

# Political Science 305: Elections and Voting Behavior

University of Wisconsin-Madison  
Spring Semester 2020

Lectures Mondays & Wednesdays 4:35pm-5:25pm  
19 Ingraham Hall

**Professor: Barry Burden**

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drop-in office hours Wednesdays 9:30-11:00am  
also available by appointment at other times

**TA: Benjamin Olneck-Brown**

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4:20pm and Thursdays Noon-1:00pm

**TA: Matthew Shor**

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Wednesdays 3:20-4:20pm

## Description

This course takes place amid the heat of the 2020 presidential campaign. We will do our best to make sense of what is happening in this election cycle by taking a wider view of U.S. elections that puts current events in context.

Elections are essential elements of a successful democracy. Americans in particular are asked to vote frequently and on a wide range of offices and issues. How well do people exercise these opportunities? And how well do election results reflect the interests of the electorate?

This course will examine the many factors that affect voter participation and how voters make decisions. Together we will explore theories dealing with party identification, group and geographic patterns, economic accountability, issue voting, and more. A nagging question will be present throughout all of these topics: do American elections facilitate making “good” decisions?

Specific learning outcomes for this course are to: (1) develop a theoretical and empirical understanding of how individuals make voting decisions, (2) be able to analyze factors that affect the results of particular elections, (3) interpret surveys and election data to analyze how specific variables affect voters, and (4) develop a basis for evaluating the health of the U.S. electoral system.

The course material will include major theories of electoral behavior, but the approach will be mainly empirical. The readings are full of data. Be prepared to spend some time with graphs and tables, and to conduct some hands-on analysis. I hope you enjoy the material, ask probing questions, are surprised by some of the findings, and finish the semester with some new tools for understanding the electorate.

## Requirements

Students are expected to do all of the assigned reading, attend lectures ready to learn, participate constructively in section meetings, and to put in their best efforts in the assignments and exams. Please come to class on time and do not allow electronic devices to interfere with your learning experience or that of fellow students.

Two core textbooks comprise most of the required readings:

- *Change and Continuity in the 2016 Elections* by Aldrich, Carson Gomez, and Rohde
- *2018 Congressional Elections* by Theiss-Morse and Wagner

These may be purchased as paper versions (in which case a discount for the bundle is available at UW Bookstore) or as digital versions. The important thing is to purchase the correct editions of the texts.

The texts will be supplemented with readings from other sources available on the course web site at [canvas.wisc.edu](http://canvas.wisc.edu). Students are expected to check e-mail and the web site regularly for news and course materials. I reserve the right to adjust the syllabus and readings as the semester progresses.

Do your best to keep up with the daily news about the 2020 election by following high quality journalism. We will have limited time in lecture to discuss current events and the material should provide frameworks to analyze what is happening in real time.

Office hours are for you. Students are encouraged to make use of drop-in office hours, as I am guaranteed to be in my office waiting. Appointments for meetings outside of regular office hours are also possible. They are perhaps the best way for me to get to know you and understand how you are experiencing the course.

## Grading

The final grade will be based on the following six items:

- Midterm exam (25%) [Mar 11]
- Final exam (35%) [May 6]
- Data project (20%) [due Feb 24]
- Section attendance and participation (5%)
- Lecture “spot checks” (5%)
- Extracurricular activity (10%) [due dates vary]

The two exams will be taken in class and will involve a combination of short answers and brief essays. The data project will be a take-home exercise in which you forecast the outcome of the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination. Section attendance and participation will be tracked by your TA. The spot checks will be random in-class activities in which students briefly reflect on the day's material (and show that they are present in lecture). The extracurricular activity will be engagement in an experience outside of class that is likely to include the following opportunities: serving as a poll worker, participating in debate watch, or attending an Elections Research Center's event. More details about the extracurricular options will be provided later.

