Political Science 217a/853a, U.S. National Elections
Fall 2018, Wednesdays 1:30 – 3:20

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The course content. Addressed will be a selection of topics associated with U.S. national elections (presidential and congressional). In all cases, U.S. history will be consulted in a search for general patterns and to place today’s politics in context. The material of the course is suitable for any student interested in understanding, or participating in, or doing journalistic coverage of, the electoral processes of the United States, but it is also an introduction to the kinds of research that political scientists undertake to study those processes. Both the readings and the discussions will tilt toward political history, simple statistics, and proper nouns. There will be a shortage of abstraction and statistical complexity. Topics to be addressed include party ideologies, voter participation, econometric analysis, homeostatic patterns in the electorate’s behavior, incumbency advantage in presidential and congressional elections, districting and gerrymandering, voter balancing across institutions, voter policy blowback, the electoral college, partisan skew and dissonance, and the Trump-Clinton election in perspective. (Topics not to be addressed include campaign finance, presidential nominations, the social media, public opinion polls, the media, the conduct of campaigns, and the micro side of voter behavior.)

The course mechanics. This is a reading and discussion seminar. It will not accommodate senior essays or long research papers. There is a heavy reading requirement each week. Each undergraduate will write a series of five analytic comment papers, three to five pages in length. Each of these will address a required reading assignment chosen by the student to dwell on, and will be due at the start of the class covering that material. These deadlines are a strict requirement. At least two of these five papers will be written before Yale College’s midterm date. Graduate students will write four of these papers plus, by the close of the fall reading period, an extended bibliographic essay on a suitable topic (which might be cross-national comparative) approved by the instructor. Students are expected to be ready to discuss the required readings in class. No midterm or final exams.
August 29 – ORGANIZATION MEETING

September 5 – HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Required:


David R. Mayhew, “Which was the most important U.S. election ever?” Washington Post Outlook section, February 19, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/which-was-the-most-important-us-election-ever/2012/02/13/glQAtBlGKR_story.html?utm_term=.1a995535fb33

Suggested:

Walter Dean Burnham, Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics (Norton, 1970). The canonical statement of the “electoral realignments theory” that is referred to at the start of the “patterns in American elections” piece above.


Gary J. Kornblith, “Rethinking the Coming of the Civil War: A Counterfactual Enterprise,” Journal of American History 90:1 (June 2003), 76-105. A model of smart counterfactual speculation. What if the close Polk-Clay election of 1844 had gone the other way? What happens regarding slavery or the Civil War?

difference which party wins an election and presides over the economy? State-of-the-art analysis as of early 2016.


September 12 – PARTY IDEOLOGIES

Required:


Suggested:


Ronald D. Rotunda, The Politics of Language: Liberalism as Word and Symbol (University of Iowa Press, 1986). When and how did the terms “liberal” and “conservative” attain their primacy as U.S. political labels? Look to the 1930s and 1940s.

Norman Luttbeg & Michael M. Grant, “The Failure of Liberal/Conservative ideology as a Cognitive Structure,” Public Opinion Quarterly 49:1 (Spring 1985), 80-93. Ignore the title. This piece has some good basic information about what voters think the labels mean—at least what
they thought then in the 1980s: the usages have evolved somewhat. But this is a nice kind of analysis.


September 19 – PARTICIPATION

Required:


Chart updating the Kromkowski chart (page 11, above) to include the 2004, 2008, and 2012 elections.


Markus Prior & Lori D. Bougher, “‘Like They’ve Never, Ever Seen in This Country’? Political Interest and Voter Engagement in 2016,” Public Opinion Quarterly 82 (special issue 2018), 236-256.

Suggested:


Donald Ratcliffe, “The Right to Vote and the Rise of Democracy, 1787-1828,” Journal of the Early Republic 33:2 (Summer 2013), 219-54. Again, white males. Recent research has pushed the U.S.’s record of relatively high 19th-century voting participation backwards in time. The picture doesn’t look as 1830s-Jacksonian as it used to.


