

American Elections

MIT | 17.263 | Fall 2020 | TuTh 11:00–12:30
Canvas site: <https://canvas.mit.edu/courses/3493>

Professor Devin Caughey
caughey@mit.edu | E53-463
Office hours: Tu 3:00–4:00

Course Description

This course provides an overview of electoral politics in the United States, covering presidential, congressional, state, and local elections. It covers the development of American elections over time, electoral rules and institutions, the macro-structural forces shaping electoral outcomes, the key organizations involved in elections (parties, etc.), candidates' calculations and campaign strategies, and the role of ordinary citizens in the electoral process, as well as potential reforms to the U.S. electoral system. Students' main assignment will be to follow a specific electoral race and report on its outcome. The course has no recitations or teaching assistants, only lectures, but it nevertheless involves a good deal of in-class participation. There are no formal prerequisites, though it is helpful to have previously taken an introductory political science course such as 17.20.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Fall 2020 incarnation of this course will be entirely online. Both lectures and office hours will be conducted over Zoom (link TBA).

Learning Goals

By the end of this course, students should be able to:

- Identify the basic rules governing U.S. elections and how they have changed.
- Describe the most important structural determinants of election outcomes and how they shape the strategic choices of candidates, parties, and interest groups.
- Explain the key forces influencing citizens' political participation and preferences.
- Evaluate the functioning of U.S. elections and the merits of proposals to reform them.
- Apply the general themes of the course to specific electoral contests.

Expectations

- **Participate actively in the course**, whether in the form of answering the questions I pose to the class, interrupting me with your own questions, or engaging in productive conversation and feedback with their fellow students. *Given our online format this term, remaining actively engaged in the course will require special effort and discipline. Staring at a computer screen for hours a day can be both exhausting and distracting, so we'll all have to work extra hard to keep things lively.*
- **Treat each other with respect.** In particular, this means:
 - Refraining from dominating the conversation;
 - Listening attentively and politely while others speak;
 - Acknowledging the right of others to hold and express contrary views;
 - When criticizing, focusing on what people said, not who they are; and
 - More generally, helping to foster a safe and welcoming environment for students with a diverse range of perspectives and identities.
- **Maintain academic integrity.** Among other things, this means never taking credit for words or ideas that are not your own, and always giving your readers enough information to evaluate the source and quality of your evidence. For more information on plagiarism and academic integrity, consult <http://integrity.mit.edu/>.

Required Books

John Sides, Daron Shaw, Matt Grossmann, and Keena Lipsitz, *Campaigns and Elections*, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 2019), ISBN: 9780393664676 ([ebook](#) recommended)

Assignments

- **Throughout the term**, attend/participate in lectures and breakout groups (10%).
- **Before each lecture**, mark up one reading on perusall.com (25%).
- On **September 15**, submit choice of race to follow throughout the term (5%).
- On **September 22**, submit initial list of sources for race report (5%).
- On **October 15**, submit pre-election “state of the race” report (20%).
- On **December 1/3/8**, present post-election race report to class (10%).
- On **December 8** (with possible extension), submit final post-election report (25%).

Semester Overview

- 1 **Tuesday, September 1: Introduction**
- 2 **Thursday, September 3: The Logic of Electoral Democracy**
- 3 **Tuesday, September 8: American Electoral Institutions**
- 4 **Thursday, September 10: Development of the American Electorate**
- 5 **Tuesday, September 15: Development of American Elections**
→ Race selection due
- 6 **Thursday, September 17: Political Parties**
- 7 **Tuesday, September 22: Candidates**
→ Initial source list due
- 8 **Thursday, September 24: Nominations**
- 9 **Tuesday, September 29: Fundamental Factors in General Elections**
- 10 **Thursday, October 1: Polls and Forecasting**
- 11 **Tuesday, October 6: Campaign Finance and Interest Groups**
- 12 **Thursday, October 8: Campaign Strategies**
- Tuesday, October 13: NO CLASS (Columbus/Indigenous Peoples Day)**
- 13 **Thursday, October 15: Media and Information**
→ Pre-election “state of the race” report due
- 14 **Tuesday, October 20: Presidential Campaigns**
→ In class: Peer feedback on pre-election reports
- 15 **Thursday, October 22: Congressional Campaigns**
→ In class: Peer feedback on pre-election reports
- 16 **Tuesday, October 27: State and Local Campaigns**
→ In class: Peer feedback on pre-election reports
- 17 **Thursday, October 29: Voter Participation**

