

Political Science 4891H  
The 2012 American Elections  
Professor Asher  
Autumn Semester, 2012

## **SYLLABUS**

The course will examine the 2012 elections from three distinct perspectives: 1.) the legal, institutional and constitutional context within which elections are held; 2.) the performance of the key actors—candidates, media, and voters—in campaigns; and 3.) and the actual conduct of the 2012 campaigns for President and Congress. With respect to the first perspective, we will describe, analyze and critique the institutional arrangements that govern and shape our political campaigns. With respect to the second perspective, we will focus on how well candidates, media and voters live up to their responsibilities in the ideal democratic electoral system and then discuss why these actors fail to meet these ideals. Finally, we will be following, analyzing and critiquing the actual campaigns being conducted for President and Congress in the 2012 elections. Here we will study the presidential selection process beginning with the pre-primary campaign, then moving to the actual caucus and primary season, and concluding with the national nominating conventions and the general election season. As we discuss the general election campaign tactics and strategy, we will discuss the role of the campaign strategists, pollsters and media advisers and give particular attention to the impact of the Electoral College and the presidential debates. Then we will turn our attention to congressional campaigns, focusing on the differences between House and Senate elections and analyzing the sources of incumbency advantages in contests for the House of Representatives. The course will conclude with an analysis and critique of how well the electoral process works in the United States.

Students should gain from the class a much deeper appreciation of the impact of institutional factors on campaigns and elections and a greater awareness of the uniqueness of American electoral arrangements. Students should also gain an understanding of the interplay between candidates, voters and the media and why campaigns use particular strategies and tactics. Finally, students should finish the class with an

appreciation of the disjuncture between the campaign process and the subsequent governing process.

**Evaluation:** There will be a midterm exam, a final exam, and two short papers. In addition, class attendance is required; for each class missed for frivolous reasons, students will lose one point on a 100 point scale (the Kamrass rule). Class participation is strongly welcomed.

**Texts:** There are five required texts for the course; additional materials will be distributed in class and online. In addition, students are expected to follow the 2012 elections by regularly reading major newspapers and/or news magazines and/or various political websites. The five required texts are:

Paul R. Abramson et al. *Change and Continuity in the 2008 and 2010 Elections* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2012).

Stephen C. Craig and David B. Hill (eds.) *The Electoral Challenge: Theory Meets Practice* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2011).

Paul S. Herrnson *Congressional Elections: Campaigning at Home and in Washington* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.) (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2012).

Candice J. Nelson et al. (eds.) *Shades of Gray: Perspectives on Campaign Ethics* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2002).

Matthew J. Streb *Rethinking American Electoral Democracy* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (New York and London: Routledge, 2011).

A note about the texts: The Streb book focuses heavily on the legal and institutional framework within which our elections and campaigns take place. The other four texts all focus on the key players in campaigns—the candidates, media, voters, political professionals and the like—but from varying perspectives. The Nelson book examines the key players from the perspective of campaign ethics and how they are strengthening or undermining electoral democracy in the United States. The Abramson and the Herrnson texts focus more on actual election campaigns, particularly the 2008 and 2010 election cycle, while the Craig

and Hill book reviews a vast amount of literature that covers campaigns in general.

**Academic Misconduct:** All of the work you do in this class will of course be your own unless you are working on joint class projects. Any cases of cheating or plagiarism will be reported to the university committee on academic misconduct and will be handled according to university policy.

**Disability:** Please let me know whether you need any accommodation because of a disability. I rely on the Office for Disability Services for assistance in verifying the need for accommodations and in developing appropriate responses. If you have not previously contacted the Office for Disability Services, I encourage you to do so.

## **Readings**

### **Week 1 (August 23)—Introduction and Overview**

No assigned readings.

### **Weeks 2 and 3 (August 28 and 30, September 4 and 6) Do Campaigns Matter? The Institutional Context of Elections**

#### **Read:**

Craig and Hill, Chapter 1.

