

POL 2192A
Special Topics: An American Election in Real Time
Fall 2026
Professor Matthew Lebo

Office: SSC and online.

Office hours: Wednesdays 10am-12pm.

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All lectures are posted for you to watch on Brightspace

There will also be State of the Union meetings every Tuesdays 10:00am on zoom starting Sept. 15:
<https://westernuniversity.zoom.us/j/6147967542>.

Tuesday meetings will also be recorded so attendance is not necessary. Quiz and test questions will come from the posted lectures. Tuesday discussions will be for talking about the November elections, American politics, and questions from the posted lectures.

I. Introduction:

We will study U.S. presidential and congressional campaigns while paying close attention to the 2026 races. In particular, we will focus on understanding the causes of successes and failures in American elections. We will also cover topics such as the U.S. electoral system, public opinion, political parties, redistricting and gerrymandering, polarization, voting behaviour, and campaign financing. Readings and assignments will include data-driven research on these and other contemporary aspects of American politics. We will discuss the congressional elections as they unfold and pay attention to election forecasting, polling, and the campaigns. We'll be looking ahead to what Congress might do in the next two years and what the 2028 presidential election will be like.

A background in American politics is preferred but not required.

II. Learning Objectives

- 1) Students will learn the **basic history of American politics** with a focus on the development and evolution of the **major political parties**. This includes: The beginning of political parties at the Founding of the United States and during the first few presidencies; the emergence of the Republican Party in the 1850s; the evolution of the two parties on civil rights beginning in the 1960s until the present. We will also learn about the recent history of the parties that set the stage for the 2016 election of President Trump and how American politics has changed since.
- 2) Students will learn about the rise of **polarization** in the United States and its effects on recent elections and politics in general. We will discuss the steady decline of democratic norms and values.
- 3) Students will also learn how American **national elections** work, both primaries and general elections. Rules and processes that govern the elections. Students will learn the fundamentals of American elections to know how to **navigate the campaign**, the polls, Election Night, and the aftermath of the election.
- 4) And, throughout the course, students will learn about the 2026 elections – how we got here, what are the factors shaping the election, and what are the **key groups** to pay attention to in assessing the likely outcome.

III. Course Requirements

- i. Watch the week's lectures and read the weekly readings on the topic of the week. There will be videos and podcasts as well. Come to live State of the Union chats Tuesdays at 10:00am and ask questions.

- ii. Follow the campaign in the news. Make one of the following your homepage for the duration of the campaign and read some of the others:
 - a) at least one major, non-partisan newspaper such as the BBC, The New York Times, or The Wall Street Journal; and
 - b) one serious political magazine (print or online) such as Vox, Slate, Politico, The Economist, or The Weekly Standard; and
 - c) one history website such as History News Network.
- iii. Watching campaign events. Students are expected to watch the major political events of the campaign season. Watch the news daily and big events like speeches, debates, and election night.

IV. Course Grading:

Weekly quizzes: 5% for each week except first and last week. 50% overall. ALL ONLINE.

Multiple Choice Mid-term: 25%. ONLINE WEEK OF OCTOBER 27th.

Multiple Choice Final exam: 25%. IN PERSON.

V. Schedule

Week 1: September 8, 2026: Introduction to the U.S. Congress and 2026 Elections

Topics: How does the U.S. Congress work? What are its powers? How do elections work? Swing states. Senate and House elections.

Read:

Hans Noel. 2010. Ten Things that Political Scientists Know that You Don't. *The Forum Volume 8, Issue 3.*

http://faculty.georgetown.edu/hcn4/Downloads/Noel_Forum.PDF

Week 2: September 15, 2026: Democratic Decline in the United States

LIVE ZOOM CHAT 10:00am Tuesday Sept 15: <https://westernuniversity.zoom.us/j/6147967542>

Read: Seth Masket, "We F**king Warned You." https://smotus.substack.com/p/we-fking-warned-you?utm_source=publication-search

V-Dem Report: <https://www.v-dem.net/news/press-release-democratic-backsliding-reaches-western-democracies-with-us-decline-unprecedented/>

Frontline's American Insurrection:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvmaw_gIUQ&list=PLNirPamLn46gfmwW3ezB9Isozo8Z6Zbe5

Week 3: September 22, 2026: Political Parties and their Evolution in the United States

LIVE ZOOM CHAT 10:00am Tuesday Sept 22: <https://westernuniversity.zoom.us/j/6147967542>

Read: America the Divided Republic:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/01/two-party-system-broke-constitution/604213/>

Quick history: <https://www.history.com/news/how-the-party-of-lincoln-won-over-the-once-democratic-south>

Quick Reads: First parties: <https://www.constitutionfacts.com/founders-library/first-party-system/>

The 1796 election: <https://www.ushistory.org/us/19c.asp>

The Great Debate: <https://www.constitutionfacts.com/us-articles-of-confederation/the-great-debate/>

Listen: Fivethirtyeight podcast: <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/politics-podcast-how-the-gop-chose-to-be-a-white-party/>

Watch: short video on LBJ speech: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4kOjKPe6-9o>

Longer speech: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-C2miztRfw>

Movie Recommendation: All the Way on Crave/HBO with Bryan Cranston.

