

PLSC 862

American Elections with Comparative Perspective

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This graduate-level seminar covers foundational work on electoral politics in the United States, with some comparisons with other countries' systems and domestic proposals for reform. Readings examine work on elite position-taking, re-election, federalism, representation, and electoral systems. Accompanying readings include similar and more recent articles in comparative politics or political economy. This course has two intended audiences: students in American Politics, and students outside American Politics interested in theories of electoral democracy developed in the American Politics subfield that have then been exported to other subfields. In addition to reading, Class emphasizes empirical research designs and analysis of available datasets. Students work on their own empirical research paper as a final project.

Distributional credits: This class satisfies the distributional requirement for American Politics for the PhD program.

Course Components

Research Paper	40%	Students will write a research paper that can be later be developed into a publishable article. Given the choice of readings, I recommend empirical research papers with data analysis as a central component. Replications and extensions of existing research is a great way to write such a paper. Students should meet at least twice with the instructor (once before Spring break) about their paper.
Paper proposal	10%	Preliminary version of a paper, with results of data analysis or preliminary findings, due on Friday, March 8 (before Spring break).
Response memos	30%	To facilitate discussion, each student will choose five weeks to write a memo based on the assigned reading (spaced roughly evenly). This memo should be 500-750 words. If the assigned reading is an entire book, the response should focus on 1-2 chapters. It should address: (i) What is the actual empirical finding behind the author's claims? (ii) What is the most important implication? (iii) What is a major theoretical / empirical

limitation? That is, what do the readings suggest about promising directions for further research?

Participation 25% Attendance and class participation. In a seminar, everyone's full participation is integral. Missed classes due to illness or unexpected travel are to be made up with a writing assignment.

Course Schedule

The current list of readings is below. The content will be adjusted to the background of students in the class in the first week of class. For an **up-to-date list**, see the [Canvas landing page](#).

Each of the week's topics represent a lengthy literature, but the emphasis of the class will be reading one or two articles closely or reading a canonical book in its entirety. By doing a close read rather than reading a collection of loosely related articles, we will gain a holistic familiarity with the literature. I recommend **purchasing** the following books:

1. **Robert S. Erikson , Michael B. Mackuen, James A. Stimson.** (2001). *The Macro Polity*
2. **Shigeo Hirano and James M. Snyder Jr.** (2019). *Primary Elections in the United States.* [\[Yale Library Online Book\]](#)
3. **Gary W. Cox** (1997). *Making Votes Count: Strategic Coordination in the World's Electoral Systems.* [PDF will be available]
4. **Jonathan Rodden,** (2019). *Why Cities Lose: The Deep Roots of the Urban-Rural Political Divide*

For background on elections and political behavior, I recommend owning and referencing:

- **Steven L. Taylor,** Matthew Shugart, Arend Lijphart, and Bernard Grofman. (2014). *A Different Democracy: American Government in a 31-country Perspective.*
- **Frances Rosenbluth and Ian Shapiro.** (2018). *Responsible Parties: Saving Democracy from Itself.* Yale University Press
- **Gary Jacobson and Jamie Carson** (2019, or any older edition by Jacobson). *The Politics of Congressional Elections.*
- **Andrew Gelman** (2009). *Red State, Blue State, Rich State, Poor State: Why Americans Vote the Way They Do - Expanded Edition.*

Organizational meeting - January 18

The study of American Politics, two high-level models of elections (spatial and valence models). The latter half of the class will be individual meetings with the instructor.

Readings

- **Laitin** (2004). "The Political Science Discipline". In *The Evolution of Political Knowledge*, Eds. Edward D. Mansfield and John Sisson.

Optional

- **Fearon** (2012). "Electoral Accountability and the Control of Politicians: Selecting Good Types versus Sanctioning Poor Performance." In *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*, Eds. Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin.
- Introduction to Hotelling Downs models, e.g. in **Stewart**, *Analyzing Congress*, Chapter 1.

1. Issue Voting - Jan 25

The first two weeks will work through workhorse models of electoral behavior. In models of issue voting, voters have preferences over outcomes of public policy and vote for representatives who they believe will enact those policies. What is the evidence used to make these claims? Is it convincing?

