

Political Science 124: Parties, Elections, Public Opinion  
Fall 2008  
Professor Julia Azari  
Marquette University

**Professor Contact Information:**

[Julia.azari@mu.edu](mailto:Julia.azari@mu.edu)

**Office: 458 WWP**

**Office hours: Tues.-Thurs. 3:30-4:30, Wed. 12-4**

“An election cannot give a country a firm sense of direction if it has two or more national parties which merely have different names but are as alike in their principles and aims as two peas in the same pod.” – Franklin Roosevelt

“The trouble with free elections is, you never know who is going to win.” – Leonid Brezhnev

“Those who stay away from the election think that one vote will do no good: 'Tis but one step more to think one vote will do no harm.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson

## **Course Description and Goals**

This course covers a variety of topics in American electoral politics. As such, the course has several main objectives. The first is to develop an understanding of American political parties and their role in the election process. In the first unit of the course, devoted to political parties, we will ask and answer questions about parties from a number of perspectives: historical and contemporary; normative and positive; organizational and behavior. There is little point in understanding voting behavior and elections without a foundational understanding of the political parties about which voters form opinions. In this unit we will look at the recent history and contemporary nature of the Republican and Democratic parties. We will also look at the nomination process and how it shapes and is shaped by political parties. Finally, moving beyond the two main parties, we will look at the types of third party movements that emerge in American politics, and the conditions under which these movements gain momentum.

The second unit moves into the topic of voting behavior. Voting behavior encompasses a variety of processes and outcomes, and we will look at these first in context, considering both presidential and Congressional elections. This unit will also cover campaigns and the soft science of election interpretation.

The final unit of the course takes a more in-depth look at public opinion. We will consider trends in public opinion about issues and governing institutions, as well as some psychological theories about how political opinions are formed.

## **Main Themes of the Course**

### Theme 1: Supply and demand

Most of you are probably familiar with the concept of supply and demand in the economic world. In this course, we will think about elections and political participation in terms of supply and demand as well. On the supply side, what do parties, candidates, and even pollsters supply from which citizens can choose? On the demand side, we will look at the factors shaping citizen attitudes (both long and short-term), voting choices, and affiliations.

### Theme 2: Change over time

How have the major parties changed over time? How have their constituencies changed over time? How has our thinking about voting behavior changed over time?

### Theme 3: Importance of political parties in American politics

Are third party movements gaining ground? What, if anything, does it mean to be a political “independent?” How does partisan affiliation relate to other social factors, opinions, and voting behavior? What is the nature of American political parties – do they represent a coherent ideology? Should they?

### Theme 4: Analyzing mass trends vs. individual behavior

At some points in the course, we will focus on the behavior of individuals – how do individuals vote, form partisan attachments, and form opinions? At other times, we will focus on aggregate trends, such as election outcomes, group behavior, and even forecasting models that posit economic or other contextual factors as the sole determinants of election outcomes.

## **Expectations and Assignments**

The major writing assignment in this course will be an analysis of a contemporary election campaign. You will choose one campaign that will be ongoing during the course of semester, and write up several analyses of the campaign. Make sure you choose your race carefully: you’ll want to select a campaign that has high potential to hold your interest through out the semester, and is competitive enough to warrant analysis of the campaign strategy and media usage. With these guidelines in mind, you may choose any national or gubernatorial race: the presidential race, any U.S. House or U.S. Senate race is acceptable.

You will be expected to attend each class session fully prepared to discuss the material and participate in discussions and debates with your classmates in the course of classroom discourse as well as more structured activities.

As students and scholars of politics, it is critical that we maintain an awareness of current events. You should follow at least one major national news source, such as the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*, and should consider reading a political blog of some sort. Current events will be discussed in class and, while emotions may run high about the events of an election campaign, we will also subject current events, political candidates, and even our own viewpoints to rigorous intellectual analysis.

## **Grading Guidelines**

Your grade will be determined by participation, a midterm exam, a final exam, and three written assignments. The breakdown is as follows:

Participation: 15%  
Midterm 1: 15%  
Midterm 2: 15%  
Assignments: 30%  
Final exam: 25%

## **List of Important Dates**

October 9 – Assignment 1 due  
September 30 – Midterm 1  
October 30 – Midterm 2  
November 11- Assignment 2 due  
December 4- Assignment 3 due  
December 10 – Final exam, 8-10AM

Week 1

August 26: Intro and Big Questions

August 28: NO CLASS

Reading (to be discussed the following week): Gerring, *Party Ideologies in American, 1828-1992*, pp. 3-22 (D2L)

## **Unit One: Political Parties: Democracy's Building Blocks?**

Week 2: Understanding the Two Parties

September 2

Reading: Polsby and Wildavsky, 249-255

Democratic Party Platform exercise

September 4

Reading: same in P and W

Republican platform exercise

Week 3 Parties and Nominations

September 9

Reading: Polsby and Wildavsky, 97-130

September 11

Reading: Polsby and Wildavsky, 131-150

Week 4 Partisanship and Polarization

September 16

Reading: Polsby and Wildavsky, pp. 5-49

September 18

Reading: Fiorina, Chapters 1-3

September 23

Reading: Fiorina, Chapters 3-8

Week 5 “Third Party” movements

September 25

Reading: Abramson et al “Challenges to the American Two-Party System: Evidence from the 1968, 1980, 1992, and 1996 Presidential Elections” (D2L)

Assignment 1 prompt handed out

## **Unit Two: Voting Behavior and Elections**

September 30: Midterm 1

Week 6 Explaining Presidential Elections

October 2

Reading: Campbell, “The 2004 Presidential Election Forecasts” (D2L)

Week 7 Congressional elections

October 7

Reading: Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections* (D2L)

October 9

Reading: Robert S. Erikson, "Economic Conditions and the Congressional Vote: A Review of the Macrolevel Evidence," *American Journal of Political Science* 34 (1990), 373-99. See also followup comment by Gary Jacobson and Erikson reply

### **Assignment 1 DUE**

Week 8 Critical Elections/Realignment/Mandates

October 14 –

Readings:

Key, "A Theory of Critical Elections" (D2L)

October 16 – Fall break, NO CLASS

October 21 Mayhew, chapters 4-5 (D2L)

Assignment 2 prompt handed out

Week 9 Media, Money and Campaigning

October 23

Readings: Polsby and Wildavsky, 151-207

October 28

Readings: same

October 30 – Midterm 2

### **Unit Three: Public Opinion**

Week 10 Political Attitudes and Information

November 4

Readings: Clawson and Oxley, Chapter 4

November 6 Election Aftermath

Readings: current events

## Week 11 Political Attitudes Continued

November 11

Readings: Clawson and Oxley, Chapter 7

### **Assignment 2 due**

November 13

Readings: Clawson and Oxley, Chapter 10

Week 12 public opinion and contemporary issues

November 18

Readings: Clawson and Oxley, Chapter 8

Assignment 3 prompt handed out

November 20

Readings: Clawson and Oxley, Chapter 9

### **Unit Four: Special Topics**

Week 13 what do elections mean- mandates, midterm correction, etc

November 25 – Polsby and Wildavsky, 252-267

Grossback, Peterson and Stimson – Mandate Politics (selection)

November 27: Thanksgiving, NO CLASS

Week 14 how do American elections compare to other democracies?

December 2

Readings TBA

December 4

Wrap-up

Reading: Clawson and Oxley, Ch 12

Assignment #3 due