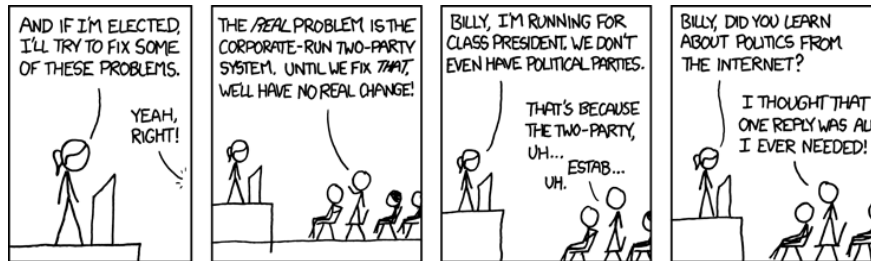# Elections and Voting Behavior

University of Wisconsin–Madison

Fall 2025

Source: XKCD

Course Information
Designation: POLI SCI 305
Lectures: Tue/Thu 8:00–9:15AM
Location: 272 Bascom Hall (in-person)
Course Website: Canvas
Credits: 4.0

Instructor Information
Instructor: Prof. Andrew Trexler
Email: atrexler@wisc.edu
Office: 301 North Hall
Office Hours: Mon 10:30-11:30AM &
                        Wed 1:30-2:30PM

Teaching Assistant
Name: Emily Matthews
Sections: 302, 304, 305
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OH Location: Peets in Memorial Union
Office Hours: Thu 11:00AM-12:00PM

Teaching Assistant
Name: Riley Rice
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OH Location: 121 North Hall (TA Office)
Office Hours: Thu 11:00AM-12:00PM

Course Overview

Free and fair elections are the hallmark of a healthy democracy. In the United States, citizens are asked to vote frequently and on candidates for a large number of offices and on a wide array of policy issues. How successful are citizens in translating preferences to votes during these opportunities? How well do election outcomes reflect the aggregated interests of the public and the electorate? This course will examine the many factors that affect participation in the electoral process, how voters make decisions, and how elections guide government behavior. Although elections and voting are common features of political systems around the globe, this course will focus primarily on the U.S. case. Together we will explore theories dealing with party identification, group and geographic patterns, economic accountability, issue voting, and more. A nagging question will be present throughout all of these topics: do American elections facilitate making "good" decisions as a public?

After completing this course, you should be able to:

1. <u>Explain</u> how individuals make voting decisions, using both political science theory and empirical evidence.

2. <u>Analyze</u> factors that affect the outcomes of elections.

3. <u>Interpret</u> public opinion and election data to evaluate effects on voter behavior and narratives regarding election outcomes.

4. <u>Describe</u> the health of the U.S. electoral system.

5. <u>Evaluate</u> merits and risks of potential reforms to the U.S. electoral system.

The course material will include major theories of electoral behavior, but the approach will be mainly empirical. The readings are full of data. Be prepared to spend some time with graphs and tables, and to conduct some hands-on analysis. I hope you will engage deeply with the material, ask probing questions, find some conclusions surprising and others intuitive, and finish the semester with some new tools for understanding the electorate.

This is a 4.0 credit course with an expectation of 180 hours of student engagement in course learning activities, meaning that you should expect to spend about three hours outside the classroom (i.e., on readings, assignments, studying) for every hour in the classroom.

Grading

There are a maximum of <u>1,000</u> points that you may earn in this course:

Assessments	Max. Points
Election Rules Brief (due Sep 23)	50
Candidate Profile (due Oct 14)	100
Midterm Exam (Oct 30)	200
Election Analysis Project (due Nov 20)	150
Final Exam (Dec 12)	300
Lecture Attendance	100
Section Participation	100
Total	1,000

From your final point total, your final course grade is calculated as follows:

Point Total	Final Grade
930–1,000	A
880–929	AB
830–879	B
780–829	BC
700–779	C
600–699	D
0–599	F

Late Assignments

All assignments are due by class time on the day noted. Assignments will receive a 10 percent penalty for each 24-hour period that they are late (but see Tokens below). No assignment will be accepted more than one week after the original deadline.

