

Political Science 4605
POLITICS OF CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS
Spring 2026 (54331)
Baldwin 322
MW 2:55 - 4:15 p.m.

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*“The electoral politics of Congress deserve careful study for one simple reason:
how Congress works, how well it performs as a governing institution,
is inextricably bound to how its members win and hold office.”*
-- Gary Jacobson (1987)

Course Overview

This course is intended as a broad survey of the literature on congressional elections. The central focus of the course will be the U.S. Congress, but much of what we discuss will have direct relevance for the study of elections more generally. We will focus on diverse topics such as the incumbency advantage, the role of strategic politicians, the impact of money in congressional elections, the effects of nationalization and local tides in congressional races, and differences between House and Senate races. You should have a better understanding of the nature of congressional elections by the end of the course.

Required Texts

Carson, Jamie L. and Gary C. Jacobson. 2024. *The Politics of Congressional Elections*. 11th ed. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Carson, Jamie, Joel Sievert, and Ryan Williamson. 2024. *Nationalized Politics: Evaluating Electoral Politics Across Time*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hassell, Hans J. G. 2018. *The Party's Primary: Control of Congressional Nominations*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Mayhew, David R. 2004. *Congress: The Electoral Connection*. 2nd edition. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Course Materials

The readings for the course will be drawn from the list of books above, in addition to scholarly articles each week. Required books are available for purchase from the usual sources or may be checked out from the library. Unless otherwise indicated, assigned articles can be downloaded from www.jstor.org or from Google Scholar (<https://scholar.google.com>). Please keep in mind that assigned readings, or the course schedule may be altered as needed at the discretion of the instructor.

General Expectations

I expect all students to behave professionally in this class. You are expected to attend class regularly, to show up on time, and be prepared to participate in discussions. You are responsible for all material in the readings and lectures, even if you are unable to attend class. It is your responsibility to remain aware of specific deadlines or dates posted on the syllabus and to be sure that assignments are completed on time.

Course Requirements and Grading

Your grade in this course will be based on the following components:

1. Class Participation (10%)
2. Active Learning Assignments (15%)
3. Final Paper (25%)
4. Midterm Exam (25%)
5. Final Exam (25%)

In terms of final grades in light of the +/- grading system, an A will be given to anyone receiving 94 or more points, an A- to those receiving 90-93 points, a B+ to those receiving 87-89 points, a B to those receiving 83-86 points, a B- to those receiving 80-82 points, a C+ to those receiving 77-79 points, a C to those receiving 73-76 points, a C- to those receiving 70-72 points, a D to those receiving 60 to 69 points, and an F to anyone receiving fewer than 60 points in the course.

Class Participation

Your grade in this area will be based on the quality of your classroom participation (see rubric below). Students are expected to participate through asking questions and answering inquiries raised in class. Keep in mind that it is difficult to participate without being physically present. To adequately prepare for class, all assigned readings should be completed by the dates indicated on the course schedule. Not all assigned readings may be discussed in class; nonetheless you are responsible for familiarizing yourself with them.

Participation Rubric

A – Student attends almost every class while consistently demonstrating that he or she has completed and understands the assigned readings by participating in class discussion meaningfully.

B – Student only attends most class meetings while completing all readings and actively participating in a meaningful way.

C – Student attends almost every class but regularly fails to demonstrate completion of readings or participate in any meaningful way.

D – Student only attends most class meetings and regularly fails to demonstrate completion of readings or participate in any meaningful way.

F – Student regularly arrives late or misses class entirely, does not complete assigned readings, does not engage in class discussion meaningfully, or is disruptive or disrespectful.

Active Learning Assignments

Several times throughout the course, we will engage in a variety of active learning exercises. This will typically involve breaking the class up into smaller groups where each group will discuss a specific issue, question, or topic related to some facet of elections. Each group may then be asked to make a very brief presentation during the last part of class or turn in a written assignment during the next class meeting. Fifteen percent of your grade will be assessed based on your active involvement in these activities. More details will be provided as the semester progresses.

Final Paper

Everyone will be required to submit a final paper at the end of the semester (due **April 27, 2026**). Each of these papers should be approximately 5-6 pages in length in a typed, double-spaced format with one-inch margins. Citations can be in text using the APA or MLE format or with footnotes following the Chicago style. More details on the topics for the paper will be given early in the semester. *Your final grade will be penalized if there are grammatical or spelling errors in the completed paper.*

Exams

There will be a midterm and a final exam. Exams are closed book and will include a mix of identification, short answer, and/or essay questions. The final exam will include material covered in the class lectures and the assigned reading for the entire semester. If you have to miss an exam due to illness, please contact me as soon as possible to discuss options for rescheduling. *A blue book will be required for each exam.*

Instructor Availability

If you would like to speak with me outside of class, feel free to stop by my office during scheduled office hours. Occasionally I have meetings during the day and may be unavailable. To ensure that I am in my office on a given day, email me ahead of time to set up a specific time to meet if meeting during office hours is inconvenient.

