PSCI 3210  
Electoral Politics in the United States  
Friday 11:35 a.m. – 14:25 p.m.

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Course Description

Building upon the foundations provided by introductory courses and the knowledge you have gained simply by proximity to the United States, PSCI 3210 is a more systematic and thorough examination of the foundations of American electoral processes and the ways that they have evolved to meet the contemporary context. While the United States has some institutions and electoral mechanisms in common with other liberal democracies, it has many unique elements that distinguish it from even its closest allies: its two-party system; the Electoral College; the prominent role of morality in shaping debate; the place of polling and media, social and traditional; the length (and frequency) of campaigns; a wide range of demographic and geographic factors; and the ‘business’ side of elections. Through lens of the recent 2016 elections and with an eye towards the upcoming midterm elections, students will develop a deeper understanding of the structures involved in electoral politics in the United States.

Course Texts – Available at Haven Books [43 Seneca Street]

- Various journal and newspaper articles (see Schedule below). Keep in mind when reading non-academic sources that you are expected to do so with a critical eye. These readings are not necessarily telling the whole story – and grappling with that is an important part of why they have been assigned.
- Additionally, I recommend following at least one of the major American newspapers (Newsweek, New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Christian Science Monitor), prominent international coverage (Reuters, BBC News, Al Jazeera), or Larry J. Sabato’s Crystal Ball. There are many other sources that you can draw on to be well informed including television and radio/podcast programs, but remember that relying solely on news-as-entertainment sources can present as distorted a picture of current events as heavily biased sources can.
Discussion Questions (5%): At your own discretion, five times throughout the term you will submit a question about the readings for the week. They are due via email the night before each class at 11:59pm. You are expected to directly link your question to the content of the readings, not just its title or introduction. These may be used (anonymously) to spark class discussion. While you will not be marked for the quality of your questions, I reserve the right to reject off topic questions or those that show a lack of attention to the readings (at which point you can resubmit in a following week).

Paper #1 - Ballot Measures (20%): 1500-2000 words. Due to cuLearn at 11:59pm on 2 March. While people, both within the US and around the world, tend to pay more attention to presidential elections, the importance of the midterms for shaping United States policy is becoming more apparent even to casual observers. Yet direct democracy, which receives considerably less attention than representative politics, has been gradually taking on a new importance in American elections: referendums, citizen initiatives, and other forms of ballot measures are increasingly becoming a way for the public to take part in political decision making. To help better understand the importance of these mechanisms, you will research a ballot measure from the 2016 election cycle and explain from where the original idea arose, how it got on the ballot, who the key stakeholders in the question were, and the eventual result. If your ballot measure was successful, you will be expected to explain where it stands today (or where it is going to go from here, if it has not yet materialized into policy decisions). If your ballot measure was unsuccessful, you should be able to explain whether that is the end of the issue at hand. While you may not be able to offer a full explanation as to why that outcome occurred, you should be able to provide at least some preliminary thoughts on the matter.

Paper #2 – Electoral Threats (30%): 2500-3000 words. Due to cuLearn at 11:59pm on 6 April. Throughout the term, we will be discussing several key aspects of the American electoral process, some of which are long established and some of which are newer developments. In recent years, questions have been raised about the strength of that process and whether American democracy is truly as healthy as it is claimed to be. In this paper, you will identify and analyze a threat, either actual or potential, to the US
electoral process. This assignment does not demand that you believe American elections are in crisis – or even that a crisis is likely – but you are expected to be able to identify weaknesses or situations that could become worse.

Key questions to address:
- What are the specific institutions, processes, or ideals that are threatened? Are there particular actors that are disproportionately affected? And is this unique to the United States or is this a problem faced in other democracies around the world?
- How plausible is the threat? How seriously is it being taken by the people and institutions affected and by society at large?
- What potential solutions are there to this problem? While you are not expected to offer in depth policy paper on all the nuances involved, you should be able to speak to the kinds of steps that could either help neutralize an ongoing threat or prevent a budding one from emerging.

A Note on Papers: Title pages and bibliography do not count towards the overall length. The length requirements mean that you are expected to have that amount of content. While you are not required to have a title page, you do need to have a complete bibliography. We will discuss the sources to be used in class before the papers are due. Additionally, please double space your papers and use 12 point Times New Roman with one inch margins.

Final Exam: (30%): The exam will take place during the official exam period between 14-26 April. It will cover all aspects of the course material from the textbooks and discussion, but you are also expected to have at least a broad understanding of the lead up to the 2018 midterm elections. To that end, you should be paying attention to current events in American politics, specifically those that deal with parties, elections, and the stakes involved come November – and be able to incorporate those into your answers.

Late Assignments: If an assignment is not submitted to cuLearn on the due date, without valid reasons, it will receive a 5% penalty per day that it is late for up to 7 days – after which assignments will not be accepted.

Schedule

12 January Introduction
19 January  
Electoral Overview and Party Organization

- Chapters 1-2, *Parties and Elections in America*
  [https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/fiorina_finalfile_0.pdf](https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/fiorina_finalfile_0.pdf)

26 January  
Voting and Participation

- Chapter 3, *Parties and Elections in America*

2 February  
Voter Suppression

9 February  Interest Groups and Campaign Finance

- Chapters 4-5, *Parties and Elections in America*

16 February  Ballot Measures and Democratic Deliberation


23 February  No Class – Reading Week

2 March  State and Local Elections

- Chapters 6-7, *Parties and Elections in America*

9 March  Presidential Elections

- Chapters 8-9, *Parties and Elections in America*
16 March  The Media and Polling

- Chapters 10, *Parties and Elections in America*

23 March  Elections as Entertainment


30 March  No Class – Good Friday

6 April  Parties/Partisans in Government

- Chapters 11-12, *Parties and Elections in America*
(https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/06/american-democracy-trump/530454/)

(https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/16/opinion/sunday/is-donald-trump-a-threat-to-democracy.html)

11 April [*Wednesday] Catchup, Conclusion, and Exam Prep

• Readings TBA in Class (and cuLearn)