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PS 13N: THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Irrespective of the outcome, the 2008 U.S. presidential election will be historic. In this seminar we will use concepts and tools from political science to understand the campaign, the election, and its likely impact on American politics and policy-making. As the campaign unfolds over the fall quarter, we will consider a variety of perspectives on campaigns and elections. To what extent do campaigns really matter? Can election outcomes be predicted long in advance of the campaign? How do voters decide for whom to vote, and indeed, whether to turn out at all? Can public opinion polls be trusted, and if so, how much? To look at these questions, we will consider historical data sources along with “real time” data from the 2008 campaign through the fall quarter.

We will consider a number of other questions that are of special relevance to the 2008 election and we will examine the role of race in American public opinion and voting behavior, drawing on unique data sources to examine the evolution of attitudes towards Barack Obama, and of voting intentions over the 2008 campaign.

In short, we have two complementary goals in this class. First, we will use the concepts, categories, theories and methods of political science to better understand the 2008 U.S. presidential election. Second, and conversely, the 2008 U.S. presidential election will be a vehicle for us to better understand those elements of political science.

Texts. We have no set text for the class. I will assign readings ahead of each week’s classes.

Assessment.

SCHEDULING

- My office hours are Wednesday, 2-4pm.
- I will miss one or two classes due to travel commitments; see below.

1. **Monday, September 22.** Introduction.

Discussion points:

- Why are elections important?

- Why is *this* election important?

2. **Wednesday, September 24.** Political parties and elections in American democracy.

Reading:

- Schattschneider, E.E. 1942. *Party Government*. Rinehart: New York. Preface and Chapter 4.
- Bartels, Larry. 2008. *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*. Russell Sage Foundation and Princeton University Press: Princeton. Chapter 2.
- Kernell Samuel. and Gary C. Jacobson. 2006. *The Logic of American Politics*. CQ Press: Washington DC. Chapter 12 on parties.

Discussion points:

- What do political parties *do*?
- Why are there just two major political parties in the United States? Why are 3rd parties not viable, or at least not for long?
- What ideas and whose interests do the American political parties represent?
- Do elections make a difference?
- Does it matter which party supplies the president, or controls Congress? And to what? The macro-economy? Incomes? National security? Social outcomes like health, living standards, educational standards?

3. **Monday, September 29.** Party in the electorate: party identification.

Reading:

- Campbell, Angus, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes. 1960. *The American Voter*. Wiley: New York. Chapters 6 and 7.
- Bartels, Larry. 2000. "Partisanship and Voting Behavior, 1952-1996." *American Journal of Political Science*. 44(1): 35-50. Available from JSTOR.

Discussion points:

- What is party identification? What does it do in a party system?
- How and why has the distribution of party identification in the United States changed over time? Over 30-40 years? Over the last 2 years?
- Do you have a party identification? Do your parents?

Group Exercise:

- Gather data on the following two variables: (a) percentage vote for the Democratic candidate for president in 2000 (Gore) in each state; (b) the same quantity, but for 2004 (Kerry). Form a two-dimensional graph where you plot Kerry vote on the vertical axis, against Gore vote on the horizontal axis. What does the visual pattern of points reveal?

- (b) There are lots of sources of polling data on the distribution of party identification over time; in text books, in scholarly articles, on numerous web sites devoted to polling. Build a small data set that show the percentage of the American electorate in various party identification categories over the period 1980 to the present. Try to “zoom in” on the period 200 to the present. Can you detect any trends in these data? Graphs might help.

4. **Wednesday, October 1.**

5. **Monday, October 6.**

6. **Wednesday, October 8.** Predicting Presidential Elections.

Reading:

- Fair, Ray C. 2002. *Predicting Presidential Elections and Other Things*. Stanford University Press. Stanford.
- Gelman and King. 1993. *British Journal of Political Science*.
- Hibbs, Douglas.
- Wlezien and Erikson.

Discussion points:

- What factors are used in the literature in predicting presidential elections? What is the implicit micro-level/individual-level of voting in this literature?
- How persuasive is the statistical evidence for the effects of these factors?
- How well can we predict elections?
- If elections are predictable, then what is the campaign about?

7. **Monday, October 13.** No class.

8. **Wednesday, October 15.** Presidential campaigns: what do they do?

Reading:

- Vavreck, Lynn. 2009. *The Message Matters*. Princeton University Press: Princeton.

Discussion points:

- Do campaigns matter? Or do they simply reflect the prevailing political, economic, social conditions in which the election takes place?
- In which U.S. presidential elections do they appear to have been important effects from campaign events?

9. **Monday, October 20.**

10. **Wednesday, October 22.**

11. **Monday, October 27.** No class.
12. **Wednesday, October 29.**
13. **Monday, November 3.** Election-Eve. Review of the campaign.
Discussion points:
 - Highlights or “turning points” in the campaign?
14. **Wednesday, November 5.** Post-election wrap-up.
Discussion points:
 - Who won? Where? Electoral College map.
 - Turnout.
 - House and Senate results.
 - Surprises? Historical firsts?
 - Do we need to revise any of our predictions about the effects of the campaign? Did the campaign matter? Or could we have predicted the result well ahead of time?
15. **Monday, November 10.**
16. **Wednesday, November 12.**
17. **Monday, November 17.**
18. **Wednesday, November 19.**
19. **Monday, November 24.** No classes, Thanksgiving break.
20. **Wednesday, November 26.** No classes, Thanksgiving break.
21. **Monday, December 1.**
22. **Wednesday, December 3.**