assigned peer reviewer. (If the class does not meet the given due date, the assignment is due at 5PM EST.) In the following class (two days later), there will be time allocated for peer review discussion. Thus, everyone should plan time to read their assigned partner's work in advance of class. The five parts are as follows.

- a. Choose and motivate a topic. Each student can choose any topic covered on the syllabus (broadly speaking). The first assignment entails posing a question and explaining why it is interesting. This will be roughly half of a page. Examples include: Do voters think misinformation is a problem? Do people who donate to campaigns have different political beliefs than those who do not? Do voters think of candidates with different gender identities differently? Do people trust polls? Do people have accurate perceptions about the state of polarization? The explanation can be informal (i.e., not based on readings or literature). This is due on January 22 (to be discussed on January 24).
- b. Conduct a literature review on the topic. Identify at least five academic sources and two non-academic sources (e.g., news articles) on the topic. Three of these seven sources can be from the syllabus, but the others should not be. Google scholar is the best resource for identifying academic sources. The first part of this assignment entails identifying the sources and typing out a bibliography (full citation in any style and link). This is due on February 5 (to be discussed on February 7). The second part of this assignment is to write a 4–5-page literature review of the sources. To do this, write a summary of each source; for academic sources, provide details on the methods used and how data were collected. This is

due on February 19 (to be discussed on February 21). Finally, synthesize these summaries so the sources connect on/build on one another. In about 4 pages, explain how your question relates to the literature you review *and* present some expectations/hypotheses. This is due on February 26 (to be discussed on February 28).

- c. Research design. Identify the main dependent and independent variables. Discuss your population, sample, measures, and data collection plan. Describe how you will analyze your data to test your expectations. This is due on March 6 (to be discussed on March 18).
- d. Data collection. Collect your data and organize it for analysis. Report on your experience collecting the data. This is due on March 23 (to be discussed on March 25).
- e. Data analysis and interpretation. Report descriptive statistics about your sample (e.g., percent Democrat, Republican, Independent) and of your variables (e.g., average scores). Engage in analyses relating your dependent and independent variables. (There is no expectation of statistical analyses beyond basic crosstabs and correlations, although those familiar with more advanced statistics are encouraged to use what they know.) Interpret the results, explaining whether they are consistent or contrary to expectations (use graphs/figures). Time in class will be provided to work on this on April 3. This is due on April 13 (to be discussed on April 15).

The final paper should include all of the above, with transitions, as well as a conclusion that provides an overall summary, explanations for anything unexpected, discussion of limitations of the study, and what would be done differently if possible. It also should include references written out (any style of references is fine, but they should be written out entirely; do not just list links). Students will offer *informal* presentations of their papers on April 24 and April 29 (*less than five minutes*). The paper is due on April 30.

The remaining 15% of each student's grade will be based on attendance and the quality of participation as well as the completion of several informal assignments discussed in class. If a student misses a class, it is the *student's* responsibility to provide written documentation of a legitimate excuse (see course policies); otherwise, it will be counted as an unexcused absence. Also, if a student misses a class (excused or unexcused), it is the *student's* responsibility to learn about any missed assignments, discussion, and so on. The student should do this by talking to other students (first), and, if necessary, the professor. Participation involves taking part in class activities, discussing class readings in an informed way, discussing ongoing campaign events, and completing the informal assignments.

All assignments should include the student's name and full references and be *emailed as a distinct document* to the Professor (and peer reviewer when relevant). Do *not* share as a Google doc.

Tables with a summary of due dates appear at the end of the syllabus. There will be several informal assignments, however, that are not listed on the syllabus; these will be discussed in class.

Readings

Each student should regularly read about the 2024 campaign in a major newspaper (e.g., *The New York Times*, *Democrat and Chronicle*). We will discuss campaign events in many classes. All other readings are either provided by links on the syllabus or will be e-mailed by the Professor. Readings could be changed throughout the semester; this will be discussed in class.

Students are expected to read all of the assigned readings before each class. Surprise quizzes on the readings are possible. If a student misses a class without a legitimate excuse, they will receive a 0 on any quizzes. It also will be necessary for students to include direct references to the readings in their assignments.

