

**17.S918**  
**Elections by the Numbers**

**Fall 2020**  
**M, W, 1:00 – 2:30 pm**  
**Zoom**

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**URL: There is a Canvas site for this class**

## **REVISED CLASS SCHEDULE**

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this class is to introduce students to elections, especially presidential elections, with a focus on data analysis. The context of this class is the 2020 presidential election. Through a series of readings, lectures, and class assignments, we will examine on a variety of topics that arise during elections. Among these topics are election forecasting, public opinion, election fraud, election reform, voting technologies, and gerrymandering.

This class is organized mostly as a workshop. The general structure of the class is divided into two parts. In the first half of the semester, up to Election Day, we will focus on a number of topics in the study of election science. These topics will give students an introduction to thus topics, as well as an introduction to data analysis associated with each. The second half of the semester will be devoted to group projects that take on questions and controversies that arise during the development of the 2020 election, including any controversies pertaining to vote counting and contesting the election.

(Because of the fluid nature of the class, it is likely that the second half of the class will include some ad hoc presentations on topics we can't reach before Election Day. If we do, each session will be preceded with brief reading assignments.)

This class is being held in parallel with the Stanford-MIT Healthy Elections Project (<https://healthyelections.org>), which combines research and direct action to help make it possible to vote in a healthy and secure manner in 2020. One major feature of the project is ongoing research in to the conduct of the 2020, which is being undertaken by staff and students. Students in this class are encouraged to also participate in the Healthy Elections Project research, although it is not required. Participation may occur either on a voluntary basis or through the UROP program. I will say more about this once the class gets going.

This class assumes that you either have at least a rudimentary knowledge of numerical/statistical software (Python, R, Stata, etc.), or are willing to acquire it during the course of this semester. You will also need to acquire some facility with multivariate statistical procedures, in particular, multivariate regression. Because all the assignments will be group-based, not everyone will have to acquire deep knowledge of these procedures, but you will get more out of the class to the degree you do.

### **Subject requirements**

#### **Readings**

There are brief, but critical, readings associated with each lecture. The readings will be delineated below and available on Canvas.

You are required to do the readings ahead of each lecture. To ensure that everyone does the reading, and to help me understand what you're absorbing from the readings, there will be a five-minute reading

quiz at the beginning of each lecture. The quizzes will be designed such that they will be really easy if you have done the readings and thought about them, but hard if you haven't.

No excuses will be given for missing any reading quizzes. However, I will drop your two worst grades. I will let you manage this as you see fit.

## **Lectures**

The lectures will serve two purposes. First, they will fill in basic materials that the readings presuppose. Second, they will put the readings in their larger context and, I hope, set the stage for questions and discussion. I especially encourage you to ask questions during the lecture, either for clarification or to explore topics of interest to you. (We'll experiment with how best to do this. In all probability, sticking a question or comment in the chat will be the most productive. Even typing "I have a question" or "could you say that in a different way?" will be fine.)

## **Projects**

The first two projects will be assigned, based on interest. The final project will be self-selected, and should pertain to some aspect of the 2020 presidential election, either analyzing in depth a topic that came up in 2020, or by analyzing previous presidential elections.

*Project 1* will focus on macro political predictions from fundamentals. I will assign teams of students to adapt an existing model to predict things such as aggregate presidential vote, aggregate congressional vote, state-level presidential vote, and predictions of outcomes for U.S. Senate elections.

*Project 2* will focus on effects of election administration. Here the teams will take on topics such as the effect of closing polling places in Kentucky during the 2020 presidential primary, the effect of COVID-19 restrictions on voter registration rates in 2020, and identifying absentee balloting fraud in the 2016 North Carolina election.

*Project 3* will allow each group to take on a topic of interest that arose during the 2020 election, propose a research strategy and data analysis, and undertake it. To help with selecting the final project, we will keep a running tally of candidate topics. (The modality of how we keep the tally is still to be determined.) I will allow people to propose topics and to propose groups to pursue them. I will need to approve the final composition of groups and the topics, but my goal is to allow everyone to pursue a topic of their interest.

## **State presentations**

The truth of American presidential elections is that there is no single election, but rather, 51 separate elections, one for each state and the District of Columbia. The politics of the states differ, the offices up for election differ (other than president and U.S. House of Representatives), the methods of voting differ, and the political cultures differ. These differences were manifest in the series of presidential primaries carried out last fall and into the summer.

