Political Science 601: Election Reform in America

Fall Semester 2014
Mondays 2:30-4:30pm
Social Science Building 4322

Contact

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About

“The truth of the matter is that the whole administration—organizations, laws, methods and procedures, and records—are, for most states, quite obsolete. The whole system, including the election laws, requires a thorough revision and improvement.”
   - Joseph Harris (1934)

“The United States runs its elections unlike any other country in the world. Responsibility for elections is entrusted to local officials in approximately 8,000 different jurisdictions. In turn, they are subject to general oversight by officials most often chosen through a partisan appointment or election process. The point of contact for voters in the polling place is usually a temporary employee who has volunteered for one-day duty and has received only a few hours of training. These defining features of our electoral system, combined with the fact that Americans vote more frequently on more issues and offices than citizens anywhere else, present unique challenges for the effective administration of elections that voters throughout the country expect and deserve.”
   - Presidential Commission on Election Administration (2014)

Election administration is one area of public policy where ideas for reform are everywhere. From the campaign finance regulations to legislative districting to voter identification, there is no shortage of proposals for improvement. Whether it be politicians, administrators, journalists, scholars, or the public, everyone seems to have opinions about what is wrong with elections and how to fix them. But the motivations for these reforms are varied and their consequences are often unknown. It is not always clear what problem a particular proposal is supposed to cure or what side effects it might have. Often the discussion devolves into a debate between liberals favoring greater accommodations for voters and conservatives favoring tighter security. We can do better. Altering something as important as the election process demands careful scrutiny of empirical evidence. This seminar immerses students in debates about election reforms and provides tools for evaluating the claims made by advocates on each side.
Requirements

You will get the most from this course (actually, any course) if you are diligent, curious, and open-minded. It is especially helpful in this setting because our attitudes toward election practices tend to be colored by our partisan and ideological commitments. I ask for your willingness to be wrong, to challenge your own assumptions. This means considering empirical evidence and legal arguments fairly, even if they run contrary to your views. If you are unwilling to change your positions, the course will not be of much value. Which one of your opinions will be turned upside down by the end of the semester?

I expect you to come to our weekly class meetings having done all of the reading and given them some thought. Because we operate as a seminar, your participation is crucial. Expect to talk (and listen!) every week.

The “required” readings are comprised of two textbooks:


Matthew J. Streb, ed. Law and Election Politics. 2nd ed. (2013 Routledge)

There are also numerous readings from academic journals, book chapters, and media reporting. All of the latter will be available as PDFs on the Learn@UW web site for the course.

Bring the readings with you to class meetings so that they can be referenced during our discussions. “Recommended” readings are optional. I might reference them and they could be useful for your final paper, but they do need not be read for class.

Expect to submit response papers every other week. At the first class meeting you will be assigned responsibility 6 of the 12 weeks. For these weeks briefly summarize each of the week’s readings in separate paragraphs and offer a synthesis. How do the readings speak to one another? Are they convincing? What questions are not answered? Responses should be left in the Dropbox application on Learn@UW by 5pm on the Sunday before class.

The course culminates in a final research project. The details will be provided separately, but the basic idea is to prepare a policy report to legislators in which you provide a change in some aspect of election administration. You will specify the proposed change, discuss what existing research has to say about it, identify any holes in existing research, assess the benefits and risks of the change, offer a plan for transitioning to the new rules, and provide a conclusion for why the change ought to be made. A paper proposal, about which details will be provided later, will be due in class on December 1. I would also like to speak with each of you individually. The final paper will be due on Monday, December 15.
**Evaluation**

Attendance and participation account for 25% of the final grade. For each class, students who participate actively will receive an A. Those who speak minimally will earn a B, those who are present but not participating will receive a C. Students absent without my permission will receive an F.

Response papers will also account for another 25% of the grade. These will be graded based on the degree to which they engage the readings on their own terms and offer thoughtful insights about them.

