

POLITICS AND ELECTIONS

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Introduction to the course

The study of politics can seem removed from the practice of politics. Since my experience has been first that of a candidate for Congress, followed by the academic discipline of political science, I have designed a course that attempts to marry both approaches. Unlike courses in other areas, political science courses must deal with the passions of students who identify as partisans. Partisanship is part of politics, a fact we do not ignore in this course. However, partisanship is only a small piece of politics, despite what the media environment blares at us from televisions, radios, and laptops.

There are other things to explore, especially when examining congressional elections. Many things have to happen before party control of the House and/or Senate shift hands from one party to the next, which is one reason that is so rare in the modern era. Incumbents have advantages that might insulate them from partisan shifts in the electorate, especially in the House of Representatives.

So we will ask of these readings, and each other, the following questions:

How much does money matter in congressional elections?

How much do the parties matter in congressional elections?

How much do campaign ads matter?

And how much can individual candidates buck a national trend?

Finally, I will ask you to write a final in-class exam that will help you tie all of this together.

In the first week of classes, I will assign each student a House and Senate race, so that no one in the class is covering the same elections. This also ensures that a class discussion will be able to reference multiple examples from all over the nation. My goal will be to give each student one race likely to be exciting, and one likely to be dull. Most House races are incredibly predictable, for reasons we will discuss; but predictable races are important to analyze, too. And even some otherwise predictable races may become interesting in this election cycle!

Each student is encouraged to use all available tools, including the Internet, to thoroughly research each assigned race. With each student assigned one high-profile race, there should be ample polling results, local press coverage, and campaign ads available on the Web for students to discuss in their papers.

The Web Site Project

At the end of the semester, the best student papers, as chosen by the instructor, will be published on a class web site, to be made available to other students of congressional elections. This honor may be noted on your resume.

Graded Writing Assignments

Parties: “Parties are a necessary evil in a democracy.” Discuss this with reference to Madison’s arguments in The Federalist Papers, and the historical development of party politics in the United States. Take the words “necessary,” “evil,” and “democracy” seriously.

Elections: Analyze one House and one Senate campaign in the current election cycle, referencing as many of the class readings as possible in your analysis.

Party Paper: 20% (3-5 pages)

House Race: 20% (5-7 pages)

Senate Race: 20% (5-7 pages)

Final take-home comprehensive essay exam, 40%

Due Dates: All writing assignments will be turned in at the time designated on the syllabus. There will be a letter-graded deduction for each day the work is late.

BOOKS

Maisel, Parties and Elections in America, The Electoral Process, 4th edition

Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, Culture War: The Myth of a Polarized America

Jacobson, The Politics of Congressional Elections, 6th edition

West, Air Wars, 4th edition

Maisel and West, Running On Empty? Political Discourse in Congressional Elections

SCHEDULE OF READINGS

Note: instructor reserves the right to institute quizzes if it becomes apparent students are not keeping up with the scheduled reading.

THE ELECTORAL ENVIRONMENT: Parties

Sept. 5-7

Maisel

Ch. 1. Elections and Political Parties

Madison, Federalist Paper #10 (electronic reserve)

Maisel

Ch. 2. American Political Parties and Party Organization

Sept. 12-14

Maisel

Ch. 3. Voting and Other Forms of Political Participation

Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope

Ch.1. Culture War?

Ch. 2. If America is not Polarized, Why Do So Many Americans Think it Is?

Sept. 19-21

Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope

Ch. 3. A 50/50 Nation?

Ch.7. Have Electoral Cleavages Shifted?

John H. Evans, Lisa M. Nunn

“The Deeper Culture Wars Questions,” The Forum: Vol. 3: No. 2, Article 3.

<http://www.bepress.com/forum/vol3/Iss2/art3>

THE PECULIAR CASE OF CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS

Sept. 26-28

David R. Mayhew

Congressional Elections: the Case of the Vanishing Marginals

Polity, vol. 6, Spring 1974 (electronic reserve)

Gary C. Jacobson

The Marginals Never Vanished: Incumbency and Competition in Elections to the U.S. House of Representatives, 1952-82

American Journal of Political Science, vol. 1, Feb. 1987 (electronic reserve)

Monica Bauer and John R. Hibbing

Which Incumbents Lose in House Elections: a Response to Jacobson’s ‘The Marginals Never Vanished.’

American Journal of Political Science, vol. 33, Feb. 1989 (electronic reserve)

PAPER #1 IS DUE IN CLASS ON TUESDAY, OCT. 3rd

Oct. 3-5

Jacobson

Ch. 3. Congressional Candidates

Oct. 10-12

Jacobson

Ch. 4. Congressional Campaigns

OCT. 17-19 NO CLASSES AT WESLEYAN

Oct. 24-26

Jacobson

Ch. 5. Congressional Voters

PAPER #2 IS DUE IN CLASS ON TUESDAY, OCTOBER 24th

Oct. 31-/Nov. 2

Jacobson

Ch. 6. National Politics and Congressional Elections

Nov. 7: NO CLASS ON ELECTION DAY: volunteer for a local campaign!

Nov. 9: Analysis of Connecticut campaigns for House and Senate

CAMPAIGN MEDIA

Nov. 14-16

West

Ch.1. Overview of Ads

Ch.3. Ad Messages

Ch.4. Media Coverage of ads

Nov. 22-24 THANKSGIVING BREAK

PAPER #3 IS DUE IN CLASS TUESDAY, NOV. 28TH

Nov. 28-30

West

Ch. 6. Setting the Agenda

Ch. 9. Ads in Congressional elections

Dec. 5-7

Discussion of Running On Empty? Political Discourse in Congressional Elections.

Review and prepare for final take-home essay, due in the Government Office by 4 PM on the first day of exam week. One letter-grade deducted for each day late. Last class on December 7th.

STATEMENT ON ACADEMIC HONESTY

Quoted from the Wesleyan Honor Code as follows:

Acts Constituting a Violation of the Honor Code

1. The attempt to give or obtain assistance in a formal academic exercise without due acknowledgment. 2. Plagiarism. 3. The submission of the same work for academic credit more than once without permission. 4. Willful falsification of data, information, or citations in any formal academic exercise. 5. Deception concerning adherence to the conditions set by the instructor for the formal academic exercise. 6. The failure to take constructive action in the event of committing or observing a violation or an apparent violation.