Re-grading

Once an assignment or exam has been graded and returned, students are required to wait at least 48 hours before contacting me about their grade. If you feel that the grade you received does not reflect your performance on the assignment or exam, you may contact me by email to request clarification on the feedback you received. You may also request that the assignment or exam be re-graded, but must do so within two (2) weeks of the assignment or exam being returned. This request must be accompanied by a written memo (no more than 500 words) presenting a cogent argument for why your assignment should be re-graded, using evidence from your assignment or exam to support your case, and specifying the grade that you believe your performance merits. If the argument you provide is valid, I will then re-grade the assignment or exam. Note that your grade could improve <u>or decrease</u> once re-graded. All re-grades are final. (*Note: This policy applies to substantive regrading requests. Like everyone, I occasionally make basic arithmetic errors. If your points were simply summed incorrectly, or incorrectly entered into Canvas, please just email me.*)

Tokens

Students often have to balance their coursework with jobs, family responsibilities, health challenges, and other hurdles of life outside the classroom. Sometimes, events outside your control interrupt your learning in sudden and unexpected ways. To reduce stress in these scenarios and create flexibility for students, I use a "token" system that allows students to extend certain deadlines or excuse class absences. Each student begins the semester with three (3) tokens, which can each be used to:

- Extend the deadline for any take-home assignment (election rules brief, candidate profile, or election analysis project) by 24 hours, no questions asked. Multiple tokens may be used for the same assignment.
- Excuse a single lecture or discussion section absence, no questions asked. You will receive full attendance credit for the excused lecture or section meeting.

I generally do not allow extensions or excuse absences beyond these three tokens except in extremely extenuating circumstances (e.g., lengthy comas, commencement of nuclear warfare, etc.), so I strongly recommend reserving your tokens for actual emergencies rather than routine procrastination. To use a token, submit a Token form on Canvas.

Note that tokens cannot be used for exams. Exams (the midterm and final) must be taken at the day and time specified in the syllabus. Missing an exam will result in a zero for that exam and place your final grade in serious jeopardy. If you have an unavoidable conflict for either exam (or suffer a dire catastrophe at that time), please contact me as soon as possible.

Assessments

Below is a brief summary of what you will be assessed on. Additional guidance on each assessment (except attendance & section participation) will be provided on Canvas at least two weeks in advance of the due date. All take-home assignments should be submitted through Canvas.

Election Rules Brief: You will summarize the voter registration requirements and election rules for your home state (or Wisconsin, if home is outside the U.S.) in a 1-page brief. This brief is due by the start of class on September 23 and is worth 50 points.

Candidate Profile: You will profile two (2) candidates for one (1) elected office that will be contested on November 4, 2025, in one of these states: Colorado, Georgia, Maryland, Maine, North Carolina, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, or Washington. That is, you will summarize both candidates' backgrounds, qualifications, campaign websites, social media sites, and policy positions in a brief, 2-page profile ($\sim$ 1 page per candidate). This profile is due by the start of class on October 14 and is worth 100 points.

Midterm Exam: The midterm exam will be held in person during class on October 30 and will cover course material up to that point. The exam will be closed-note and conducted the old-fashioned way, with exam blue books and pencils (or pens if you are feeling confident). If you need accommodations due to a learning disability, see Resources below. The exam will involve a combination of short answer questions regarding key course concepts and brief essay questions that ask you to apply your knowledge from the course. In total, the midterm exam is worth 200 points.

Election Analysis Project: You will conduct a hands-on analysis of the outcome of the election for Wisconsin State Supreme Court Justice held on April 1, 2025, using real election data to make your case (in $\sim$ 700 to 1,000 words) about why the election went the way that it did. This analysis is due by the start of class on November 20 and is worth 150 points.