Hamilton on Disney Plus – that’s a recommendation, not a requirement.

Listen: <https://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/podcast/the-federalists-vs-the-anti-federalists>

Weekly learning objectives: The Framers’ views of political parties. How they emerged during the first 3 presidencies. The creation of the Republican Party and the Civil War. The positions of the parties up to the 1960s. How Civil Rights changed the two parties in the United States. History of the parties beginning post-WWII to the present. How the American South went from solidly Democratic to solidly Republican.

Week 4: September 29, 2026: Presidential Primaries and Elections

LIVE ZOOM CHAT 10:00am Tuesday Sept 29: <https://westernuniversity.zoom.us/j/6147967542>

Read: Andrew Prokop (2015), “Political scientists think ‘the party’ will stop Trump. They shouldn’t be so sure,” Vox. <https://www.vox.com/2015/9/23/9352273/party-decides-trump-sanders>

Read: Nate Silver (2016), “The Republican Party May Be Failing: What ‘The Party Decides’ could get wrong about Donald Trump and the GOP,” FiveThirtyEight. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-republican-party-may-be-failing/>

Watch: Video, How do primaries work?: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51273719>

Weekly learning objective: How do primaries work? How did Trump win the 2016 Republican primaries and how did Biden get the 2020 Democratic nomination? What are the advantages and disadvantages of primaries compared to leadership conventions, like in Canada?

Week 5: October 6, 2026: House and Senate Primaries and Elections in 2026

LIVE ZOOM CHAT 10:00am Tuesday Oct 6: <https://westernuniversity.zoom.us/j/6147967542>

Read: The goals of a Speaker: <https://www.mischiefsoffaction.com/post/evaluating-pelosi-speakership>

Fivethirtyeight article: <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/democrats-lead-the-race-for-congress-but-the-national-environment-will-probably-change/>

Look: https://ballotpedia.org/United_States_House_of_Representatives_elections,_2020

Look: the Electoral College, Senate, and House pages at the Cook Political Report: <https://cookpolitical.com>

Study the map of Senate races here: <https://www.270towin.com/2020-senate-election/>

Watch: Global News primer <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAj-Y3gr3f4>

Weekly learning objective: How are House and Senate seats distributed? What does majority status mean in the House and Senate? What is the recent history of who has won the majority? What do the elections look like for 2020? What should we be watching?

Week 6: October 20, 2026: Redistricting, Reapportionment, and Gerrymandering

LIVE ZOOM CHAT 10:00am Tuesday Oct 20: <https://westernuniversity.zoom.us/j/6147967542>

Read: What is Gerrymandering? <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/27/us/what-is-gerrymandering.html>

Common Cause and redistricting: <https://www.commoncause.org/our-work/gerrymandering-and-representation/gerrymandering-redistricting/>

Listen: fivethirtyeight podcast September 6, 2019: <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/politics-podcast-the-gerrymandering-fight-moves-to-the-states/>

Look: North Carolina 2018 results: <https://www.politico.com/election-results/2018/north-carolina/>

Weekly learning objective: Understand the process of reapportionment and redistricting. Learn how packing and cracking works. What are trade-offs between majority-minority districts and liberal representation?

Week 7: October 27, 2026: Public Opinion, Election Fundamentals and Forecasting

MIDTERM WEEK

LIVE ZOOM CHAT 10:00am Tuesday Oct 27: <https://westernuniversity.zoom.us/j/6147967542>

Read: Michael Lewis-Beck and Charles Tien. 2016. "The Political Economy Model: 2016 US Election Forecasts." *PS: Political Science and Politics* pp. 661-663.

Read: Professor Helmut Norpoth's Forecast favoured Trump in 2016 and does so again:

<http://primarymodel.com/2016-forecast-full>

<http://primarymodel.com/2020>

The Economist's forecasting model:

<https://projects.economist.com/us-2020-forecast/president>

Weekly learning objective: How do pollsters, statisticians, and political scientists make election predictions? What are the factors that matter in their models? How to read a poll.

Week 8: November 3, 2026: Election Day!

