Contemporary American Politics: The 2008 Election in Context

POLI 3712                  Jessica Blatt
Fall 2008                  Bates 20
Mon/Thurs 2:00-3:25        jblatt@slc.edu
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COURSE DESCRIPTION

At this writing, the 2008 presidential contest has already been precedent setting in a number of ways. This course will attempt to think systematically about what the 2008 election can teach us about American politics. Does it confirm or extend what we think we know? Does it lend support to certain accounts and undermine others? Does it challenge basic assumptions?

We will begin by surveying a range of theoretical approaches to and empirical findings about contemporary American electoral politics. Topics will include partisan “regimes,” the secular and political factors shaping the American presidency, and trends in public opinion, voter participation, and voting behavior (including the much-repeated idea of a fundamental divide between “red” and “blue” states). We will examine the influence on elections of racial, class, religious, and gender dynamics as well as party organization and electoral mechanisms. Throughout, we will follow the campaigns, attempting to understand and explain the workings and finally the outcome of this year’s contests.

IMPORTANT NOTE ON THE SCHEDULE

The requirements for this class include a number of events outside regularly scheduled class times. These include (but are not necessarily limited to!) attendance at a lecture series being planned around the election, at least one debate-watching evening, and, hopefully, at least one day-long “field trip” to do voter protection or get-out-the-vote work on election day. Some of these events are already scheduled (though still subject to change), some are not. In any event, THESE ARE REAL REQUIREMENTS, NOT EXTRAS. Signing up for this class is, in effect, agreeing to make these events a priority in your schedule, and to shuffle around other commitments if necessary. So if your schedule is very crowded and inflexible, this is not the course for you.

Also, because much of what we do in this course will be determined by events happening in real time (responding to things that haven’t happened yet, watching debates that may be rescheduled, etc.), the schedule for the readings/discussions below should be taken as more of a wish list than an actual schedule: a list of materials and topics that I hope we will cover, and the order in which I hope we will do so. But things may change, and as we have learned (think 2000 presidential election, 2008 Democratic primary), American politics don’t always conform to the schedule we expect. So in some respects we will have to make this up as we go along. Again, the moral of the story is that we will all have to be a bit flexible, and also that if you miss class for any reason, you will need to check we left off and what we plan to do the following week.
MATERIALS FOR PURCHASE

Paul R. Abramson et al, *Change and Continuity in the 2004 & 2006 Elections*
Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter With Kansas?*
Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward: *Why Americans Still Don’t Vote, and Why Politicians Want It That Way*
Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make*
Raymond E. Wolfinger and Steven J. Rosenstone, *Who Votes?*

Students are required to read the national political coverage in the *New York Times* daily over the course of the semester and are asked to bring relevant articles to class. All of this is easier if you subscribe to the print edition of the paper. Discounted subscriptions are available to students. (If you already subscribe to another major, national paper—e.g. *The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post*—you don’t necessarily need to switch to the *Times*, though you should read at least its editorial and opinion pages online.)

REQUIREMENTS AND POLICIES

Writing

*Reading Responses*

Students are required to submit regular, written responses the readings (see due dates listed below). Responses will discuss all readings since the previous response was due. They need not be comprehensive, but should briefly analyze main themes in the readings and class discussions (where applicable) and raise questions or theses for discussion in class. Responses should average 300-600 words. They are not graded but will receive a 3, 3+, or 3-, depending on whether they meet, exceed, or miss some part of the expectations for the exercise. You will get more specific feedback on your reading responses in conference.

No late reading responses will be accepted (except in cases of excused absence, on which see below), but you do get a “pass” on one response. After that, failure to turn in a response in class on the due date will affect your overall grade/evaluation.

*Punditry Practice*

Just before the election, you will be asked to survey the pundits, and then join them! In a short paper (5-7 pp.), you will give an overview of what political commentators in major media (the *Times*, other major newspapers, political magazines, network and cable news channels) are predicting and for what reasons. (Has a consensus emerged as to who is going to win and why, how different groups/regions will vote, etc.? What seem to be the factors that most commentators expect to be decisive? Why? What are the major areas of uncertainty?) You should also consider how well the pundits’ reasoning squares with what we have read and discussed so far in class.
Once you have done this, it will be time to go out on a limb and make your own predictions. No points for lucky guesses; this exercise will be evaluated on your grasp of the relevant materials and the depth of your reasoning.