Course Policies

It is the student's responsibility to obtain an assignment if they are absent during the class in which the assignment is distributed or discussed. Assignments are due at the start of the class period on the days they are due or by 5PM EST on days when the class does not meet. Make-up in-class assignments and/or late papers will be permitted *only* if the student presents written documentation of legitimate circumstances that prevented the student from completing the assignment on time. This documentation must be provided in a timely manner (i.e., within a week); failure to provide such documentation will result in the student receiving a 0 on the assignment in question. Legitimate circumstances include religious holidays, illness (verified by a note from a health care provider), serious family emergencies, subpoenas, jury duty, military service, and participation in group activities sponsored by the University. If a student wishes to appeal an assigned grade, they must submit a *written* statement to the professor explaining why the grade should be changed. Incompletes will be granted only in the case of documented illness, and if the student and professor complete the required form.

A significant amount of work will be done in teams. Working with others invariably leads to some disagreement. Students should approach their partners/team with an open and flexible mind. If there are *major* problems, students should notify the professor. Finally, students are expected to type each written assignment. The assignments should be proofread; spelling, grammar, and writing style will make up part of a student's grade.

Artificial Intelligence

The use of artificial intelligence in writing and research is quickly evolving. We will discuss its usage during a class early in the semester.

Course Outline

January 17 Introduction

January 22 Politics in the 21st Century: From Bush v. Gore to the Capitol Insurrection

“[The 2000 Election Never Ended](#),” by Andrew Rice, *New York Magazine*, 2020.

“[9/11 Was a Test. The Books of the Last Two Decades Show How America Failed](#),” by Carols Lozada, *Washington Post*, 2021.

“[Who Authorized America’s Endless Wars?](#),” by Andrea Mazzarino, *The Nation*, 2021.

“[A Short History of the Great Recession](#),” by Wayne Duggan, *Forbes*, 2023.

“[Defiance in the Face of Autocratization. Democracy Report 2023](#),” Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2023, Pages 6-7, 42-43 (Skim other parts).

Research Topic Proposal Due

January 24 Demographic Change in America

“[New Census Projections Show Immigration Is Essential to the Growth and Vitality of a More Diverse U.S. Population](#),” by William H. Frey, *Brookings*, 2023.

“[The Scientific Case That America is Becoming More Prejudiced](#),” by Brian Resnick, *Vox*, 2017.

Uncivil Disagreement, by Lilianna Mason, University Chicago Press, 2018, Chapter 3.

“[A Close-Up Picture of Partisan Segregation, Among 180 Million Voters](#),” by Emily Badger, Kevin Quealy, and Josh Katz, *The New York Times*, 2021.

Discuss Research Topic Proposals

February 5 The Evolution of Media in America

Media Politics, by Shanto Iyengar, 2022, Chapter 5.

“[Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid - The Atlantic](#),” by Jonathan Haidt, *The Atlantic*, April 11, 2022.

“[How Harmful Is Social Media? | The New Yorker](#),” by Gideon Lewis-Kraus, *The New Yorker*, June 3, 2022.

[“Yes, Social Media Really Is Undermining Democracy,”](#) by Jonathan Haidt, *The Atlantic*, July 28, 2022.

Identification of Sources for Research Paper Due

February 7 Polarization

[Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know](#), by Nolan McCarty, Oxford University Press, 2019, Chapter 3.

[“Partisan Antipathy: More Intense, More Personal,”](#) by Pew Research, October 10, 2019.

[“Trump’s Approval Ratings so Far Are Unusually Stable – and Deeply Partisan,”](#) by Amina Dunn, Pew Research, August 24, 2020.

[“Political Sectarianism in America,”](#) by Eli J. Finkel et al., *Science*, 2020.

[“The Perception Gap, Findings,”](#) by More in Common, June 2019. *Also take the Perception Gap Quiz.*

Discuss Sources for Research Paper

Work on State Voting Laws

February 12 How Democratic Elections Work

[“Electoral Systems,”](#) by Alan Ware, *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences (Second Edition)*, 2015.