Read

- **Key, V.O.** (1966). *The Responsible Electorate: Rationality in Presidential Voting, 1936-1960*. Harvard University Press. Chapters 1 "The Voice of the People: An Echo"; 2, "Standpatters, Switchers, and New Voters"; 3, "Maintaining the New Deal Coalition"; 4, "Republican Interlude" (For 3 and 4, skim and focus on Tables).
- **Ansolabehere, Stephen, and Shiro Kuriwaki.** (2021). "Congressional Representation: Accountability from the Constituent's Perspective". *American Journal of Political Science*.

Skim

- **Fowler, Hill, Lewis, Tausanovitch, Vavreck, and Warshaw.** (2022) "Moderates," *American Political Science Review*.

2. Economic Voting - Feb 1

In another model of elections, voters vote their "pocketbook" rather than an assessment of the politician's policy positions. In the Macro Polity model, the tradeoff between inflation and unemployment combined with voter ideology generates a dynamic model of electoral politics.

- **Erikson, Mackuen, and Stimson** .(2001). *The Macro Polity*, focus on Chapters 1, “A Model of the Macro Polity”; first half of 2, “Presidential Approval”; 4, “Decomposing Partisan Change”; 6, “Public Opinion”; 7, “Elections”; 8, “Public Opinion and Policy Making” (but entire book recommended)
- **Bartels, Larry**. (2016). *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*. Chapters 3, “Partisan Biases in Economic Accountability”; 5, “Homer Gets a Tax Cut”.

3. Candidate Selection - Feb 8

The options voters choose from in the general election are the product of political process. In the US, this process is made more public through primaries. What are the consequences of selection through primary? What types of candidates are more likely to enter into primary elections or the general candidate pool?

Background:

- **Taylor et al.**, Chapter 6, especially p. 177-191 on Primaries

Read:

- **Hirano and Snyder** (2019). *Primary Elections in the United States*. Chapters 1 “More Democracy”; 2, “One-Party Dominance, 1880 to 1950”; 5, “Primaries and Qualifications of Nominees”; 6, “Voting Behavior and Primary Elections, 1892-1950”; skim 7
- **Galasso and Nanicinni** (2011), “Competing on Good Politicians.” *American Political Science Review*

Further reading:

- **Anzia and Berry**, (2011). “The Jackie (and Jill) Robinson Effect: Why Do Congresswomen Outperform Congressmen?” *American Journal of Political Science*.

4. Data Lab I - Collecting Candidate Data - Feb 15

Demonstration and group analysis of data on candidates, historical elections, and surveys. Come with potential ideas about your final paper and extensions. Zoom Q and A with **Jim Snyder** on his data for the *Primary Elections* book, and **Charlie McClean** on web scraping for modern data (see his article below).

5. Incumbents - Feb 22

The incumbency advantage spawns a large literature because of its normative implications, availability of data, and amenability to econometric identification strategies. What effect does the standard regression discontinuity design measure?

Background (if you are unfamiliar with RDD)

- **Lee**, (2008). "Randomized experiments from non-random selection in U.S. House elections." *Journal of Econometrics*. Skim the statistical assumptions and focus on substantively interpreting Figures 1-5.

Read

- **Fowler and Hall** (2014), "Disentangling the Personal and Partisan Incumbency Advantages: Evidence from Close Elections and Term Limits.", *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*.
- **Martin, McClean, and Strøm** (2023+) "Legislative Resources, Corruption, and Incumbency", *British Journal of Political Science*
- **Eggers, Andrew**. ([2017](#)), "Quality Based Explanations of Incumbency Effects". *Journal of Politics*.

6. Polarization - March 1

- **Hirano and Snyder** (2019), *Primaries in the United States*, Chapter 11, "Primaries and Polarization"
- **McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal** (2009): "Does Gerrymandering Cause Polarization?" *American Journal of Political Science*
- **Lee** (2016), *Insecure Majorities: Congress and the Perpetual Campaign*. Chapter 9, "The Perpetual Campaign and the US Constitutional System".