Incompletes and Make-Up Policy

A final grade of “Incomplete” will only be given in this course under exceptional circumstances and is solely at the discretion of the instructor. If an incomplete is given, it is the student’s responsibility to complete the necessary requirements as early in the following semester as possible. Legitimate excuses for absence from an exam (e.g., a university-sanctioned activity, religious holiday, medical emergency, or illness) must be accepted **prior** to the exam when feasible to allow a make-up to be scheduled. As a rule, late assignments will not be accepted unless approval is obtained in advance from the instructor.

Miscellaneous

Professional courtesy and sensitivity are important with respect to individuals and topics dealing with differences of race, culture, religion, politics, sexual orientation, gender, and nationalities. Class rosters are provided to the instructor with the student’s legal name. I am eager to address you by your preferred name and/or gender pronoun. Please advise me of this preference early in the semester so that I may make appropriate changes to my records. No “extra credit” will be given under any circumstances. Final grades may only be changed in the event of a clerical error (e.g., points summed incorrectly). The syllabus is a general plan for the course; deviations announced to the class by the instructor may be necessary.

AI Usage in Class

We are now living in an age where artificial intelligence tools are widely accessible and increasingly used in academic work. I do not want to discourage you from exploring and learning with these tools in this class. However, you need to be smart and thoughtful about how you use them to avoid any issues related to academic honesty (see general policy outlined below). AI should be treated as a supplement to—not a replacement for—your own critical thinking, writing, and analysis. You also need to document any AI source that you do use just like any other reference material. Keep in mind that AI-generated content can sometimes be incorrect, misleading, or lacking in nuance. Submitting work that relies entirely on these tools without proper understanding, citation, or originality may violate academic integrity policies like those highlighted above. You are responsible for the work you turn in, regardless of how you created it. If you choose to use AI to brainstorm ideas, clarify concepts, or get feedback on drafts, do so in a way that supports your learning, not short-circuits it. If you have questions about what constitutes appropriate use of AI in this course, please do not hesitate to ask me. I am happy to help you navigate this evolving landscape responsibly and effectively.

UGA Student Honor Code

“I will be academically honest in all of my academic work and will not tolerate academic dishonesty of others.” A Culture of Honesty, the University’s policy and procedures for handling cases of suspected dishonesty, can be found at honesty.uga.edu.

Policy on Recording Lectures

In the absence of written authorization from the UGA Disability Resource Center, students may not make a visual or audio recording of any aspect of this course. Students who have a recording accommodation agree in writing that they:

- Will use the records only for personal academic use during the specific course.
- Understand that faculty members have copyright interest in their class lectures and that they agree not to infringe on this right in any way.
- Understand that the faculty member and students in the class have privacy rights and agree not to violate those rights by using recordings for any reason other than their own personal study.
- Will not release, digitally upload, broadcast, transcribe, or otherwise share all or any part of the recordings. They also agree that they will not profit financially and will not allow others to benefit personally or financially from lecture recordings or other course materials.
- Will erase/delete all recordings at the end of the semester.
- Understand that violation of these terms may subject them to discipline under the Student Code of Conduct or subject them to liability under copyright laws.

UGA Well-Being Resources

UGA Well-being Resources promote student success by cultivating a culture that supports a more active, healthy, and engaged student community. Anyone needing assistance is encouraged to contact Student Care & Outreach (SCO) in the Division of Student Affairs at 706-542-8479 or visit sco.uga.edu. Student Care & Outreach helps students navigate difficult circumstances by connecting them with the most appropriate resources or services. They also administer the Embark@UGA program which supports students experiencing, or who have experienced, homelessness, foster care, or housing insecurity. UGA provides both clinical and non-clinical options to support student well-being and mental health, any time, any place. Whether on campus, or studying from home or abroad, UGA Well-being Resources are here to help.

- Well-being Resources: well-being.uga.edu
- Student Care and Outreach: sco.uga.edu
- University Health Center: healthcenter.uga.edu
- Counseling and Psychiatric Services: caps.uga.edu or CAPS 24/7 crisis support at 706-542-2273
- Health Promotion/ Fontaine Center: healthpromotion.uga.edu
- Accessibility and Testing: accessibility.uga.edu
- Additional information, including free digital well-being resources, can be accessed through the UGA app or by visiting <https://well-being.uga.edu>

Course Schedule (Assigned readings are to be completed by the dates listed below.)