Final Exam: The final exam will be held in person on Friday, December 12, from 5:05-7:05PM. The final exam may include any material covered in the course (cumulative). The exam will be closed-note and conducted the old-fashioned way, with exam blue books and pencils (or pens if you are feeling confident). If you need accommodations due to a learning disability, see Resources below. The exam will involve a combination of short answer questions regarding key course concepts and brief essay questions that ask you to apply your knowledge from the course. In total, the final exam is worth 300 points.

Lecture Attendance: Attending class is an important part of the learning process for this course, and is therefore required. Slide decks from lecture will be provided on Canvas following each class; I encourage you to take notes for your own use, but do not feel that you need to copy down everything on the screen. Attendance will be tracked for each class. There are 26 class meetings this semester (not including the final exam); each student gets one grace absence (in addition to the Token system noted above) and the remaining 25 class meetings are worth 4 points each for a total of 100 points.

Section Participation: Active participation in your discussion section is also an important part of the learning process for this course, as these meetings allow students to engage with the course topics differently than in lecture. While I encourage students to actively participate during lecture, the discussion section is your opportunity for deeper engagement with the material by forming reasoned arguments and trying them out with your peers. All students are expected to actively participate in their section discussions, not to simply attend. Your section TA will track your attendance and participation in your discussion section. Each section will meet 11 times this semester; each student gets one grace absence (in addition to the Token system noted above) and the remaining 10 section meetings—and participation therein—are worth a maximum of 10 points each for a total of 100 points.

Expectations

Alongside the assessments noted above, I have several expectations of you in this course, which if not followed may reflect in your assessments and grades. These include:

1. **Read & take notes:** Readings for this course provide necessary background information about the concepts that we will discuss during class and that you will be asked to apply in your assignments and exams. The readings include a mix of scholarly works (book chapters, journal articles) and lighter fare that summarizes scholarship for a broad audience (what academics call "public scholarship"). All readings are available on Canvas. I expect to you to examine these readings carefully before class on the day assigned, take notes, and come to both lecture and your section meeting prepared to discuss—including any questions you may have. You should also take notes during class, though do not feel that you need to copy down everything on the slides: slide decks from lecture will be provided on Canvas after each class meeting.

2. **Attend class & participate actively:** We will use lecture time to cover many things not discussed in the readings and to apply course concepts in breakout sessions and class activities, while the discussion sections provide an opportunity to delve into key topics in more depth. All of us benefit from a classroom environment that allows each student to share their unique perspective—meaning that *you* have something important to contribute to everyone's learning (including mine!). I expect you to come to class prepared to listen actively, think critically, and engage with your peers respectfully.

3. **Be a good classmate:** I expect you to contribute positively to an inclusive learning environment for your peers. Politics can be a divisive topic, but differences in perspective can provide opportunities for intellectual growth. We each come to the classroom with our own backgrounds, beliefs, and biases, and sharing our individual perspectives can help everyone learn. I expect, however, that you will be respectful of the contributions and skills of your fellow classmates. While reasoned debates are welcome, disrespectful behavior will not be tolerated. Similarly, I expect you to avoid distracting your fellow students during class. This means arriving on time, staying engaged, and not using technology for things unrelated to class (checking email, scrolling social media, etc.).

4. **All work is your own:** I expect that all work you complete for this course is your own—not the work of another person or the work of an AI. The goal of this course (indeed, much of education in general) is first and foremost to foster your ability to think critically, in this case particularly about elections and voting behavior. Every component of the course—the readings, lectures, discussions, your written assignments and exams—are part of that thinking and learning process. Having someone else do your work for you, whether that someone else is human or artificial, means that you are thinking and learning less. Students are not permitted to use generative AI (such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, LlaMa, Copilot, DeepSeek, or any of the innumerable similar tools) for any purpose in this course, except with written permission from me. Any assignment that uses generative AI at any stage will receive a zero. Similarly, I expect you to adhere to standards of academic integrity and to appropriately credit and cite words, data, and ideas that are not your own. Failure to do so may result in disciplinary action. For more information regarding academic misconduct and how to avoid it, please visit the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards website here: https://conduct.students.wisc.edu/academic-misconduct/.