Nelson et al., Chapter 1.

Streb, Chapters 1, 3, 4, 5, 6. And 7.

Herrnson, Chapter 1.

**Weeks 4 and 5 (September 11, 13, 18 and 20)  
Turnout in Elections**

**Read:**

Streb, Chapter 2.

Craig and Hill, Chapter 10.

Abramson et al., Chapter 4.

Nelson et al., Chapters 13 and 14.

**Weeks 6 and 7 (September 25 and 27 October 2 and 4)  
The Presidential Nominating Process; Political Consultants**

**Read:**

Streb, Chapter 8.

Abramson et al., Chapter 1.

Craig and Hill, Chapter 11.

Nelson et al., Chapters 5 and 6.

**Week 8 (October 9 and 11)  
The General Election Campaign**

**Read:**

Abramson et al., Chapter 2 and 3.

Craig and Hill, Chapters 2 and 3.

Streb, Chapter 9.

**Weeks 9 and 10 (October 16, 18, 23, and 25)  
The General Election—Determinants of Vote Choice**

**Read:**

Abramson et al., Chapters 5 through 8.

**Weeks 11 and 12 (October 30, November 1, 6, and 8)  
Congressional Elections**

**Read:**

Herrnson, entire book.

Abramson et al., Chapters 9, 10, and 11.

**Weeks 13 and 14 (November 13, 15, and 20)  
Money and Media**

**Read:**

Streb, Chapter 10.

Craig and Hill, Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8.

Nelson et al., Chapter 9, 10, 11 and 12.

**Weeks 15 and 16 (November 27, 29, December 4)  
How Well Does It Work? What Can be Done?**

**Read:**

Streb, Chapter 11.

Craig and Hill, Chapters 4 and 12.

Nelson et al., Chapters 2, 3, 4, 7, and 8.

Abramson et al., Chapter 12.

## Paper One

**You are to write a paper that predicts the outcome of various races on the ballot in 2012. The first set of predictions focuses on the presidential contest. You will predict the presidential election outcome in two states—Ohio and another state assigned to you. You will also predict the outcome of two U.S. Senate races—the Ohio contest between Senator Sherrod Brown and Treasurer Josh Mandel and another Senate race assigned to you. Finally, you will predict the outcome of two U.S. House races in Ohio: the contest between two incumbent U.S. Representatives Jim Renacci and Betty Sutton and the contest between incumbent Representative Bill Johnson and former incumbent Representative Charlie Wilson.**

**Your grade will be based on the quality of the information and the quality of the arguments you make in justifying your predictions. Certainly past election results are one kind of data you might examine. And you might also examine public opinion polling data where available. You should also examine other characteristics of your assigned state or district that might affect the vote choices of its citizens such as economic conditions, the political climate, and the social climate of the state or district. State your prediction in terms of what percentage of the total vote the candidates will win in each of these six contests. Your numerical prediction is far less important than the justification you provide for it. The paper should not exceed 10 double spaced pages and is due on Election Day. Be prepared to talk about your results in class that day.**

## Paper Two

Over the past two years, there have been efforts in numerous states to change the states' election laws to address various perceived problems such as election fraud, election administration efficiency and consistency, and many others. Typically these efforts were advanced in states where the Republican Party controlled the governorship and the state legislature. You are to select two states—Ohio plus another one—and write about what has happened in these two states. Talk about the proposed and/or adopted changes in election laws, and the rationale for these changes. Then offer your own arguments and opinions about these changes, indicating whether you support or oppose them or have mixed opinions, justifying your opinions by citing evidence wherever possible. Finally, speculate about the likely political/electoral consequences of these changes in election laws. This is a topic about which advocates on both (all) sides of the issue will likely have very strong opinions, The key to a good paper is coherent arguments and solid evidence to support your opinions. The paper should not exceed 10 double-spaced pages and is due on Tuesday, November 27.