[“Democratic Electoral Systems Around the World, 1946–2020,”](#) Nils-Christian Bormann and Matt Golder, *Electoral Studies* 78: 102487, 2022

[“Primer on the U.S. Election System,”](#) by Thad E. Hall, 2012,

Work on State Voting Laws

February 14 State Election Rule Reports

February 19 No Class

Summary of Sources Due

February 21 Presidential Primaries and the 1968 Chicago Convention

[“A Deeply Divided Nation,”](#) by Kenneth T. Walsh, *U.S. News and World Report*, 2018.

[“‘The Whole World Is Watching’: The 1968 Democratic Convention, 50 Years Later,”](#) by Maggie Astor, *New York Times*, 2018.

[“The Good Old Days?,”](#) by the Brookings Institute, 2018.

[“Winning the Presidential Nomination is All About Delegates. But How Does the Process Work?,”](#) by PBS News Hour, 2023.

Watch Decades [documentary](#) on 1968 Democratic National Convention

Discuss Summary of Sources

February 26 Voting Rights

The Fight to Vote, by Michael Waldman, 2016, pages 125-170.

[“The Right Way to Honor John Lewis: Restore and Extend the Voting Rights Act,”](#) by Jeanne Theoharis, *The Intercept* July 20, 2020.

[“Election Administration at State and Local Levels \(ncsl.org\),”](#) by the National Conference of State Legislatures, 2022.

[“Voting Laws Roundup: May 2022 | Brennan Center for Justice,”](#) Brennan Center for Justice, May, 2022.

[“States Pass New Laws to Protect Election Workers Amid Ongoing Threats - CNNPolitics,”](#) by Fredreka Schouten, CNN, September 13, 2022.

Literature Review Due

February 28 Polling

The Voter’s Guide to Election Polls, by Michael W. Traugott and Paul J. Lavrakas, Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, Inc., 2008, pages 1-47, 59-106.

[“American Association for Public Opinion Research Task Force on 2020 Pre-Election Polling. Executive Summary.”](#)

Discuss Literature Review

March 4 Election Surveys and Experiments

[Improving Public Opinion Surveys: Interdisciplinary Innovation and the American National Election Studies](#), by John H. Aldrich, and Kathleen M. McGraw, Princeton University Press, 2012, Chapter 1.

[“Like-minded Sources on Facebook Are Prevalent But Not Polarizing,”](#) by Brendan Nyhan et al. *Nature* 620: 137-144, 2023.

Go to: <https://electionstudies.org/data-tools/anes-guide/>. Choose one topic and come ready to report on trends over time.

March 6 Young Voters

[Making Young Voters: Converting Civic Attitudes Into Civic Action](#), by John B. Holbein, and D. Sunshine Hillygus, Cambridge University Press, 2020, Chapter 1.

[“Learning to Dislike Your Opponents: Political Socialization in the Era of Polarization,”](#) by Matthew Tyler, and Shanto Iyengar, *American Political Science Review* 117: 347-354, 2023.

Research Design Due

March 9 – 17: Spring Break

March 18 Gender and Elections

[“Self-Confidence and Gender Gaps in Political Interest, Attention, and Efficacy,”](#) by Jennifer Wolak, *The Journal of Politics* 82: 1490-1501, 2020.

[“Reassessing Public Support for a Female President,”](#) by Barry C. Burden, Yoshikuni Ono, and Masahiro Yamada, *The Journal of Politics* 79: 1073-1078, 2017.

[“Women’s Representation and the Gendered Pipeline to Power,”](#) by Danielle M. Thomsen, and Aaron S. King, *American Political Science Review* 114: 989-1000, 2020. (*Skim.*)

Discuss Research Design

March 20 Persuading Voters

Persuasion, by Daniel J. O’Keefe, 2016, pages 1-9, *Skim* pages 188-267 (as needed for your presentations).

[“Political Campaigns and Big Data,”](#) by David W. Nickerson and Todd Rogers, *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 28: 51-73, 2014. (*Skim.*)

[“Campaigns Influence Election Outcomes Less Than You Think,”](#) by David W. Nickerson and Todd Rogers, *Science* 369: 1181-1182, 2020.