Likewise, here is what you can expect from me in this course:

1. **Be accessible:** You can expect me to provide plenty of opportunities to interface with me outside of class. The best way to get in touch with me is to come to my "office hours"—which are really "student hours" that I have specifically set aside in my schedule to meet with you. This semester my office hours are 11:00AM–Noon on Mondays and 1:30–2:30PM on Wednesdays, and my office is 301 North Hall. You can sign up to reserve time with me here: https://calendly.com/proftrexler/students, otherwise I will meet with students on a first-come, first-serve basis. If you have a persistent conflict with both of these times (or have a pressing need), you can contact me for a separate appointment. Office hours are an opportunity for a one-on-one conversation about course concepts, an upcoming assignment, how the course is going for you, your goals and aspirations, or challenges you may be facing. I encourage you to attend my office hours at least once—this is a big class, so office hours are one of the best opportunities for us to get to know each other.

   Outside of office hours, the best way to reach me is by email at atrexler@wisc.edu. You can generally expect me to respond to emails within 48 hours during the work week (that is, Monday through Friday). Emailing a professor can be intimidating for some students and others may be unaware of common emailing conventions. Here is some simple but helpful advice about emailing professors, which if followed will likely to get you a faster response from me.

2. **Provide timely feedback:** Just as I expect you to submit your work on time, you can also expect me to return your assignments and exams with useful feedback in a timely manner to help you succeed on subsequent assessments.

3. **My work is my own:** Just as I require that you eschew the use of AI tools, I will not use AI tools to develop course materials (slides, assignments, exams, etc.) or to grade your work.

4. **Give you opportunities for input:** I will survey the class (anonymously) partway through the semester so that you can provide feedback on how the course is going for you. Together, we will work through any major issues identified by a significant number of students. If I am considering changes, I will seek input from students and will not make any major changes to the syllabus (assessments, deadlines, expectations, policies) without the support of a majority of the students engaged in the course.

5. **Timely communication:** I will communicate any pertinent information about assignments, exams, and syllabus updates to you in a timely fashion. I will contact students via the Announcement function on Canvas and/or by emailing students at their university email address. Students are strongly encouraged to check their email regularly to ensure that no important information is missed.

Resources

McBurney Disability Resource Center: If you have a disability that may affect your learning experience in this course, please contact me within the first two weeks of the semester so that we can discuss accommodations to help you succeed. The McBurney Disability Resource Center can provide official documentation and additional student support. Of note, my office is located on the third floor of North Hall, a historic building with no elevator. For students who are unable to meet with me in my office due to a disability, I am happy to meet at another convenient location on campus. Please contact me to make arrangements.

UHS Mental Health Services: Students often experience stressors that can impact both their academic experience and personal well-being. UHS Mental Health Services provides confidential, no-cost care to students. Students are encouraged to learn about and utilize these services and resources as needed.

The Writing Center: The Writing Center can provide many kinds of support to students, from workshops to individual writing mentorships.

Learning Support: UW-Madison offers a wide range of free tutoring, study skills workshops, and other learning support for students across 15 distinct learning centers.

UW Libraries Research Support: UW Libraries offers a variety of services to assist with student research, from planning and finding information to analysis and reporting your research.

University Policies

You should familiarize yourself with several policies maintained by the University of Wisconsin–Madison, which apply to this course. These include:

- Academic Calendar and Religious Observances
- Academic Integrity
- Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

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Course Schedule

This course schedule is subject to change with notice. Check Canvas for updates.

Week 0   **Why Have Elections**

Sep 4   - Dahl, Robert A. *On Democracy.* [Chapters 4 & 5]
              - Pew Research Center. "Public Trust in Government: 1958-2024."