- 18 Tuesday, November 3: Voter Choice (ELECTION DAY!)**
- 19 Thursday, November 5: Consequences of Elections**
- 20 Tuesday, November 10: Evaluating American Democracy**
- 21 Thursday, November 12: Reforms I—Voter Fraud**
- 22 Tuesday, November 17: Reforms II—Gerrymandering**
- 23 Thursday, November 19: Reforms III—Electoral Systems**
- Tuesday, November 24: NO CLASS (Thanksgiving)**
- Thursday, November 26: NO CLASS (Thanksgiving)**
- 24 Tuesday, December 1: Presentations**
 - In class: Post-election presentations
- 25 Thursday, December 3: Presentations**
 - In class: Post-election presentations
- 26 Tuesday, December 8: Presentations**
 - In class: Post-election presentations
 - Final post-election report due

Course Schedule

Book	=	Reading from one of the required books for the course
PDF	=	Reading can be downloaded from the course website
URL	=	Reading can be accessed at the specified URL
Perusall	=	Reading should be viewed on perusall.com

1 Tuesday, September 1: Introduction

2 Thursday, September 3: The Logic of Electoral Democracy

Readings (43 pages)

- [PDF](#) Sides et al., *Campaigns and Elections*, 2–17 (chapter 1: “Introduction”)
- [Perusall](#) Bernard Manin, Adam Przeworski, and Susan Carol Stokes, “Elections and Representation,” chap. 1 in *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*, ed. Adam Przeworski, Susan Carol Stokes, and Bernard Manin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 29–55

3 Tuesday, September 8: American Electoral Institutions

Readings (34 pages)

- [Book](#) Sides et al., *Campaigns and Elections*, 18–51 (chapter 2: “The American Electoral Process”)

4 Thursday, September 10: Development of the American Electorate

Readings (36 pages)

- [Perusall](#) Richard Valelly, “How Suffrage Politics Made—and Makes—America,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Political Development*, ed. Richard Valelly, Suzanne Mettler, and Robert C. Lieberman (Oxford University Press, 2016), doi:[10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199697915.013.34](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199697915.013.34)
- [PDF](#) Christina Wolbrecht and J. Kevin Corder, “Turning Rights into Ballots: The Uneven Integration of Women into Electoral Politics after Suffrage,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 53, no. 3 (2020): 479–483

5 Tuesday, September 15: Development of American Elections

→ *Race selection due*

Readings (49 pages)

- [Book](#) Sides et al., *Campaigns and Elections*, 52–83 (chapter 3: “The Transformation of American Campaigns”)
- [Perusall](#) Richard Bensel, “The American Ballot Box: Law, Identity, and the Polling Place in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” *Studies in American Political Development* 17 (Spring 2003): 1–17

6 Thursday, September 17: Political Parties

Readings (46 pages)

- [Book](#) Sides et al., *Campaigns and Elections*, 158–185 (chapter 6: “Political Parties”)
- [Perusall](#) Ismail K. White, Chryl N. Laird, and Troy D. Allen, “Selling Out?: The Politics of Navigating Conflicts between Racial Group Interest and Self-interest,” *American Political Science Review* 108, no. 4 (2014): 783–800

7 Tuesday, September 22: Candidates

→ *Initial source list due*

Readings (49 pages)

- [PDF](#) Richard L. Fox and Jennifer L. Lawless, “Uncovering the Origins of the Gender Gap in Political Ambition,” *American Political Science Review* 108, no. 3 (2014): 499–519
- [PDF](#) Danielle M. Thomsen, “Ideological Moderates Won’t Run: How Party Fit Matters for Partisan Polarization in Congress,” *Journal of Politics* 76, no. 3 (2014): 786–797
- [Perusall](#) Nicholas Carnes, “Why Are There So Few Working-Class People in Political Office? Evidence from State Legislatures,” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 4, no. 1 (2016): 84–109

8 Thursday, September 24: Nominations

Readings (39 pages)

- [PDF](#) Stephen Ansolabehere, John Mark Hansen, Shigeo Hirano, and James M. Snyder Jr., “More Democracy: The Direct Primary and Competition in U.S. Elections,” *Studies in American Political Development* 24, no. 2 (2010): 190–205
- [Perusall](#) Marty Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel, and John Zaller, “Political Parties in Rough Weather,” *The Forum* 5, no. 4 (2008): 1–23

