

POSC 324: VOTING & ELECTIONS FALL 2020 SYLLABUS

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In this course, we'll unpack why voters make the decisions they do, why elections result in the winners and losers they do, and how campaigns spend their time and money as a consequence.

We'll look beyond the media portrayal of fickle voters emotionally siding with a candidate at the last minute and of elections as hinging on attack ads and campaign gaffes. Instead, we'll engage with classic academic theories of voting, and analyze empirical evidence from recent presidential and congressional elections, to understand in a more rigorous way why elections in the U.S. turn out the way they do.

The course is organized into three sections: (1) Understanding voters' choices, where we'll focus on why Americans make the decisions they do in elections; (2) Understanding election outcomes, where we'll focus on the factors that shape electoral politics outside of voters; and (3) Understanding campaign strategy, where we'll focus on how campaigns spend their time and money as a result.

Learning outcomes

As a result of successfully completing this class, students will be able to

- Describe, explain, and compare academic theories of voter behavior and election outcomes
- Analyze data from recent congressional and presidential elections to evaluate these theories
- Communicate their own conclusions from data analysis to others
- Synthesize course material to create an effective presidential campaign strategy
- Apply course material to explain the outcomes of 2020 elections

Teaching and learning during a pandemic

Although it is tempting to pretend that this is a normal class in a normal semester, we all know that's not true. I am fully committed to making sure that you can get whatever you were hoping to get from this class. I think the most important thing we can do to facilitate that is to be open and honest with one another. If you are experiencing challenges of any kind preventing you from learning, reach out straight away. I *promise* I never think any less of students or penalize them for asking for help. I am good at finding solutions to problems, and am happy to help. But to do that I need to know that there is a problem, so make sure to keep lines of communication open.

On the flip side, I hope that you will also cut me and your classmates some slack too. We are all trying to do our best in a pretty unpredictable situation. I'll do the same thing I expect you to: if I have to make changes to the course, or can't meet some deadline I promised, I will let you know. Basically, let's be kind to one another and try to make our time together a pleasant one.

Grades

Your final grade for the class will be calculated on the basis of your performance in the following areas:

- **Individual quizzes (25% total).** These are short learning activities designed to boost your understanding of the assigned material and to further your empirical analysis skills. Your two lowest quiz scores from the semester will be automatically dropped from your grade. Unless otherwise noted, quizzes for each module are due by that Sunday at 11.59pm.
- **Collaborative exercises (25% total).** These are more extensive exercises designed for you to demonstrate your skills and knowledge. These will be completed in assigned teams, with further instructions being given each week. I am well aware that group work has a negative reputation for many students, and have designed these to ameliorate many of the problems associated with such tasks. Your lowest CE score from the semester will be automatically dropped from your grade. Unless otherwise noted, the CE for a module is due by that Sunday at 11.59pm.
- **Research projects (50% total).** Each section of the course will also have a larger research project for you to demonstrate your proficiency at the course learning outcomes. These are somewhere between a research paper and a take-home exam. You will have one week to complete these projects; more detail will be given throughout the course.

Course policies

- **Absences.** I am committed to being flexible and making sure that you can complete the course to the best of your ability. Some absences are going to be inevitable this semester. I ask that you be pro-active and contact me ASAP. You do not need to have an official excuse, nor do you need to go into detail about the reasons for your absence: just let me know so that I can help.
- **Late submission of assignments.** One of the challenges of online courses is keeping on track with the material. The learning activities and other assignments have due dates to help keep you accountable. I will still accept late assignments, but these are subject to a 10% deduction for each calendar day they are overdue (beginning on the day they are due). If an absence is going to result in a late submission, contact me ASAP.
- **Instructor contact.** If you have a question about course policies, the best place to post is in the FAQ discussion: I promise that if you have a question, someone else in the class would benefit from hearing the answer too. The best way to contact me is via email. I usually try to respond within a day during normal business hours (M-F, 9-5).
- **Office hours.** I have set aside time in my schedule for you, Wednesdays 10-11am and 2.30-3.30pm. [Please schedule a meeting during these times](#). We can talk either via Zoom or via phone; you will be given contact details for both when you confirm the meeting time. If you cannot make a meeting during that time, email me with alternative times that you are available and we can schedule a meeting.
- **Zoom meetings.** Unless otherwise noted, our weekly Zoom meetings will be recorded and made available online to those enrolled in the course. I do not require you to have your video camera on for the meeting. However, I do ask that you include a photo of yourself in your profile so it feels less like I'm talking to an empty room when your camera is muted.
- **Academic honesty.** Although this is an online course, the University's policies on academic integrity still apply. To falsify the results of one's research, to steal the words or ideas of another, to cheat on an assignment, to re-submit the same assignment for different classes, or to allow or assist another to commit these acts corrupts the educational process. Students are expected to do their own work and neither give nor receive unauthorized assistance.

Course plan

The course is organized into three sections: (1) Understanding voters' choices, where we'll focus on why Americans make the decisions they do in elections; (2) Understanding election outcomes, where we'll focus on the factors that shape electoral politics outside of voters; and (3) Understanding campaign strategy, where we'll focus on how campaigns spend their time and money as a result.

Within each section, we will have weekly modules. Every module will have the following components:

- Assigned academic reading and video guides
- Individual learning activities to help you meet the learning objectives for the course
- Collaborative activities that will let you apply the academic literature to current and recent elections
- A Zoom meeting for us to discuss that week's material and assignments, and the 2020 elections (attendance optional)

Each section will also have a larger research project for you to demonstrate your proficiency at the course learning outcomes. These are somewhere between a research paper and a take-home exam. You will have one week to complete these projects; more detail will be given throughout the course.

PART ONE: UNDERSTANDING VOTERS' CHOICES

- Week 1 (8/31) What voters know about politics
- Week 2 (9/7) How voters think about politics
- Week 3 (9/14) How voters choose I: Ideology and spatial voting
- Week 4 (9/21) How voters choose II: Party identification
- Week 5 (9/28) How voters choose III: Retrospective voting
- Week 6 (10/5) How voters choose IV: Social group identities
- Week 7 (10/12) Research project #1: Understanding voters' choices
Research project #1 due 10/18 at 11.59pm

PART TWO: UNDERSTANDING ELECTION OUTCOMES

- Week 8 (10/19) The fundamentals
- Week 9 (10/26) Competition and district lines

Week 10 (11/2) Turnout and the franchise

Week 11 (11/9) Electoral systems and the parties

Week 12 (11/16) Research project #2: Understanding election outcomes
Research project #2 due 11/22 at 11.59pm

PART THREE: UNDERSTANDING CAMPAIGN STRATEGY

Week 13 (11/30) Campaign strategy

Week 14 (12/7) Research project #3: Understanding campaign strategy
Research project #3 due 12/13 at 11.59pm