Political Science 467: Elections and Voting Behavior

Spring 2014
Monday & Wednesday 11:00-11:50am
6102 Social Sciences

Professor: Barry Burden
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Description

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?

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: are Americans capable of making “good” decisions? At the end of course you should have a firm understanding of theories of voting behavior and a means for answering this question.

The course material will include major theories of electoral behavior, but the approach will be mainly empirical. The course is supported in part by the Madison Initiative for Undergraduates funding to enhance analytical experiences. Although structured as a lecture, the course content and method of inquiry will encourage students to develop their quantitative analysis skills. Be prepared to spend some time with graphs and tables, and to conduct some hands-on analysis. I hope you enjoy the topics, 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, actively participate 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 the learning experience.
Two core textbooks comprise most of the required readings:

*Change and Continuity in the 2008 and 2010 Elections* (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde, CQ Press)

*Unconventional Wisdom* (Kaufmann, Petrocik, and Shaw, Oxford University Press)

These texts will be supplemented with readings from other sources available on the course web site (Learn@UW). Students are expected to check e-mail and the web site frequently for news and course materials. I reserve the right to adjust the syllabus and readings as the semester progresses.

Students are encouraged to make use of office hours. They are for you. Appointments for meetings outside of office hours are also possible.

**Grading**

The final grade will be based on the following items:

- Midterm (20%) [on April 2]
- Final Exam (30%) [on May 12]
- Project 1 – forecasting congressional elections (20%) [due March 12]
- Project 2 – testing hypotheses about vote choice (20%) [due May 7]
- Section attendance and participation (10%)

More details about the exams and projects will be provided later in the semester. Assignments will be penalized 10 percentage points for each day they are late without instructor permission. The grading scale is as follows:

- A = 93-100%
- AB = 88-92.9%
- B = 83-87.9%
- BC = 78-82.9%
- C = 70-77.9%
- D = 60-69.9%
- F = 0-59.9%

Your success in this class is important to me. If you have a disability or circumstance that could affect your performance, please contact me 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.
Tentative Schedule

Jan 22  Introduction

Jan 27  Representative Democracy and Voter Competence
Jan 29  Lupia, “How Elitism Undermines the Study of Voter Competence”
Feb 3   Nyhan and Reifler, “Misinformation and Fact-Checking: Research from Social Science”

Feb 5   Voter Turnout
Feb 10  Change and Continuity [chapter 4]
Feb 12  Unconventional Wisdom [chapters 6 & 7]
        Census Bureau, “The Diversifying Electorate—Voting Rates by Race and Hispanic Origin in 2012”

Feb 17  Election Laws and Administration
        Stewart, “A Voter’s Eye View of the 2012 Election”

Feb 24  Congressional Elections
Feb 26  Change and Continuity [chapters 9 & 11]
March 3  Althaus, “Who’s Voted In When the People Tune Out? Information Effects in Congressional Elections”

March 5  Patterns of Presidential Elections
March 10 Change and Continuity [chapters 2 & 3]
*March 12 Unconventional Wisdom [chapter 8]

March 17  Spring Break
March 19  

March 24  Demographic Groups and the Vote
March 26  Change and Continuity [chapter 5]
March 31  Unconventional Wisdom [chapter 5]
        Gelman et al., “Rich State, Poor State, Red State, Blue State: What’s the Matter with Connecticut?”

April 2   Midterm exam

April 7   Partisanship and Polarization
April 9   Change and Continuity [chapter 8]
April 14  Unconventional Wisdom [chapters 2 & 3]
April 16  Candidates and Issues
April 21  Change and Continuity [chapter 6]
April 23  Petrocik, “Issue Ownership in Presidential Elections, with a 1980 Case Study”

April 28  Swing Voters and Economic Accountability
April 30  Change and Continuity [chapter 7]
           Unconventional Wisdom [chapter 4]

May  5  Presidential Nominations
**May 7  Change and Continuity [chapter 1]
           Unconventional Wisdom [p. 194-8]

May 12  Final exam (5:05pm to 7:05pm)

*Project 1 due
** Project 2 due