9 Tuesday, September 29: Fundamental Factors in General Elections

Readings (65 pages)

- [Perusall](#) David R. Mayhew, “Incumbency Advantage in U.S. Presidential Elections: The Historical Record,” *Political Science Quarterly* 123, no. 2 (2008): 201–228
- [PDF](#) Michael S. Lewis-Beck and Mary Stegmaier, “Economic Determinants of Electoral Outcomes,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 3, no. 1 (2000): 183–219

10 Thursday, October 1: Polls and Forecasting

Readings (47 pages)

- [Perusall](#) D. Sunshine Hillygus, “The Evolution of Election Polling in the United States,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 75, no. 5 (2011): 962–981
- [URL](#) Nate Silver, *The Signal and the Noise: Why So Many Predictions Fail—But Some Don’t* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 47–73 (chapter 2: “Are You Smarter than a Television Pundit?”), <https://archive-org.libproxy.mit.edu/details/signalnoisewhymo00silv/page/n5/mode/2up>

11 Tuesday, October 6: Campaign Finance and Interest Groups

Readings (66 pages)

- [Book](#) Sides et al., *Campaigns and Elections*, 84–123 (chapter 4: “Financing Campaigns”) and 186–211 (chapter 7: “Interest Groups”)

12 Thursday, October 8: Campaign Strategies

Readings (58 pages)

- [Book](#) Sides et al., *Campaigns and Elections*, 124–157 (chapter 5: “Modern Campaign Strategies”)
- [Perusal](#) Tali Mendelberg, *The Race Card: Campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages, and the Norm of Equality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 3–28 (chapter 1: “A Theory of Racial Appeals”)

Tuesday, October 13: NO CLASS (Columbus/Indigenous Peoples Day)

13 Thursday, October 15: Media and Information

→ *Pre-election “state of the race” report due*

Readings (51 pages)

- [Book](#) Sides et al., *Campaigns and Elections*, 212–247 (chapter 8: “Media”)
- [Perusal](#) Jennifer Jerit, “How People Learn About Politics: Navigating the Information Environment,” chap. 12 in *New Directions in Public Opinion*, 3rd ed., ed. Adam J. Berinsky (New York: Routledge, 2020), 282–296

14 Tuesday, October 20: Presidential Campaigns

→ *In class: Peer feedback on pre-election reports*

Readings (38 pages)

- [Book](#) Sides et al., *Campaigns and Elections*, 248–285 (chapter 9: “Presidential Campaigns”)

15 Thursday, October 22: Congressional Campaigns

→ *In class: Peer feedback on pre-election reports*

Readings (26 pages)

- [Book](#) Sides et al., *Campaigns and Elections*, 286–311 (chapter 10: “Congressional Campaigns”)

16 Tuesday, October 27: State and Local Campaigns

→ *In class: Peer feedback on pre-election reports*

Readings (30 pages)

- [Book](#) Sides et al., *Campaigns and Elections*, 312–341 (chapter 11: “State and Local Campaigns”)

17 Thursday, October 29: Voter Participation

Readings (64 pages)

- [Book](#) Sides et al., *Campaigns and Elections*, 342–379 (chapter 12: “Voter Participation”)
- [Perusall](#) Bernard L. Fraga, “Candidates or Districts? Reevaluating the Role of Race in Voter Turnout,” *American Journal of Political Science* 60, no. 1 (2016): 97–122

18 Tuesday, November 3: Voter Choice (ELECTION DAY!)

Readings (32 pages)

- [Book](#) Sides et al., *Campaigns and Elections*, 380–411 (chapter 13: “Voter Choice”)
- Review the final prediction of your favorite election forecaster.

19 Thursday, November 5: Consequences of Elections

Readings (70 pages)

- [Perusall](#) David W. Brady and Craig Volden, *Revolving Gridlock: Politics and Policy from Jimmy Carter to George Bush* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2006), 1–11 (chapter 1: “The Origins of Revolving Gridlock”) and 12–48 (chapter 2: “Theoretical Foundations”)
- [PDF](#) Anthony Fowler and Andrew B. Hall, “Long-Term Consequences of Election Results,” *British Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 2 (2017): 351–372

20 Tuesday, November 10: Evaluating American Democracy

Readings (35 pages)

- [Book](#) Sides et al., *Campaigns and Elections*, 412–439 (chapter 14: “Democracy in Action or a Broken System?”)
- [Perusall](#) Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, “Democracy for Realists: Holding up a Mirror to the Electorate,” *Juncture* 22, no. 4 (2016): 269–275