The grading scale is as follows:

A = 93-100%  
AB = 88-93%  
B = 83-88%  
BC = 78-83%  
C = 70-78%  
D = 60-70%  
F = 0-60%

This is an Honors Optional course. Taking the course with Honors will provide students with more exposure to cutting-edge political science research on U.S. elections. Honors students will be asked to attend at least one research presentation and read at least one scholarly article and then write reviews of both. Please contact me immediately if you are interested in earning Honors credit in this course to learn more.

## **Other Considerations**

Your success in this class is important to me.

All of us benefit when the classroom environment draws on our diversity and values the contributions of each person. We all have things to learn from one another and each participant in the class has insights to contribute that enrich the university community.

If you have a disability or circumstance that could affect your performance, please contact the teaching team early in the semester so that we can consider accommodations. The McBurney Center for Disability Services can provide official documentation of disabilities.

Academic misconduct is not tolerated. All academic work must be your own and cite others' work appropriately. Please make sure you are familiar with the policies outlined by the Dean of Students.

Makeup exams are expected to be rare. They require extenuating circumstances and must be approved in advance if there is not a dire emergency. An assignment will be penalized 10 percentage points for each day it is late without instructor permission.

Please only use electronic devices in class for referencing course materials, taking notes, and occasionally tracking down online items that are necessary for our discussions. Everything else should be quieted and stowed away for later use.

I encourage you to be actively involved in both lectures and section meetings. Full class meetings are formatted mostly as lectures, although your questions and feedback are warmly welcomed. Slides presented in class will be posted to the course web site at the end of each unit so that you can review them later.

## **Tentative Schedule**

Jan 22 & Jan 27 **Role of a Voter in a Democracy**  
*Change and Continuity* [introduction]  
Lupia, “How Elitism Undermines the Study of Voter Competence”  
Schaffner & Luks, “Misinformation or Expressive Responding?”

Jan 29, Feb 3\*, Feb 5, & Feb 10 **Presidential Nominations**  
*Change and Continuity* [chapter 1]  
Cohen et al., “Party Versus Faction in the Reformed Presidential Nominating System”  
Dowdle et al., “Forecasting Presidential Nominations in 2016: #WePredictedClintonANDTrump”  
(\*work day on forecasting project)

Feb 12, Feb 17, & Feb 19 **Voter Turnout**  
*Change and Continuity* [chapter 4]  
Wattenberg, “Where Have All the Young Voters Gone?”

Feb 24, Feb 26, & Mar 2 **Explaining the Vote**  
*Change and Continuity* [chapters 2 & 3]  
Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta, “Hostile Sexism, Racism Denial, and the Historic Education Gap in Support for Trump”

Mar 4 & Mar 9 **Congressional Elections**  
*Change and Continuity* [chapter 9]  
*2018 Congressional Elections* [whole book]

Mar 11 **Midterm Exam**

- Mar 23, Mar 25, & Mar 30 **Demographic Groups and the Vote**  
*Change and Continuity* [chapter 5]  
 Gelman et al., “Rich State, Poor State, Red State, Blue State: What’s the Matter with Connecticut?”
- Apr 2, Apr 6, & Apr 8 **Partisanship and Polarization**  
*Change and Continuity* [chapter 8]  
 Shaw, “If Everyone Votes Their Party, Why Do Presidential Election Outcomes Vary So Much?”  
 Abramowitz and Webster, “Negative Partisanship: Why Americans Dislike Parties but Behave Like Rabid Partisans”
- Apr 13, Apr 15, & Apr 21 **Candidates and Issues**  
*Change and Continuity* [chapter 6]  
 Petrocik, “Issue Ownership in Presidential Elections, with a 1980 Case Study”
- Apr 23, Apr 27, & Apr 29 **Swing Voters and Economic Accountability**  
*Change and Continuity* [chapters 7 & 13]  
 Mayer, “The Disappearing – but Still Important – Swing Voter”  
 Sides, Tessler, and Vavreck, “The Electoral Landscape of 2016”
- May 6 **Final exam (7:25pm-9:25pm)**