1/12	Introduction
1/14	<i>No Class, Southern Political Science Association Meeting – New Orleans</i>
1/19	<i>No Class, MLK Day</i>
1/21	The Electoral Connection Mayhew, <i>Congress: The Electoral Connection</i> (pgs. 1-77)
1/26	Mayhew, <i>Congress: The Electoral Connection</i> (pgs. 81-180)

- 1/28 **Electoral Accountability in Congress**
 Canes-Wrone, Brandice, David W. Brady, and John F. Cogan. 2002. "Out of Step, Out of Office: Electoral Accountability and House Members' Voting." *American Political Science Review* 96(March): 127-140.
 Carson and Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections* (pgs. 1-34)
- 2/2 Carson, Jamie, Greg Koger, Matt Lebo, and Everett Young. 2010. "The Electoral Costs of Party Loyalty in Congress." *American Journal of Political Science* 54(3): 598-616.
- 2/4 **Congressional Primaries**
 Hassell, *The Party's Primary* (pgs. 1-87)
- 2/9 Hassell, *The Party's Primary* (pgs. 88-191)
- 2/11 Pyeatt, Nicholas. 2015. "Party Unity, Ideology, and Polarization in Primary Elections for the U.S. House: 1956-2012." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 40(4): 651-676.
- 2/16 **Strategic Politicians**
 Krasno, Jonathan S. and Donald Philip Green. 1988. "Preempting Quality Challengers in House Elections." *Journal of Politics* 50(4): 920-936.
- 2/18 Jacobson, Gary C. 1989. "Strategic Politicians and the Dynamics of U.S. House Elections, 1946-86." *American Political Science Review* 83(September): 773-793.
- 2/23 **The Incumbency Advantage**
 Cox, Gary and Jonathan Katz. 1996. "Why Did the Incumbency Advantage in U.S. House Elections Grow?" *American Journal of Political Science* 40(May): 478-497.
 Carson and Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections* (pgs. 35-46)
- 2/25 Ansolabehere, Stephen, James M. Snyder, Jr., and Charles Stewart, III. 2000. "Old Voters, New Voters, and the Personal Vote: Using Redistricting to Measure the Incumbency Advantage." *American Journal of Political Science* 44(January): 17-34.
 Carson and Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections* (pgs. 47-64)
- 3/2 Carson, Jamie L., Erik J. Engstrom, and Jason M. Roberts. 2007. "Candidate Quality, the Personal Vote, and the Incumbency Advantage in Congress." *American Political Science Review* 101(May): 289-301.
- 3/4 **Midterm Exam**
- 3/9 *No Class, Spring Break*
- 3/11 *No Class, Spring Break*
- 3/16 **Nationalization**
 Jacobson, Gary C. 2015. "It's Nothing Personal: The Decline of the Incumbency Advantage in U.S. House Elections." *Journal of Politics* 3(July): 861-873.
- 3/18 Dancey, Logan, John Henderson, and Geoffrey Sheagley. 2023. "The Personalized Vote in a Polarized Era." *American Journal of Political Science*
<https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12815>

- 3/23 Carson, Sievert, and Williamson, *Nationalized Politics* (pgs. 1-93)
- 3/25 Carson, Sievert, and Williamson, *Nationalized Politics* (pgs. 94-164)
- 3/30 **Money in Congressional Elections**
 Goodliffe, Jay. 2001. "The Effect of War Chests on Challenger Entry in U.S. House Elections." *American Journal of Political Science* 45(October): 830-844.
 Carson and Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections* (pgs. 64-76)
- 4/1 Gimpel, James G., Frances E. Lee, and Shanna Pearson-Merkowitz. 2008. "The Check Is in the Mail: Interdistrict Funding Flows in Congressional Elections." *American Journal of Political Science* 52(April): 373-394.
 Carson and Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections* (pgs. 81-108)
- 4/6 **Media and Elections**
 Levendusky, Matthew S. 2013. "Why do Partisan Media Polarize Viewers?" *American Journal of Political Science* 57(July): 611-623.
 Carson and Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections* (pgs. 117-122)
- 4/8 Arceneaux, Kevin, Johanna Dunaway, Martin Johnson, and Ryan J. Vander Wielen. 2020. "Strategic Candidate Entry and Congressional Elections in the Era of Fox News." *American Journal of Political Science* 64(2): 398-415.
 Carson and Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections* (pgs. 122-138)
- 4/13 **Senate Elections**
 Lublin, David I. 1994. "Quality, Not Quantity: Strategic Politicians in U.S. Senate Elections, 1952-1990." *Journal of Politics* 56(February): 228-241.
 Jacobson and Carson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections* (pgs. 138-144)
- 4/15 Johnson, Gbemende, Bruce I. Oppenheimer, and Jennifer L. Selin. 2012. "The House as a Stepping Stone to the Senate: Why Do So Few African American House Members Run?" *American Journal of Political Science* 56(April): 387-399.
 Jacobson and Carson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections* (pgs. 225-245)
- 4/20 **Representation**
 Grimmer, Justin. 2013. "Appropriators not Position Takers: The Distorting Effects of Electoral Incentives on Congressional Representation." *American Journal of Political Science* 57(July): 624-642.
 Jacobson and Carson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections* (pgs. 247-266)
- 4/22 *No Class, Midwest Political Science Association Meeting – Chicago*
- 4/27 Thomsen, Danielle and Aaron King. 2020. "Women's Representation and the Gendered Pipeline to Power." *American Political Science Review* 114(4): 989-1000.
 Jacobson and Carson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections* (pgs. 266-296)
****Final Papers Due****
- 5/4 **Final Exam** (3:30-6:30 p.m.)