To help orient the class to differences across states, everyone will be assigned to make one 20-minute presentation to the class about the electoral process in each state. (Depending on enrollment, I may assign 2 or 3 people to each state.) The major elements of these presentations will include (1) basic political context, (2) methods of voting, (3) adaptation to voting on account of COVID-19, (4) lessons learned from the primaries, and (5) likely challenges to conducting a credible election in November.

To help in preparing for these presentations, you will be given a set of resources to start. A very good resource for understanding election administration in each state will be the set of state memos on the Healthy Elections website (<https://healthyelections.org/state-updates>).

## Attendance

This is a synchronous class, and at least to begin, I will assume that everyone is attending the assigned lecture time. Some of the classes are designated as “workshops.” These will be informal opportunities for groups to work together, and for the teaching staff to provide feedback and assistance to the groups. They are not substitutes for collaborative work outside of the assigned class times, but productive use of this workshop time will make outside-of-class work easier and more rewarding.

## Being present

We all know the temptations of having access to the web, e-mail, etc. while the Zoom session is going on. In the interest of making the in-person time the most productive, I ask you to adhere to the following two guidelines:

1. *Avoid checking e-mail and using the web for anything other than material related to the class.* If you want to check out something on the web related to something I’m lecturing about, that is fine. If you want to check up on your e-mail or do some on-line shopping, that is fine. I have no way of checking up on this, so it’s the honor system.
2. *No private chatting.* If you have something to share on the chat, chat it to everyone (including me).
3. *Mute your microphone once the class begins.* Unmuting your microphone while we are gathering before the formal class has begun, to say something to the group and/or to me, is fine (and to be encouraged).
4. *Keep your camera on, unless your Internet connection can’t handle it.* If the class gets too big, we’ll have people turn off their cameras for lectures, but seeing people while the class is being conducted is an important part of creating connections among us. *If you have a problem adhering to this request, please let me know privately.*
5. *Please put your questions and interjections in the chat.* If I have obviously overlooked a question, feel free to “raise your hand” or even to pop open your microphone and let me know there’s a chat in the queue.

## Grading

Under the special grading regulation in effect this semester, students will be given letter grades for this class, with D and F grades converted to D/NE and F/NE. Check the [Registrar’s website](#) for further details.

Grading will be based mostly on the projects, with an additional increment being attributed to participation and attendance. Part of that participation will be determined by the staff checking in during the assigned workshop sessions.

In particular, grading will be based on the following distribution:

- Project 1: 15%
- Project 2: 25%
- Final project: 40%
- State presentations: 10%
- Reading quizzes: 10%

## Class Meeting Topics

### 1. Organizing Meeting (Wed., Sept. 2)

The class today will review the topics to be covered in this class. I will provide a brief overview to the substance of the class and to the general pedagogical approach. No prior preparation will be necessary.

### Labor Day Holiday (Mon., Sept. 7)

### 2. Fundamentals: Micro Politics (Wed., Sept. 9)

Today's class will focus on public opinion, which is one of the building blocks of elections. The two major topics to be considered are, first, why do people vote in the first place, and, second, why do they make the choices they make?

#### Readings:

William Riker and Peter C. Ordeshook. A theory of the calculus of voting. *The American Political Science Review* 62, no. 1 (1968): 25 – 42.

Steven J. Rosenstone and Raymond E. Wolfinger. The effect of registration laws on voter turnout. *The American Political Science Review* 72, no. 1 (1978): 22 – 45.

Larry M. Bartels. Partisanship and voting behavior, 1952 – 1996. *American Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 1 (2000): 35 – 50.

Morris P. Fiorina. Economic retrospective voting in American national elections: A micro-analysis. *American Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 2 (1978): 426 – 443.

### 3. Fundamentals: Macro Politics (Mon., Sept. 14)

Although it is certainly the case that the factors influencing the outcome of elections operate on the individual, it is also true that when aggregated up, elections have certain regularities that can be abstracted from the individuals. Today's class will examine how factors such as the economy and presidential popularity influence election outcomes at an aggregate level.

#### Readings:

Tufte, Edward. *Political Control of the Economy*, pages TBA

Fair, Ray C. Presidential and congressional vote-share equations. *American Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 1 (2009): 55 – 72.