21 Thursday, November 12: Reforms I—Voter Fraud

Readings (53 pages)

- [PDF](#) Jesse T. Richman, Gulshan A. Chattha, and David C. Earnest, “Do Non-Citizens Vote in U.S. Elections?,” *Electoral Studies* 36 (2014): 149–157
- [Perusall](#) David Cottrell, Michael C. Herron, and Sean J. Westwood, “An Exploration of Donald Trump’s Allegations of Massive Voter Fraud in the 2016 General Election,” *Electoral Studies* 51 (2018): 123–142
- [PDF](#) Zoltan Hajnal, Nazita Lajevardi, and Lindsay Nielson, “Voter Identification Laws and the Suppression of Minority Votes,” *Journal of Politics* 79, no. 2 (2017): 363–379
- [PDF](#) Justin Grimmer, Eitan Hersh, Marc Meredith, Jonathan Mummolo, and Clayton Nall, “Obstacles to Estimating Voter ID Laws’ Effect on Turnout,” *Journal of Politics* 80, no. 3 (2018): 1045–1051

22 Tuesday, November 17: Reforms II—Gerrymandering

Readings (63 pages)

- [PDF](#) Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, “Does Gerrymandering Cause Polarization?,” *American Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 3 (2009): 666–680
- [Perusall](#) Jowei Chen and Jonathan Rodden, “Unintentional Gerrymandering: Political Geography and Electoral Bias in Legislatures,” *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 8, no. 3 (2013): 239–269
- [PDF](#) Devin Caughey, Chris Tausanovitch, and Christopher Warshaw, “Partisan Gerrymandering and the Political Process: Effects on Roll-Call Voting and State

Policies,” *Election Law Journal* 16, no. 4 (Symposium on Partisan Gerrymandering and the Efficiency Gap 2017): 453–469

23 Thursday, November 19: Reforms III—Electoral Systems

Readings (40 pages)

- [Perusall](#) Adam J. Berinsky, “The Perverse Consequences of Electoral Reform in the United States,” *American Politics Research* 33, no. 4 (2005): 471–491
- [PDF](#) Lee Drutman, “This Voting Reform Solves 2 of America’s Biggest Political Problems,” *Vox*, July 27, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/4/26/15425492/proportional-voting-polarization-urban-rural-third-parties>

Tuesday, November 24: NO CLASS (Thanksgiving)

Thursday, November 26: NO CLASS (Thanksgiving)

24 Tuesday, December 1: Presentations

→ *In class: Post-election presentations*

Readings

- Classmates’ post-election reports

25 Thursday, December 3: Presentations

→ *In class: Post-election presentations*

Readings

- Classmates’ post-election reports

26 Tuesday, December 8: Presentations

→ *In class: Post-election presentations*

→ *Final post-election report due*

Readings

- Classmates’ post-election reports

This syllabus was last modified on August 17, 2020.

References

- Achen, Christopher, and Larry Bartels. "Democracy for Realists: Holding up a Mirror to the Electorate." *Juncture* 22, no. 4 (2016): 269–275.
- Ansolabehere, Stephen, John Mark Hansen, Shigeo Hirano, and James M. Snyder Jr. "More Democracy: The Direct Primary and Competition in U.S. Elections." *Studies in American Political Development* 24, no. 2 (2010): 190–205.
- Bensel, Richard. "The American Ballot Box: Law, Identity, and the Polling Place in the Mid-Nineteenth Century." *Studies in American Political Development* 17 (Spring 2003): 1–17.
- Berinsky, Adam J. "The Perverse Consequences of Electoral Reform in the United States." *American Politics Research* 33, no. 4 (2005): 471–491.
- Brady, David W., and Craig Volden. *Revolving Gridlock: Politics and Policy from Jimmy Carter to George Bush*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 2006.
- Carnes, Nicholas. "Why Are There So Few Working-Class People in Political Office? Evidence from State Legislatures." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 4, no. 1 (2016): 84–109.
- Caughey, Devin, Chris Tausanovitch, and Christopher Warshaw. "Partisan Gerrymandering and the Political Process: Effects on Roll-Call Voting and State Policies." *Election Law Journal* 16, no. 4 (Symposium on Partisan Gerrymandering and the Efficiency Gap 2017): 453–469.
- Chen, Jowei, and Jonathan Rodden. "Unintentional Gerrymandering: Political Geography and Electoral Bias in Legislatures." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 8, no. 3 (2013): 239–269.
- Cohen, Marty, David Karol, Hans Noel, and John Zaller. "Political Parties in Rough Weather." *The Forum* 5, no. 4 (2008): 1–23.
- Cottrell, David, Michael C. Herron, and Sean J. Westwood. "An Exploration of Donald Trump's Allegations of Massive Voter Fraud in the 2016 General Election." *Electoral Studies* 51 (2018): 123–142.
- Drutman, Lee. "This Voting Reform Solves 2 of America's Biggest Political Problems." *Vox*, July 27, 2017. <https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/4/26/15425492/proportional-voting-polarization-urban-rural-third-parties>.
- Fowler, Anthony, and Andrew B. Hall. "Long-Term Consequences of Election Results." *British Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 2 (2017): 351–372.