**Conference Work**

Our main task in this class is to try to makes sense of the 2008 election. So conference work will ideally be geared to explaining some aspect of the outcome (presuming we know it by this December!) or its meaning for larger questions about American politics. Most conference work will take the form of a paper of about 10 pages. You will also present your work for discussion by the class in one of our final class sessions.

**Note on written assignments**

Written work should be typed, double-spaced, with standard margins.

All assignments should be written in an appropriate academic style. This does not mean you should use convoluted sentences or fancy jargon (you shouldn’t). It means your work should be analytical and rigorous rather than personal and allusive. It also means it must conform to academic norms of citation. Reading responses require citations but not bibliographies; other written assignments must have citations and formal bibliographies. (Class readings should be included in bibliographies.) Policies on academic integrity, including plagiarism, are outlined in the student handbook.

You are free to use any standard citation style you like. If you have questions about citation or other formal aspects of academic writing, the Chicago Manual of Style “Citation Quick Guide” and “Q&A” are great resources. They can be accessed at [http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org](http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org).

**Participation**

You are expected to be an active, constructive, and respectful participant in class discussions. We will refer to texts constantly so you must always bring copies of the readings to class. You are also encouraged to bring in relevant articles from the New York Times or other news source for discussion with the class. And be prepared: students may be selected at random to brief the class on political news since the last class session!

**Grades and Evaluations**

For purposes of grades and evaluations, work will be weighted as follows.

- Class participation: 25%
- Reading responses: 25%
- Punditry exercise: 15%
- Conference work: 25%
- Final in-class presentation: 10%

Grades—including your estimated class-participation grade—available on request.
Absences and Deadlines

If you absolutely cannot be in class or conference for some reason, please make every effort to contact me in advance. I consider an absence “excused” if it is due to a religious holiday, family emergency, academic conflict (within reason), or medical issue serious enough to send you to the doctor; I reserve the right to ask for documentation. Having a cold doesn’t count; neither do work or internship obligations or having to go to your cousin’s wedding. If you miss a conference appointment due to an excused absence I will make every effort to reschedule it. Conference appointments missed for any other reason will not be rescheduled.

You get one “free” absence, no questions asked. The next two unexcused absences will affect your grade/evaluation for class participation. **IF YOU MISS FOUR CLASSES YOU WILL LOSE CREDIT.** Please be on time for class.

Consistently missing conference may also lead to loss of credit and will affect my evaluation of your work (and your grade).

All written work must be submitted in class on the due date. I consider assignments one day late if I get them after class on the day they were due.

Email

I do not accept assignments over email, but you should of course feel free to contact me at any time with questions about class or conference work. Just know that I may take a day or so to respond, and I may not respond on weekends. (Translation: If you want help with something due Monday, it’s a bad idea to email me on Friday afternoon.)

**SCHEDULE OF READINGS/DISCUSSIONS (revised version)**

**Monday 9/8: Introductions**
No reading

**Section 1: Parties and Participation**

**Thursday 9/11: The Democrats in 2008**
Platform of the Democratic Party
View in class: Clips from the Democratic Convention

**Monday 9/15: The Republicans in 2008**
Platform of the Republican Party
View in class: Clips from the Republican Convention
**Thursday 9/18: Partisan Regimes**
James L. Sundquist, *The Dynamics of the American Party System*, Ch 1
*Response due*

**Monday 9/22: Note change!**
No class today; replaced by panel with Francis Fox Piven, Margaret Groarke, and Lorraine Minnitt, **Tuesday 9/23 1:30-3:00**, Titsworth Lecture Hall.
Reading for Tuesday: Piven and Cloward, *Why Americans...*, Chs 3-6

**Thursday 9/25: Participation and Voting Rights**
No additional reading, to discuss panel and chapters from Piven and Cloward
NB: Next week’s reading is substantial, so use the time to get a head start.
*Response due*

