

PLSC 22711: American Elections: A Scientific Approach

Meeting Time: Tue & Thu 3:30-4:50 PM
Location: Cobb Hall 203

Instructor: Dr. Shu Fu, fushu@uchicago.edu
Office: Pick Hall 503
Office hours: Fri 2:30-3:30 PM or by appointment

COURSE OBJECTIVES

This course focuses on the scientific study of American elections. We will address empirical and theoretical questions about political participation and vote choice; we will also cover different stages of elections, both general and primary elections, and investigate elections in different levels, from presidential elections to local elections; we will further explore the most currently popular topics, such as voter rationality, race and gender in elections, mail-in ballots, and voting fraud. We will address these questions through the cutting-edge and credible empirical research.

PREREQUISITES

There are no specific prerequisite courses, but basic familiarity with American politics and experience with quantitative analysis is strongly recommended.

COURSE MATERIALS

The reading assignments for the course are academic journal articles and book chapters and will all be freely available on Canvas site. Students are expected to closely engage with every reading. The number of pages assigned per class session is intentionally left small, with the expectation that students will read everything carefully, evaluate the quality of the evidence and arguments, and come to class prepared to discuss the readings.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADES

1. Participation and Attendance: 20%

Students are expected to come to every class and to participate in class discussions. You should read the assigned reading(s) for a particular class day prior to coming to class. Because the class aims to develop a scientific and analytical mind in understanding American elections, participation and discussion are essential. However, if you ever need to miss a class for a medical, family, religious, or personal reason, just email me before the class session.

2. Reading Reports: 40%

Students will write brief reports on the reading assignments. A reading report should address the following questions:

- What is the question being addressed by this study?
- What is the answer offered by the study?
- What evidence is brought to bear?
- In your view, does the evidence compellingly support the conclusion of the study? Why or why not?
- Can you propose a better way to study or address the same question?

These reports (no longer than 1-page, with 12-point font, single space, and one-inch margin) should be submitted to Canvas before noon of the class day. There will be 17 opportunities (signaled by *) to write a report, and students are expected to write at least 8 reading notes, allowing students to focus on the topics that they are most interested in and allowing for unforeseen circumstances that may prevent a student from writing a report at some point during the term.

3. In-class Quizzes: 30%

We will have 7 short quizzes given at the beginning of each Tuesday class from Week 2 to Week 8. The quizzes will cover materials from the previous class and the readings due in class that day. Typically, they will be composed of 5 multiple-choice or fill-the-blank questions. **Your lowest quiz score will be dropped when calculating your final grade.**

Frequent quizzes have been shown improve students' learning. For example, in one recent study in a large introductory class in psychology, on-line quizzes appeared to improve students' performance (especially among students whose families were less wealthy).¹ Moreover, students taking this class also did better in their other classes that semester and in the classes that they took the next semester. This suggests that frequent assessment helps students develop study habits that are beneficial in other courses, not just the course that assigns quizzes. Frequent quizzes also help me ascertain how well concepts are understood, so that I can adjust the content accordingly.

4. Presentation: 10%

Each student is expected to choose ONE of the readings with an asterisk sign (*) and make a presentation to introduce that reading to everyone, before discussing the reading in more detail. The presentation should be around 5-8 minutes. Your presentation does not need to cover every detail addressed in your paper (there won't be enough time!). But you should give everyone a clear understanding of several things: (1) the research question the paper is addressing; (2) the main theoretical concepts; (3) the data and methods (e.g., estimation and identification strategies); and (4) the main results.

¹ Pennebaker JW, Gosling SD, Ferrell JD (2013). "Daily Online Testing in Large Classes: Boosting College Performance while Reducing Achievement Gaps." PLoS ONE 8(11): e79774.

You should use slides (e.g., PowerPoint, or other equivalent software) to accompany your presentation and make your main points clear. Good slides for a presentation like this contain just enough information to make your points memorable. For each slide, think: What one or two things do I want my audience to take away from each slide, and how can I make those one or two things as clear as possible? Remember, your slides are not the presentation—you are the presentation.

When you prepare your presentation, my office hours are great opportunities to discuss the technical details in the paper and receive advice and feedback.

Please **send me your slides in PDF format before noon** of the day you make presentation via email.