**SEPTEMBER 26 – ECONOMETRIC ANALYSIS**

**Required:**


**Suggested:**


October 3 – HOMESTASIS (that is, election-induced control of the government bounces around the median voter to left and right, in an evolving equilibrium, by way of the victorious parties’ ideological overshoot once in office and voters’ compensatory adjustment)

Required:


Suggested:


Joseph Bafumi & Michael C. Herron, “Leapfrog Representation: A Study of American Voters and Their Members in Congress,” American Political Science Review 104:3 (August 2010), 519-42. A U.S. House election lofts to power a party whose MCs are to the left, or to the right, of the U.S. median voter or the median voter of either party. This piece jibes with the Stimson et al. model.


October 10 – PERSONAL INCUMBENCY ADVANTAGE

Required:

David R. Mayhew, “Incumbency Advantage in Presidential Elections: The Historical Record,” Political Science Quarterly 123:2 (Summer 2008), 201-28

Anthony Fowler & Andrew B. Hall, “Long-Term Consequences of Election Results,” British Journal of Political Science 47 (2015), 351-72

Suggested:


David Samuels, “Presidentialism and Accountability for the Economy in Comparative Perspective,” American Political Science Review 98:3 (August 2004), 425-36. Net of all else, parties profit electorally in a range of presidential systems, not just the USA’s, by running incumbent presidential candidates.


October 24 – DISTRICTING AND GERRYMANDERING

Required:


Suggested:


David Samuels & Richard Snyder, “The Value of a Vote: Malapportionment in Comparative Perspective,” British Journal of Political Science 1:4 (October 2001), 651-71. How do the U.S. House and Senate compare with other representative bodies around the world? The Senate is way off the world norm.
October 31 – VOTER BALANCING (either as a voter intention, or as a product somehow of staggered terms across the House, Senate, and presidency)


Suggested:


Matthew S. Shugart, “The Electoral Cycle and Institutional Sources of Divided Presidential Government,” American Political Science Review 89:2 (June 1995), 327-343. What is the story for midterms (or for other between-presidential-elections contests if not exactly midterms) in other presidential systems?


Brian Knight, “An Econometric Evaluation of Competing Explanations for the Midterm Gap,” Quarterly Journal of Political Science 12 (2017), 205-239. This is a skilled, up-to-date probe into the various causes of the House midterm gap.
November 7 – PERFORMANCE BLOWBACK

Required:


Suggested:


Required:


Suggested:

James Roger Sharp, The Deadlocked Election of 1800: Jefferson, Burr, and the Union in the Balance (University Press of Kansas, 2010), chs. 8-10


Ronald F. King, “Hayes Truly Won: A Revisionist Analysis of the 1876 Electoral Vote in Louisiana, South Carolina, and Florida,” paper presented at the annual conference of the APSA, 2000, and apparently not published subsequently. But King did publish papers on two of those states’ gubernatorial elections in 1876, which very likely matched what went down at the presidential level in the two states: “Counting the Votes: South Carolina’s Stolen Election of 1876,” Journal of Interdisciplinary History 32:2 (Autumn 2001), 169-91; “A Most Corrupt Election: Louisiana in 1876,” Studies in American Political Development 15 (Fall 2001), 123-37. The Hayes-Tilden election of 1876 is the one that was resolved by a commission.


**November 28 – PARTISAN SKEW AND DISSONANCE IN THE SYSTEM**

**Required:**

Required:


Two new charts that update Tables 1.3 and 1.4 (in the book above) to include the elections of 2012 and 2016

**December 5 – THE TRUMP-CLINTON ELECTION IN PERSPECTIVE**

**Required:**


Sean Trende, “The ‘Emerging Democratic Majority’ Fails to Emerge,” ch. 14 in Larry Sabato et al., Trumped.


**Suggested:**
John B. Judis & Ruy Teixeira, *The Emerging Democratic Majority* (Scribner, 2002), ch. 2 (“George McGovern’s Revenge: Who’s in the Emerging Democratic Majority”). Judis & Teixeira were the leading proponents of the idea of an “emerging Democratic majority.”


For those with a keen interest in political geography, there exists a set of very nice county-level maps, in color, comparing 2016 with previous elections:


January 16, 2017 - The South
https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2017/01/16/how_trump_won_the_south_132796.html

January 17 – The West
https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2017/01/17/how_trump_won_the_west_132803.html

January 18 – The Northeast
https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2017/01/18/how_trump_won_the_northeast_132827.html

January 19 – The Midwest
https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2017/01/19/how_trump_won_the_midwest_132834.html

January 20 – Conclusions
https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2017/01/20/how_trump_won__conclusions_132846.html