**Monday 9/29: Participation and Democracy**
Wolfinger and Rosenstone, *Who Votes?*, Chs 1, 5, and 6
*Response due*

**Thursday 10/2: Understanding the Financial Crisis**
In preparation for economics faculty panel on the financial crisis, catch up on coverage of crisis, bailout, etc. in the NYT and elsewhere; we will discuss in class. Responses should outline your understanding of the nature and apparent political ramifications of the crisis. They should also include a list of at least 3 questions you plan to ask at the panel.
* Response due

**Monday 10/6: Public Opinion, Elite Frames, and Democracy**
Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans’ Policy Preferences*, Ch 1
Donald R. Kinder and Lynn M. Sanders, *Divided by Color: Racial Politics and Democratic Ideals*, Ch 10
AP-Yahoo poll (9/27/08)
*Response due*
Section 2: Continuity and Change in Postwar American Politics and Institutions

Monday 10/13: Theorizing the Presidency
Theodore Lowi, *The Personal President: Power Invested, Promise Unfulfilled*, Ch 5
Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make*, Ch 1
*Response due*

Thursday 10/16: “Political Time”
Skowronek, Chs 2-3, Ch 7 part 1
*response due*

Monday 10/20: Study Days
No Class!

Thursday 10/23: From the New Deal to Anti-Statism
Skowronek, Ch 7 parts 2-3
Abramson, 65-67, 131-134
David Plotke, *Democracy and Boundaries: Themes in Contemporary American Politics*, Ch 3
*Response due*

Monday 10/27: From Reagan to Bush 2
Skowronek, Ch 8 and Afterword
Christopher Kelley, “Rethinking Presidential Power: The Unitary Executive and the George W. Bush Presidency”
*Response due*

Thursday 10/30: 2004 and 2006 elections
Abramson, *Change and Continuity*... pp. 1-15, 34-70, 87-133
Section 3: Election 2008

Monday 11/3: Trends and Forecasts
Abramson, pp. 87-181, 299-323
James Campbell, “Election Forecasting” PS: Political Science and Politics 41/3 (2008)

Punditry assignment due

Tuesday 11/4: Election Day!
Bring snacks, a pen and notebook, warm clothes and wear comfortable shoes. We meet in Andrews parking lot at 8:30. Don’t be late! (If you’re voting here, polls open at 6 AM.)

Thursday 11/6 AND Monday 11/10: What Happened?
NYT election supplements and other election coverage (I will email you materials to read over the weekend)
You will present your punditry projects on Monday; we will reflect together on the extent to which the election results conformed to our expectations, and what we make of any surprises.

Thursday 11/3: New Directions?
Stephen Skowronek, Presidential Leadership in Political Time, Ch 5
*Response due

Monday 11/17: Note change!
No class today, replaced by “Wounded Colossus: The Threat to America as We’ve Known It,” lecture by Bob Herbert, Tuesday 11/18, 1:30-3:00, Heimbold Auditorium

Sect. 4: Characterizations of Contemporary Politics—How Are They Holding Up?

Thursday 11/20: Democratic Decline?
*Response due (responses should include Herbert talk)

Monday 11/24: Polarization or “Post-Partisanship”?
Philip Longman, “What Does ‘Post-Partisan’ Mean?” (online)
Jonathan Rauch, “Post-partisans” The Atlantic August 2008 (online)
*Response due

11/27: Happy Thanksgiving!
Monday 12/1: What’s Up With Kansas?
Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter...?*, Introduction, Chs 1, 3, 5-6, 8-9

**Thursday 12/4: What’s Up With Kansas?, cont’d**
Frank, Chs 10, 12-Afterword
*Response due*

Edward Carmines and James Stimson, *Issue Evolution* pp. 1-26
Kinder and Sanders, *Divided By Color*, Ch 9
*Response due*

**Thursday 12/11: Political Scientists Weigh In**
Early scholarly responses to the election; readings TBA
*Response due*

**Monday 12/15 AND Thursday 12/18: Final Presentations**

*Response due Monday 12/15 at the beginning of class***