CLASS MEETINGS

I will always begin class on time and you should arrive on time, having completed the assigned reading and ready to take the quiz if one is scheduled.

Normally, each class session will contain three components. 1) I will give you a mini lecture, laying out the background, main concepts, or methods that are essential in investigating the class topic. 2) One student will give a 5-8 min presentation on the reading. 3) I will then lead a discussion when we altogether evaluate the topic and reading in more details.

While we are in class, laptops, iPads, phones, and other electronic devices are not allowed.

There are two reasons for this policy. First, studies of electronic devices in classrooms show that a student with the ability to browse on a laptop will remember less of what occurred during class and tend to earn a lower grade. Moreover, a student who does not have a laptop but can see another student's laptop also remembers less. Electronic devices tend to distract both the user and those around them.² Second, taking notes on laptops leads to less learning than taking notes by hand.³ Taking notes on a laptop creates a tendency to transcribe information verbatim, while taking notes forces you to process and reframe the information, which contributes to learning.

That being said, we will go “old fashion”—you are encouraged to buy a (traditional) notebook and print out the readings for each class session.

If you believe that you need an exception to this policy, please speak with me.

² Helene Hembrooke and Geri Gay. 2003. “The Laptop and the Lecture: The Effects of Multitasking in Learning Environments.” *Journal of Computing in Higher Education* 15(1): 46-64. Faria Sana, Tina Weston, and Nicholas J. Cepeda. 2013. “Laptop multitasking hinders classroom learning for both users and nearby peers.” *Computers and Education* 62(1): 24-31. Carter, Susan Payne, Kyle Greenberg, and Michael S. Walker. 2017. “The Impact of Computer Usage on Academic Performance: Evidence from a Randomized Trial at the United States Military Academy.” *Economics of Education Review* 56: 118-132. Patterson, Richard W., and Robert M Patterson. 2017. “Computers and Productivity: Evidence from Laptop Use in the College Classroom.” *Economics of Education Review* 57: 66-79.

³ Mueller, Pam A., and Daniel M. Oppenheimer. 2014. “The Pen Is Mightier Than the Keyboard: Advantages of Longhand over Laptop Note Taking.” *Psychological Science* 25: 1159-1168.

CLASS SCHEDULE AND READINGS

Week 1 Tuesday (3/21): Welcome & Course Introduction

This class session will provide a broad overview of the course and introduce students to several scientific approaches to studying and analyzing electoral politics.

PART I: PARTICIPATION

Week 1 Thursday (3/23): Political Participation I

Why do people turn out to vote when there is almost no chance that their vote will be pivotal in a large election? What campaign strategies are effective in mobilizing voters?

* Gerber, Alan, Donald Green, and Christopher Larimer. 2008. "Social Pressure and Voter Turnout: Evidence from a Large-Scale Field Experiment." *American Political Science Review* 102(1):33-48.

Special Event: Students will participate a randomized field experiment on friend-to-friend "get out the vote" encouragements among college-age voters in the coming Chicago Mayoral run-off, run by Don Green, Madeleine Roberts, and Aaron Schein.

Week 2 Tuesday (3/28): Political Participation II (Quiz #1)

Who turns out to vote and what implications does this have for election results, public policy, and political representation? Is the non-compulsory voting in American elections representative? Can inequalities in turnout be corrected?

* Fowler, Anthony. 2013. "Electoral and Policy Consequences of Voter Turnout: Evidence from Compulsory Voting in Australia." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 8(2):159-182.

PART II: VOTE CHOICE

Week 2 Thursday (3/30): The "Fundamentals"

Why can the outcomes of the American presidential election be predicted within a few percentage points based on information available months before the election? What are these important factors that determine the individual's vote choice in presidential elections? What are the "iron triangle" of explanatory concepts for understanding voting behavior? What evidence do we see on how these fundamentals play a role in 2012 presidential elections in the general stage?

Jacoby, William G. 2010. "The American Voter." In *The Oxford Handbook of American Elections and Political Behavior*, edited by Jan E. Leighley, 262-277. Oxford University Press.

Sides, John, and Lynn Vavreck. 2013. *The Gamble: Choice and Chance in the 2012 Presidential Election*. Princeton University Press. Chapter 2.