The election observation assignment is worth 10% of the grade.

The final research paper is worth 40% of the grade.

The final grading scale is based on the following thresholds: A (90%), AB (87.5%), B (82.5%), BC (77.5%), C (67.5%), and D (60%). Assignments delivered late without my approval are penalized half a letter grade for each day.

**Other Considerations**

If you have a disability and need accommodation, please contact me immediately. I will work through the McBurney Disability Resource Center (www.mcburney.wisc.edu) to identify the best way to achieve this accommodation and facilitate equal opportunity for all students.

Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. This includes using someone else’s words or ideas without proper attribution. I will report any cases of academic dishonesty to the Assistant Dean for Academic Integrity.

I reserve the right to modify the syllabus timeline or specific readings as needed.

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.
September 8: **Introduction**

**Required**

**Recommended**

Bipartisan Policy Center Commission on Political Reform. “Governing in a Polarized America: A Bipartisan Blueprint to Strengthen our Democracy” (2014 report) - p. 29-50

September 15: **The History of Voting Rights and Practices**

**Required**
The U.S. Constitution
Voting Rights Act of 1965
Jeff Manza and Christopher Uggen. “Punishment and Democracy: Disenfranchisement of Nonincarcerated Felons in the United States” (2004 *Perspectives on Politics*)

**Recommended**
September 22: **Recent Federal Fixes**

**Required**

National Voter Registration Act of 1993  

**Recommended**


September 29: **Voter ID and Fraud**

**Required**

Michael J. Hanmer and Paul S. Herrnson. “Provisional Ballots.” [chapter in Burden and Stewart]  

**Recommended**

Symposium on Voter ID (2009 *PS: Political Science & Politics*)

October 6: **Voter Registration**

**Required**

Stephen Ansolabehere and Eitan Hersh. “Voter Registration: The Process and Quality of Lists.” [chapter in Burden and Stewart]


Recommended
Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC). ericstates.org

October 13: Absentee Voting, Early Voting, and Voting by Mail

Required
Thad Hall. “Voting from Abroad: Evaluating UOCAVA Voting.” [chapter in Burden and Stewart]
Christopher B. Mann. “Mail Ballots in the United States: Policy Choice and Administrative Challenge.” [chapter in Burden and Stewart]

October 20: Ballot Design and Voting Technology

Required
Charles Stewart III. “The Performance of Election Machines and the Decline of Residual Votes in the U.S.” [chapter in Burden and Stewart]
Thad Hall and Lucy Williams Smoot. “Voting Machines: The Question of Equal Protection” [chapter in Streb]

Recommended

October 27: **Ballot Access and Third Parties**

**Required**

**Recommended**

November 3: **No class meeting**

November 4: **Election Observation**

November 10: **Party Nominations**

**Required**
Kristin Kanthak and Eric Loepp. “Political Parties and Primaries: The Tension between Free Association and the Right to Vote” [chapter in Streb]
November 17: **Redistricting**

**Recommended**

**Required**
Charles S. Bullock, III. “Redistricting: Racial and Partisan Issues Past and Present” [chapter in Streb]

**Recommended**
Frances E. Lee and Bruce I. Oppenheimer. *Sizing up the Senate: The Unequal Consequences of Equal Representation* (1999 University of Chicago Press)
November 24: Campaign Finance

Required
Neil Reiff. “A Decade of McCain-Feingold: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly…” (Campaigns & Elections Magazine)

Recommended
Eliza Newlim Carney. “The Deregulated Campaign” (September 19, 2011 CQ Weekly)

December 1: Direct Democracy

Required

December 8: Judicial Elections (and Course Conclusion)

Required
Matthew J. Streb. “Judicial Elections: Just Like Any Other Election?” [chapter in Streb]
Chris W. Bonneau and Melinda Gann Hall. *In Defense of Judicial Elections.* (2009 Routledge) [chapters 1, 5, & 6]