- Fox, Richard L., and Jennifer L. Lawless. “Uncovering the Origins of the Gender Gap in Political Ambition.” *American Political Science Review* 108, no. 3 (2014): 499–519.
- Fraga, Bernard L. “Candidates or Districts? Reevaluating the Role of Race in Voter Turnout.” *American Journal of Political Science* 60, no. 1 (2016): 97–122.
- Grimmer, Justin, Eitan Hersh, Marc Meredith, Jonathan Mummolo, and Clayton Nall. “Obstacles to Estimating Voter ID Laws’ Effect on Turnout.” *Journal of Politics* 80, no. 3 (2018): 1045–1051.
- Hajnal, Zoltan, Nazita Lajevardi, and Lindsay Nielson. “Voter Identification Laws and the Suppression of Minority Votes.” *Journal of Politics* 79, no. 2 (2017): 363–379.
- Hillygus, D. Sunshine. “The Evolution of Election Polling in the United States.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 75, no. 5 (2011): 962–981.
- Jerit, Jennifer. “How People Learn About Politics: Navigating the Information Environment.” Chap. 12 in *New Directions in Public Opinion*, 3rd ed., edited by Adam J. Berinsky, 282–296. New York: Routledge, 2020.
- Lewis-Beck, Michael S., and Mary Stegmaier. “Economic Determinants of Electoral Outcomes.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 3, no. 1 (2000): 183–219.
- Manin, Bernard, Adam Przeworski, and Susan Carol Stokes. “Elections and Representation.” Chap. 1 in *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*, edited by Adam Przeworski, Susan Carol Stokes, and Bernard Manin, 29–55. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Mayhew, David R. “Incumbency Advantage in U.S. Presidential Elections: The Historical Record.” *Political Science Quarterly* 123, no. 2 (2008): 201–228.
- McCarty, Nolan, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal. “Does Gerrymandering Cause Polarization?” *American Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 3 (2009): 666–680.
- Mendelberg, Tali. *The Race Card: Campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages, and the Norm of Equality*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Richman, Jesse T., Gulshan A. Chattha, and David C. Earnest. “Do Non-Citizens Vote in U.S. Elections?” *Electoral Studies* 36 (2014): 149–157.
- Sides, John, Daron Shaw, Matt Grossmann, and Keena Lipsitz. *Campaigns and Elections*. 3rd ed. New York: Norton, 2019. ISBN: 9780393664676.
- Silver, Nate. *The Signal and the Noise: Why So Many Predictions Fail—But Some Don’t*. New York: Penguin, 2015.
- Thomsen, Danielle M. “Ideological Moderates Won’t Run: How Party Fit Matters for Partisan Polarization in Congress.” *Journal of Politics* 76, no. 3 (2014): 786–797.

- Valelly, Richard. “How Suffrage Politics Made—and Makes—America.” In *The Oxford Handbook of American Political Development*, edited by Richard Valelly, Suzanne Mettler, and Robert C. Lieberman. Oxford University Press, 2016. doi:[10 . 1093 / oxfordhb/9780199697915.013.34](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199697915.013.34).
- White, Ismail K., Chryl N. Laird, and Troy D. Allen. “Selling Out?: The Politics of Navigating Conflicts between Racial Group Interest and Self-interest.” *American Political Science Review* 108, no. 4 (2014): 783–800.
- Wolbrecht, Christina, and J. Kevin Corder. “Turning Rights into Ballots: The Uneven Integration of Women into Electoral Politics after Suffrage.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 53, no. 3 (2020): 479–483.