Work on Misinformation Interventions

Work on Candidate Advertisements

March 23 *Data Collection Due*

March 25 Misinformation

[“The Science of Fake News,”](#) by David M.J. Lazer et al., *Science* 359: 1094-1096, 2018.

[“Science Audiences, Misinformation, and Fake News,”](#) [Dietram A. Scheufele](#) and Nicole M. Krause, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 116: 7662-7669, 2019.

[“Misinformation Is Eroding the Public’s Confidence in Democracy,”](#) by Gabriel R. Sanchez and Keesha Middlemass, Brookings Institute, 2022.

Discuss Data Collection

Present Misinformation Intervention

March 27 Campaigns and Representation Speaker (Anna Kanter)

See <https://indigov.com/>

April 1 Debates

[“The Objectivity Illusion and Voter Polarization in the 2016 Presidential Election,”](#) by Michael C. Schwalbe, Geoffrey L. Cohen, and Lee D. Ross, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117 (35): 21218-21229, 2020.

See and explore the website for [Commission on Presidential Debates](#).

[“Three General Election Debates Are Scheduled for 2024. Neither Party Has Committed to Attending,”](#) by Will Weissert, *Associated Press*, 2023.

Advertisement Presentations

April 3 Data Analysis Class

Work on Campaign Spending Assignment

April 8 Money

[“Campaign Finance,”](#) by the Policy Circle, 2023.

[Campaign Finance and American Democracy: What the Public Really Thinks and Why It Matters,](#) by David M. Primo and Jeffrey D. Milyo, University of Chicago Press, 2020, chapters 1 and 9.

[“Campaign Contributions, Independent Expenditures, and the Appearance of Corruption: Public Opinion vs. the Supreme Court's Assumptions,”](#) by Matthew DeBell and Shanto Iyengar, *Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy* 20, 2021. (Skim.)

Present Campaign Spending

April 10 **No Class**

April 13 *Data Analysis Interpretation Due*

April 15 **Race and Elections**

[“We Are One: The Social Maintenance of Black Democratic Party Loyalty,”](#) by Julian J. Wamble, Chryl N. Laird, Corrine M. McConaughy, and Ismail K. White, *The Journal of Politics* 84: 682-697, 2022.

[“Do Politicians Racially Discriminate Against Constituents? A Field Experiment on State Legislators,”](#) by Daniel M. Butler, and David E. Broockman, *American Journal of Political Science* 55: 463-477, 2011.

Discuss Data Analysis Interpretation

April 17 **Elections and Democratic Erosion**

[“Searching for Bright Lines in the Trump Presidency,”](#) by John M. Carey, Gretchen Helmke, Brendan Nyhan, Michell Sanders, and Susan Stokes. *Perspectives on Politics*, 17(3), 699–718, 2019.

[“The Crisis of American Democracy,”](#) by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *American Educator*, Fall, 2000.

[“Here’s What Persuades Americans to Support Democracy Over Party,”](#) by Robb Willer and Jan Voelkel, *The Washington Post*, September 13, 2022.

[“House Republicans Were Rewarded for Supporting Donald Trump’s ‘Stop the Steal’ Efforts,”](#) by Larry M. Bartels, and Nicolas Carnes, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 120: e2309072120, 2023. (Skim.)

See <https://brightlinewatch.org/>.

April 22 **Civic Reform Speaker (Jillian Youngblood, Civic Genius)**

See <https://www.ourcivicgenius.org/>

April 24 **Informal Research Paper Presentations (<5 minutes each)**

April 29 **Informal Research Paper Presentations (<5 minutes each)**

April 30 *Final Research Paper Due*

Research Paper Assignments

Assignment	Due Date	Discussion Date
Topic	January 22	January 24
Identification of sources	February 5	February 7
Summary of sources	February 19	February 21
Literature review	February 26	February 28
Research design	March 6	March 18
Data collection	March 23	March 25
Data analysis in class	April 3	
Data analysis interpretation	April 13	April 15
Informal presentation	April 24 and April 29	
Final Paper	April 30	

Other Assignments

Assignment	Work on In Cass	Due Date
State Voting Laws	February 7, 12	February 14
Misinformation Interventions	March 20	March 25
Candidate Advertisements	March 20	April 1
Campaign Spending	April 3	April 8