Andrew Gelman and Merlin Heidemanns. How *The Economist* Presidential Forecast Works. *The Economist*, <https://projects.economist.com/us-2020-forecast/president/how-this-works>.

### 4. Project Setup 1 (Wed., Sept. 16)

The purpose of today's class is to prepare you for the first project and its presentation. We have now had an introduction to two important topics in the analysis of elections. In this class, I will introduce you to the projects, which will require you to explore a statistical model that predicts aggregate election results and then has you apply that model to predicting the results of the 2020 federal election.

Preparation: Read James Campbell, Introduction, *PS: Political Science & Politics* 44, Special Issue 4: 649 – 654. Also take a look at the symposium on forecasting the 2016 presidential election at <https://politicalsciencenow.com/politics-symposium-forecasting-the-2016-american-national-elections/>.

5. **Workshop 1-A (Mon., Sept. 21)**
6. **Workshop 1-B (Wed., Sept. 23)**
7. **Workshop 1-C (Mon., Sept. 28)**
8. **Workshop 1-D (Wed., Sept. 30)**
  
9. **Presentations 1-A (Mon., Oct. 5)**
10. **Presentations 1-B (Wed., Oct. 7)**

**Indigenous People's Day: Oct. 12.** Note that Monday classes will be held on Tuesday.

**11. Election administration fundamentals (Mon., Oct. 13)**

*Readings:*

Barry C. Burden and Charles Stewart III. Introduction to the *Measure of American Elections*. In *The Measure of American Elections*, Barry C. Burden and Charles Stewart III (eds), chap. 1, pp. 1 – 39.

Kathleen Hale and Mitchell Brown. *How We Vote: Innovation in American Elections*, chap. 1 (The Federal System and Politics: How the U.S. Intergovernmental Architecture Shapes the Way We Vote), pp. 19 – 44

**12. Voting Rights (Wed., Oct. 14)**

*Readings:*

Olivier Richomme. The Voting Rights Act at 50: From vote [sic] participation to meaningful representation. *Transatlantica: Revue d'études américaines/American Studies Journal* 1 (2015): <https://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/7465>.

Anthony J. Gaughan. Has the South changed; Shelby County and the expansion of the voter ID battlefield. *Texas Journal on Civil Liberties & Civil Rights* 19 (2013): 109 – 147.

**13. The Challenges of 2020 (Tues., Oct. 19)**

*Readings:*

Nathaniel Persily and Charles Stewart III. Ten recommendations to ensure a healthy and trustworthy 2020 election. *Lawfare Blog* March 19, 2020: <https://www.lawfareblog.com/ten-recommendations-ensure-healthy-and-trustworthy-2020-election>.

Barry Burden, Robert M. Stein, and Charles Stewart III. More voting by mail would make the 2020 election safer for our health. But it comes with risks of its own. *The Monkey Cage* April 6, 2020: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/04/06/more-voting-by-mail-would-make-2020-election-safer-our-health-it-comes-with-risks-its-own/>.

Nathaniel Persily and Charles Stewart III. The looming threat to voting in person. *The Atlantic*, June 27, 2020: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/looming-threat-voting-person/613552/>.

**14. Project Setup 2 (Wed., Oct. 21)**

The purpose of this class will be to prepare you for the second project and presentations. We have now taken a look at some of the fundamentals of election administration, voting rights, and election reform, as well as had a chance to consider what special challenges face conducting the 2020 election. In this class, I will introduce you to the projects, which will focus on administrative issues that are relevant to the 2020 election, as well as the datasets and analytical issues that will be in play.

Preparation: TBA.

- 15. **Workshop 2-A (Mon., Oct. 26)**
- 16. **Workshop 2-B (Wed., Oct. 28)**
- 17. **Workshop 2-C (Mon., Nov. 2)**
- 18. **Workshop 2-D (Wed., Nov. 4) (Plus Election Day Debrief)**

- 19. **Presentations 2 (Mon., Nov. 9)**

**Veteran's Day: Nov. 11**

- 21. **Workshop 3-A (Mon., Nov. 16)**
- 22. **Workshop 3-B (Wed., Nov. 18)**

**Thanksgiving Break: Nov. 23 & 25**

- 23. **Workshop 3-C (Mon., Nov. 30)**
- 24. **Workshop 3-D (Wed., Dec. 2)**
- 25. **Presentations 3-A (Mon., Dec. 7)**
- 26. **Presentations 3-B (Wed., Dec. 9)**