Week 1   **The Voter's Task**

Sep 9   - Lupia, Arthur. 2016. *Uninformed.* [Chapters 1 & 4]

Sep 11   NO MEETING (instructor attending the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association)

Week 2   **Heuristics**

Sep 16   - Popkin, Samuel. 1991. *The Reasoning Voter.* [Chapter 2]
              - Thorson, Emily. 2024. *The Invented State.* [Chapter 1]
              - CrashCourse. 2014. "Cognition: How Your Mind Can Amaze and Betray You." [YouTube]

Sep 18   - Theiss-Morse, Elizabeth, and Michael Wagner. 2023. *Political Behavior of the American Electorate.* [Chapter 5]

Week 3   **Identities & Socialization**

Sep 23   ***Election Rules Brief due***

              - Theiss-Morse, Elizabeth, and Michael Wagner. 2023. *Political Behavior of the American Electorate.* [Chapter 8, 256–260 only]
              - Mason, Lilliana. 2018. *Uncivil Agreement.* [Chapter 3]

- Phillips, Aleks. 2023. "Why Democrats and Republicans Aren't Dating." *NewsWeek.*

Sep 25
- Holbein, John, and Sunshine Hillygus. 2020. *Making Young Voters.* [Chapter 1]
- Holman et al. 2021. "Girls learn early that they don't have much of a place in politics." *The Conversation.*

Week 4   **Polarization**

Sep 30
- Costa, Mia. 2025. *How Politicians Polarize.* [Chapter 2]
- Ridge, Hannah. 2022. "Enemy Mine: Negative Partisanship and Satisfaction with Democracy." *Political Behavior* 44: 1271–1295.
- Doherty et al. 2022. "As Partisan Hostility Grows, Signs of Frustration With the Two-Party System." Pew Research Center.

Oct 2
- Levendusky, Matt, and Neil Malhotra. 2016. "(Mis)perceptions of partisan polarization in the American public." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80 (S1): 378–391.
- Sanders, Katie. 2022. "Are Republicans and Democrats Driven by Hatred of One Another? Less Than You Think." Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania.

Week 5   **Issues**

Oct 7
- Theiss-Morse, Elizabeth, and Michael Wagner. 2023. *Political Behavior of the American Electorate.* [Chapter 6]
- Trexler, Andrew, and Christopher Johnston. 2025. "An Ideology by Any Other Name." *Political Behavior* 47: 385–409.

Oct 9
- Hillygus, Sunshine, and Todd Shields. 2008. *The Persuadable Voter.* [Chapter 1]
- Kustov, Alexander, and James Dennison. 2024. "Good to Know: Issue importance in politics." Good Authority.
- Kustov, Alexander. 2025. "Good to Know: The public is a thermostat." Good Authority.

Week 6   **Participation**

Oct 14   ***Candidate Profile due***

- Theiss-Morse, Elizabeth, and Michael Wagner. 2023. *Political Behavior of the American Electorate.* [Chapters 3 & 4]

Oct 16	- Elliot, Kevin. 2023. *Democracy for Busy People.* [Chapter 1] - Moynihan, Don. 2023. "Understanding Elections from an Administrative Burden Perspective." Institute for Responsive Government.

Week 7   **Candidates**

Oct 21	- Theiss-Morse, Elizabeth, and Michael Wagner. 2023. *Political Behavior of the American Electorate.* [Chapter 8, 263–283 only] - Porter, Rachel, Sarah Treul, and Maura McDonald. 2024. "Changing the Dialogue: Descriptive Candidacies and Position Taking in Campaigns for the US House of Representatives." *The Journal of Politics* 86 (2): 458–474.
Oct 23	- Lau, Emily. 2024. "What is 'dark money' political spending, and how does it affect US politics?" *The Conversation.* - Bonica, Adam, and Jacob Grumbach. 2025. "Old Money: Campaign Finance and Gerontocracy in the United States." *Journal of Public Economics* 249.