Week 3 Tuesday (4/4): Party Identification (Quiz #2)

What are the conceptual underpinnings of party identification? What is the best evidence that surveys can possibly offer? How do scholars use a variety of sources and statistical approaches to demonstrate the persistence of individuals' partisan identities?

* Green, Donald, Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler. 2002. *Partisan Hearts & Minds: Political Parties and the Social Identities of Voters*. Yale University Press. Chapter 3.

Week 3 Thursday (4/6): Retrospective Voting

Because voters can never be fully informed about the electoral choices they face, they may use shortcuts. One such shortcut is the economy conditions, a.k.a. retrospective voting. Voters reward incumbents in good economic condition and punishes them in bad economic condition. To what extent do voters use this shortcut? Do they use it well? When can it go astray? What implications can this have for democratic representation?

* Healy, Andrew and Gabriel Lenz. 2014. "Substituting the End for the Whole: Why Voters Respond Primarily to the Election-Year Economy." *American Journal of Political Science* 58(1):31-47.

Week 4 Tuesday (4/11): Issue Voting (Quiz #3)

One optimistic view of democracy is that voters have predetermined preferences on public policies, evaluate the issue positions of the candidates, and vote for the candidate offering the best set of options. To what extent do we see evidence of issue voting? Even if issue positions are correlated with vote choices, do we know that issues are driving votes? What does this mean for democracy and issue representation?

* Ansolabehere, Stephen, Jonathan Rodden and James M. Snyder Jr. 2006. "Purple America." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 20(2): 97-118.

Week 4 Thursday (4/12): Incumbency Advantage

This class session is devoted to one of the most striking phenomena in American politics: incumbency advantage. Incumbent candidates appear to receive more votes simply by virtue of being an incumbent. What is the evidence for this phenomenon? What can explain it? What can explain its dramatic rise over time or its consistency across offices?

* Ansolabehere, Stephen and James Snyder. 2002. "The Incumbency Advantage in U.S. Elections: An Analysis of State and Federal Offices, 1942-2000." *Election Law Journal* 1(3):315-338.

PART III: ELECTORAL INSTITUTIONS

Week 5 Tuesday (4/18): Primaries and Presidential Nominations (Quiz #4)

In primary elections, the candidates are often less well-known and voters cannot use their party identification to choose among candidate. What is the process that a candidate would normally experience in the primaries? Much like presidential general elections, presidential primaries have their own fundamentals. What are the determinant factors in primaries?

Sides, John, and Lynn Vavreck. 2013. *The Gamble: Choice and Chance in the 2012 Presidential Election*. Princeton University Press. Chapter 3.

Week 5 Thursday (4/20): Primaries and Ideological Voting

Primaries in congressional elections are often overlooked as a crucial component of the electoral process, determining which candidates will be on offer to the voters in the general election. What kinds of candidates win primaries? Without the assistance of party labels, how do voters decide who to support in primary elections?

* Hall, Andrew B. 2015. "What Happens When Extremists Win Primaries?" *American Political Science Review* 109(1):18-42.

Week 6 Tuesday (4/25): Local Elections I (Quiz #5)

Local elections are more intimate affairs usually involving less than a few thousand voters deciding on offices with limited power and for states that are often undifferentiated for an entire constituency. What are the aspects that differ local elections both in regard to national elections and among each other? What shapes individual vote choice in local elections?

* Oliver, J. Eric. 2012. *Local Elections and the Politics of Small-Scale Democracy*. Princeton University Press. Chapter 5.

Week 6 Thursday (4/27): Local Elections II (With Guest Speaker Prof. Eric Oliver)

We will invite Prof. Eric Oliver to our class to further discuss local elections and the Chicago Mayoral Election this year.

PART IV: THE OUTCOMES

Week 7 Tuesday (5/2): Electoral Accountability (Quiz #6)

Do elections replace bad incumbents with better incumbents who are either more competent or better represent the issue positions of the electorate? Do elections (and prospects for reelection) also incentivize officials to perform better or to better represent the preferences of the electorate? To what extent do we observe these phenomena and which force is more prevalent in American elections? If elections primarily accomplish one goal but not the other, what implications does that have for public policy, democratic representation, and the ways in which voters could achieve better outcomes?

