Political Science 601: Election Reform in America

University of Wisconsin-Madison
Spring Semester 2019
Wednesday 2:25-5:25pm
Ingraham Hall 223

Contact

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About

“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 rules and administration is one area of public policy where there are abundant ideas for reform. From the campaign finance regulations to legislative districting to voter identification, there is no shortage of proposals for improvement. Whether it comes from 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. These are important considerations, but we can do better than to get stuck in this debate. Altering something as important as the election process demands careful scrutiny of empirical evidence and weighing against various normative and legal concerns. This seminar immerses students in debates about election reforms and provides tools for evaluating the claims made by advocates on each side.

In terms of course learning outcomes, by the end of the semester, students should be able to (1) convey a working knowledge of the operation of U.S. elections, (2) have developed an understanding of the origins and effects of prominent election practices, and (3) be prepared to analyze proposals for reform in light of normative goals and resources available
This is a three-credit advanced-level course. The prerequisites for enrollment are junior or senior standing and permission of the instructor. The course is designated for accelerated honors.

**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 actively!) every week.

There are numerous readings from academic journals, book chapters, and media reporting. All will be available on the Learn@UW web site for the course. The readings tend to be original studies rather than textbook-type introductions to topics. This means that you will want to spend more time to work through what can be technical language and data analysis. I will help explain the more challenging methodological aspects of readings in class. 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 writing such papers 5 of the 10 substantive meetings between the introductory session and the final session whose topic is yet to be decided. For your assigned weeks, briefly summarize each of the week’s readings 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 Tuesday before class. Each paper should be 2½ to 3 pages long, double-spaced, with one-inch margins.

We are not covering all topics. In particular, we leave aside campaign finance, which is the subject of another course (PS 511). The topic of the final session will be decided by the class.

The course culminates in a final research project. The details will be provided separately, but the basic idea is to prepare a policy recommendation in which you propose a reform in some aspect of election administration. You will specify the reform, discuss what existing scholarly research in journals and books 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. The paper should clearly address the legal, normative, and empirical implications of the reform.
To help in the development of the paper, several benchmarks are built into the schedule. On specific dates you should upload to the course web site the appropriate documents. These will include a broad proposal, a tentative list of references, and a summary of the legal, empirical, and normative issues that will be addressed. More details will be provided later, but note that the final paper will be due on Friday, May 10.

**Evaluation**

Attendance and participation account for 20% of the final grade. Students who participate actively and constructively based on the readings will receive an A. Those who speak minimally or without clear connection to the readings will earn a B, those who are present but not participating will receive a C.

Bimonthly response papers will also account for another 20% 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.

A short report based on observing an election day polling place on April 2 will be worth 10% of the grade.

The final research paper is worth 50% 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**

Your success in this course is important to me. All students are encouraged to visit office hours, if only to share how the course is working for you. The classroom is designed to be an inclusive and welcoming environment where each student has the opportunity to learn.

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. Please make sure you are familiar with university policies about plagiarism.

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.

January 23: **Introduction**

**Required**
Martha E. Kropf. *Institutions and the Right to Vote in America.* (2016 Palgrave McMillan) [chapter 2]

**Recommended**

January 30: **The History of Voting Rights and Practices**

**Required**
The U.S. Constitution and amendments [go find them!]
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**


February 6: **Recent Federal Fixes: NVRA and HAVA**

**Required**
National Voter Registration Act of 1993


**Recommended**


Martha E. Kropf and David C. Kimball. *Helping America Vote: The Limits of Election Reform*. (2012 Routledge)

February 13: **No class** (UW-Eau Claire presentation)

February 20: **Voter Registration**

**Required**


Thad E. Hall. “U.S. Voter Registration Reform.” (2013 *Electoral Studies*)

Recommended
Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC). ericstates.org
Eric McGhee et al. “Automatic Voter Registration and Voter Turnout” (2017 ESRA conference paper)

February 27: Voter ID

Required

Recommended
March 6: **Absentee Voting, Early Voting, and Voting at Home**

**Required**

**Required**

March 13: **Ballot Design and Voting Technology**

**Required**
- Charles Stewart III. “Voting Technologies” (2011 *Annual Review of Political Science*)

**Recommended**


March 20: No class (spring break)

March 27: Ballot Access and Third Parties

Required

Recommended

April 2: Election day observation

April 3: No class (MPSA/Big Ten Voting Challenge meeting)

April 10: Party Nominations

Required


**Recommended**


Costas Panagopoulos “Are Caucuses Bad for Democracy?” (2010 *Political Science Quarterly*)


**April 17: Redistricting**

**Required**


Jonathan Krasno et al. “Wisconsin’s State Legislative Districts Are a Big Republican Gerrymander.” (May 24, 2016 Monkey Cage blog post in the *Washington Post*)

**Recommended**


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


April 24: **Electoral College**

**Required**

Michael J. Korzi. “‘If the Manner of It Be Not Perfect’: Thinking Through Electoral College Reform.” (2010 chapter in *Electoral College Reform: Challenges and Possibilities*, ed. Gary Bugh and David Schultz) [available as e-book]


**Recommended**

George C. Edwards III. *Why the Electoral College is Bad for America*. 2nd ed. (2001 Yale University Press)


May 1: **Topic to be chosen by the class**