7. Electoral System Reform - March 8

Background:

- **Taylor et al.**, *A Different Democracy*, Chapter 5, "Elections and Electoral Systems"

Read:

- **Cox, Gary W.** (1997). "Making Votes Count: Strategic Coordination in the World's Electoral Systems." Chapters 1, 2, "Duverger's Propositions"; 5 "Strategic Voting in multimember Districts" (the M+1 rule)
- **Rickard** (2008). *Spending to Win: Political Institutions, Economic Geography, and Government Subsidies*. Chapters 1, "Who Gets What and Why? The Politics of Particularistic Policies"; 7, "The Policy Effects of Electoral Competitiveness in Closed-List PR"
- **Gandhi, Heller, and Reuter.** (2022). *Shoring up Power: Electoral Reform and the Consolidation of Authoritarian Rule*. *Electoral Studies*

For further study:

- **Shugart and Taagepera**, *Votes from Seats: Logical Models of Electoral Systems*. Chapters 1 and 7, "The Seat Product Model of the Effective Number of Assembly Parties"

Paper Proposals / Slides due March 8

8. Data Lab II - Geographic Data. March 29

The second data lab will focus geographic data, demographic data from the Census, election data in other countries, and potentially web scraping.. Topics adjusted based on student papers.

Read:

- **Rodden** (2019). *Why Cities Lose: The Deep Roots of the Urban-Rural Political Divide*, Basic Books., Introduction and Chapter 4 ("Urban Form and Voting")
- **Autor, Dorn, Hanson, and Majlesi.** (2020). "Importing Political Polarization? The Electoral Consequences of Rising Trade Exposure." *American Economics Review*.

Skim:

- **McCartan et al.**, "Simulated redistricting plans for the analysis and evaluation of redistricting in the United States", <https://alarm-redist.org/fifty-states/>. Also see the article in *Nature Scientific Data*

9. Realignment - April 5

Rodden's book covers the historical evolution of the urban-rural geographic divide in the U.S., as well as in other former Commonwealth countries.

- **Rodden** (2019). *Why Cities Lose: The Deep Roots of the Urban-Rural Political Divide*, Basic Books. All remaining chapters, especially 6-9.
- **Kitschelt and Rhem**, (2019). “Secular Partisan Realignment in the United States: The Socioeconomic Reconfiguration of White Partisan Support since the New Deal Era.” *Politics & Society*
- Skim: **Kitschelt and Rhem** (2022). “Polarity Reversal: The Socioeconomic Reconfiguration of Partisan Support in Knowledge Societies”, *Politics & Society*.

Reference:

- **Rickard**, (2020). “Economic Geography, Politics, and Policy.” *Annual Review of Political Science*

10. Nationalization - April 12

Background:

- **Taylor et al.** *A Different Democracy*. Chapter 4. “Federalism and Division of Power”

Read:

- **Erikson, Wright, and McIver** (1989). “Political Parties, Public Opinion, and State Policy in the United States.” *American Political Science Review*
- **Hopkins** (2018). *The Increasingly United States: How and Why American Political Behavior Nationalized*. University of Chicago Press., Selected chapters: 1, 6, “Explaining Nationalization”; 7, “*E Pluribus Duo*”.

Skim:

- **Jacobson** (2015). “It’s Nothing Personal: The Decline of the Incumbency Advantage in US House Elections”. *Journal of Politics*

Further Study:

- **Caramani** (2004), *The Nationalization of Politics : the formation of national electorates and party systems in Western Europe*.

11. Campaign Effects and Dominant Parties - April 19

- **Le Pennec and Pons** (2023+), “How Do Campaigns Shape Vote Choice? Multi-Country Evidence From 62 Elections and 56 TV Debates”, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*

- **Kalla and Broockman** (2019), “The Minimal Persuasive Effects of Campaign Contact in General Elections: Evidence from 49 Field Experiments”, *American Political Science Review*
- **McElwain** (2008), “Manipulating Electoral Rules to Manufacture Single-Party Dominance.” *American Journal of Political Science*

Further Study:

- **Blaydes** (2011). *Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak's Egypt*. Cambridge University Press, selected chapters

12. Student Presentations - April 26