Week 8   **Primaries**

Oct 28	- Rothschild, Anna, and Galen Druke. 2020. "Do Parties or Voters Choose Presidential Nominees?" FiveThirtyEight. [Video] - Cohen et al. 2016. "Party Versus Faction in the Reformed Presidential Nominating System." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 49 (4): 701–708.
Oct 30	*****Midterm Exam*****

Week 9   **Interpreting Elections**

Nov 4	- Theiss-Morse, Elizabeth, and Michael Wagner. 2023. *Political Behavior of the American Electorate.* [Chapter 8, 290–293 only] - Mutz, Diana. 2012. "The Great Divide." *Daedalus* 141(4): 83–97. - Corasaniti, Nick. 2024. "A Pro-Trump Group's Risky Bet on Infrequent Voters Seems to Have Paid Off." *The New York Times.*
Nov 6	- Montanaro, Domenico. 2024. "Why Trump won—9 takeaways from the 2024 election." *National Public Radio.* - Levitz, Eric. 2025. "There's a very popular explanation for Trump's win. It's wrong." *Vox.*

- Leary, Alex, and Tarini Parti. 2024. "How Donald Trump Won—by Being Donald Trump." *The Wall Street Journal.*

Week 10   **Sub-national Elections**

Nov 11
- Theiss-Morse, Elizabeth, and Michael Wagner. 2023. *Political Behavior of the American Electorate.* [Chapter 8, 283–290 only]
- Lupia, Arthur. 1994. "Shortcuts Versus Encyclopedias: Information and Voting Behavior in California Insurance Reform Elections." *American Political Science Review* 88 (1): 63–76.
- Bonneau, Chris, and Damon Cann. 2013. "Nonpartisan election formats do not affect voting behaviors." United States Politics and Policy, LSE.

Nov 13
- Corasaniti et al. 2021. "Redistricting Maps Explained." *The New York Times.*
- Greenwood et al. 2025. "Score Electoral District Maps." PlanScore. [Interactive]

Week 11   **Nationalization**

Nov 18
- ***Election Analysis Project due***

- Abramowitz, Alan, and Steven Webster. 2016. "The rise of negative partisanship and the nationalization of U.S. elections in the 21st century." *Electoral Studies* 41: 12–22.
- Knight Abowitz, Kathleen. 2024. "School boards, long locally focused and nonpartisan, get dragged into the national political culture wars." *The Conversation.*

Nov 20
- Hopkins, Daniel. 2018. *The Increasingly United States.* [Chapter 3]
- Darr, Joshua, Matthew Hitt, and Johanna Dunaway. 2019. "When newspapers close, voters become more partisan." *The Conversation.*

Week 12   **Election Administration**

Nov 25
- Bonica, Adam, Jacob Grumbach, Charlotte Hill, and Hakeem Jefferson. 2021. "All-mail voting in Colorado increases turnout and reduces turnout inequality." *Electoral Studies* 72: 102363.
- Keele, Luke, William Cubbison, and Ismail White. 2021. "Suppressing Black Votes: A Historical Case Study of Voting Restrictions in Louisiana." *American Political Science Review* 115 (2): 694-700.

- Miller Karalunas, Lauren. 2024. "How Elections are Certified in Battleground States." Brennan Center for Justice.

Nov 27   NO MEETING (Thanksgiving Recess)

Week 13   **Reforms**

Dec 2   - Nixon, Richard. 1969. "Special Message to the Congress on Electoral Reform." American Presidency Project, UCSB.
                - Eggers, Andrew, and Laurent Bouton. 2024. "Ranked-Choice Voting." Center for Effective Government.
                - Institute for Responsive Government. 2024. "Ranked Choice Voting: Avoiding a One-Size-Fits-All Approach."

Dec 4   - Masket, Seth. 2024. "A Third Party Could be Successful—But Probably Not This One." Good Authority.
                - Wegman, Jesse, Lee Drutman, and Aileen Clarke. 2025. "How to Fix America's Two-party Problem." *The New York Times.*

Week 14   **Loose Ends**

Dec 9   - Theiss-Morse, Elizabeth, and Michael Wagner. 2023. *Political Behavior of the American Electorate.* [Chapter 1]
                - Azari, Julia. "Weak parties and strong partisanship are a bad combination." *Vox.*

Dec 12 (Fri)   ***Final Exam***
5:05 - 7:05PM

Acknowledgements