* Alt, James, Ethan Bueno de Mesquita, and Shanna Rose. 2011. "Disentangling Accountability and Competence in Elections: Evidence from U.S. Term Limits." *The Journal of Politics* 73(1):171-186.

Week 7 Thursday (5/4): Voter Rationality I

The wild tone and tenor of the presidential campaign has led many commentators to bemoan the state of American democracy. Based upon some evidence that voters can allow arbitrary and irrelevant factors like football games and shark attacks to influence their choices, commentators suggest that democratic elections fail simply because voters are incompetent. Is it really true that voters are so fickle, irrational, and incompetent that they allow football games and shark attacks to influence their vote for president? What is the best evidence?

- * Achen, Christopher H. and Larry M. Bartels. 2016. Blind Retrospection: Electoral Responses to Droughts, Floods, and Shark Attacks (Chapter 5). *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. Princeton University Press.
- * Fowler, Anthony and Andrew B. Hall. 2018. Do Shark Attacks Influence Presidential Elections? Reassessing a Prominent Finding on Voter Competence. *Journal of Politics* 80(4):1423-1437.

Week 8 Tuesday (5/9): Voter Rationality II (With Guest Speaker Prof. Anthony Fowler) **(Quiz #7)**

Prof. Anthony Fowler will join our class to further discuss voter rationality, shark attacks, college football and elections, and even the health of democracy.

PART V: NEW TOPICS ON AMERICAN ELECTIONS

Week 8 Thursday (5/11): Gender and Race

What differences do we observe between men and women in the political world? Women represent half of the voting-eligible population, more than half of the electorate (well more than half among young minorities), but significantly less than half of high-profile elected officials? What might explain these patterns? What barriers exist for women to run for and obtain higher office? What are the policy consequences of greater female representation?

Race and ethnicity are extremely salient topics that pervade many aspects of the political process. To what extent do racial attitudes influence public opinions and election results? Do attitudes about race and immigration stem primarily from self-interest or irrational prejudice? Does contact with outside groups improve or degrade attitudes toward the group? Did Obama's race hurt or help him in his presidential elections?

- * Anzia, Sarah and Christopher Berry. 2011. "The Jackie (and Jill) Robinson Effect: Why Do Congresswomen Outperform Congressmen?" *American Journal of Political Science* 55(3):478-493.
- * Tesler, Michael. 2012. "The Spillover of Racialization into Health Care: How President Obama Polarized Public Opinion by Racial Attitudes and Race." *American Journal of Political Science* 56(3):690-704.

Week 9 Tuesday (5/16): Mail-in Ballot and Absentee Votes

In response to COVID-19, many scholars and policymakers are urging the U.S. to expand voting-by-mail programs to safeguard the electoral process. However, it has been debated in public discourse over the effect of vote-by-mail. What are the best evidence scholars provide in terms of the effect of mail-in ballot on election turnout and party's vote share?

- * Thompson, Daniel M., Jennifer A. Wu, Jesse Yoder, and Andrew B. Hall. 2020. "Universal Vote-By Mail Has No Impact on Partisan Turnout or Vote Share." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117(25): 14052-14056.
- * Yoder, Jesse, Cassandra Handan-Nader, Andrew Myers, Tobias Nowacki, Daniel M. Thompson, Jennifer A. Wu, Chenoa Yorgason, and Andrew B. Hall. 2021. "How Did Expanding Absentee Voting Affect the 2020 US Election?" *Science Advances* 7(52): 1-8.

Week 9 Thursday (5/18): Voter Fraud

After the 2020 U.S. presidential election Donald Trump refused to concede, alleging widespread and unparalleled voter fraud. Vote manipulation and voter fraud create huge challenges and concerns toward American democracy. What are the statistical arguments Trump's supporters deployed in an attempt to cast doubt on the result? Is any of these claims convincing?

- * Eggers, Andrew C., Haritz Garro, and Justin Grimmer. 2021. "No Evidence for Systematic Voter Fraud: A Guide To Statistical Claims About the 2020 Election." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118(45).
- * Grimmer, Justin, Michael C. Herron, and Matthew Tyler. "Evaluating a New Generation of Expansive Claims about Vote Manipulation." Working Paper.