LIVE ZOOM CHAT 10:00am Tuesday Nov. 3: <https://westernuniversity.zoom.us/j/6147967542>

BONUS LIVE ZOOM CHAT 10:00am Wednesday Nov. 4: <https://westernuniversity.zoom.us/j/6147967542>

Read: ALL the news.

Weekly learning objective: What happened? Why? What were the key groups that swung the election? Is it over? What happens next? What can and cannot be done with the new party split between the branches of government?

Week 9: November 10, 2026: Voter Choice and Participation

LIVE ZOOM CHAT 10:00am Tuesday Nov. 10: <https://westernuniversity.zoom.us/j/6147967542>

Read: Non-voters. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/increased-voter-turnout-could-benefit-republicans-or-democrats-in-2020/>

The 2016 Election Exit Polls: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2018/08/09/an-examination-of-the-2016-electorate-based-on-validated-voters/>

Listen: Podcast on 2016 How did the media – how did we – get this wrong?:
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/09/podcasts/election-analysis-run-up.html>

I'll add a couple things about 2020 and 2024.

Weekly learning objective: Which voters swung the 2016, 2020m and 2024 elections.

Week 10: November 17, 2026: Polarization in the U.S.

LIVE ZOOM CHAT 10:00am Tuesday Nov. 17: <https://westernuniversity.zoom.us/j/6147967542>

Read: The Single Most Important Fact about American Politics: <http://www.vox.com/2014/6/13/5803768/pew-most-important-fact-american-politics>

Watch: Lilliana Mason: Elections in a Polarized America. The 2016 Election:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fJZntk_RPJA

Weekly learning objective: Learn about how polarization has occurred in the American electorate. What is negative partisanship? How strong is it?

Week 11: November 24, 2026: Presidential General Election Campaigns

LIVE ZOOM CHAT 10:00am Tuesday Nov. 24: <https://westernuniversity.zoom.us/j/6147967542>

Readings: How Do Campaigns Matter? Gary Jacobson 2015:
<https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev-polisci-072012-113556>

Watch: A sample commercial: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPaucMixQMM>

Watch: Campaign staffers react and dissect advertisements:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= AZWg3FDDIM&feature=youtu.be>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vUrIXyonBQ>

Weekly learning objective: How much do campaigns matter? How do candidates decide how and where to campaign? How much does money matter in a campaign? Do debates matter?

Week 12: December 1, 2026: The Electoral Map, Electoral College, Electors, and What's Coming in 2028

LIVE ZOOM CHAT 10:00am Tuesday December 1: <https://westernuniversity.zoom.us/j/6147967542>

Read: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/09/us/politics/how-does-the-electoral-college-work.html>

Listen: <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/politics-podcast-the-electoral-college-episode/>
With Professors Julia Azari and Seth Masket.

Movie Recommendation: Recount on Crave/HBO.

Weekly learning objective: How does the election actually work? How how does the Electoral College work? What will happen on Election Day and after?

Week 13: December 1, 2026: Wrap up and looking ahead to 2027 and 2028.

LIVE ZOOM CHAT 10:00am Tuesday December 1: <https://westernuniversity.zoom.us/j/6147967542>

VI. Makeup Exam Policy

It is essential that you understand the following policy for the course since *no exceptions will be made*. No exams may be taken early for any reason. A student who misses an exam must provide a *very good* reason supported by evidence such as a hospital admittance form. If you are ill prior to an exam, let me know as soon as possible beforehand if you may miss the exam. Failure to write one of the exams without providing a sufficient excuse will result in a grade of zero for that exam.

VII. Academic Integrity:

Academic integrity is essential to the pursuit of learning and scholarship in a university. As a result, the University treats cases of cheating and plagiarism very seriously. Potential offences include, but are not limited to:

On tests and exams:

1. Using or possessing unauthorized aids;
2. Communicating with someone else during an exam or test;
3. Misrepresenting your identity; and
4. When you knew or ought to have known you were doing it.

In academic work:

1. Falsifying institutional documents or grades;
2. Falsifying or altering any documentation required by the University, including (but not limited to) doctor's notes; and
3. When you knew or ought to have known you were doing so.

All wearable technology and smart glasses are banned from use. Students who need glasses must ensure that they have their regular prescription eyewear available for use for the in-person final exam.

All suspected cases of academic dishonesty will be investigated. If students have questions or concerns about what constitutes appropriate academic behaviour or appropriate research and citation methods, they are expected to seek out additional information on academic integrity from their instructors or from other institutional resources.

VIII. Accommodations for Disability

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. In particular, if you have a disability/health consideration that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach me and/or Accessibility Services.