Political Behavior

Political behavior is the study of the way people think, feel, and act with regard to politics. This course is designed to touch on the major areas of research in political behavior, including public opinion, ideology, partisanship, participation, campaigns, the media, and polarization. Although many fruitful comparisons could be made in a cross-national context, we will focus on the American political system and will be primarily concerned with national elections.

The study of political behavior presents many intriguing puzzles. Millions of people vote in presidential elections every four years, even though any individual’s vote will not affect the outcome of the election. Approximately 60% of Americans identify with one of the two major political parties, but a substantial proportion of people are unable to recognize the name of their congressional representative or know which party holds a majority in Congress. Democratic theory is built on the principle that citizens can make informed and rational choices, yet emotion influences our political opinions and actions. In this course, we will discuss these and other topics in the context of broader questions about political behavior, including:

What drives public opinion?
How sophisticated is the public’s thinking about politics?
Can people make reasoned political decisions?
Why do we vote?
Do political campaigns and the media influence the electorate’s vote choices?

The academic study of political behavior is a very different pursuit than the sport of following electoral politics. While we will focus on the empirical study of politics, given the timing of this course with an extremely interesting presidential election, we will certainly consider how our theories of political behavior inform what we read and hear about the 2012 election.

Teaching Philosophy and Course Goals

The subject matter of a course serves as a tool to help you develop skills to become a better thinker and communicator. The goals for this course are for you to:

*Ask good questions.* Learning necessitates curiosity.

*Assess and synthesize information.* Use the course material to arrive at informed opinions.

*Engage in analytical reasoning.* Respectfully discuss and deliberate ideas.

*Communicate effectively.* Continue to improve the skills necessary to write or present a clearly argued and well-developed discourse.
My Expectations
I aim to make class worth your time, and I ask for the same in return. I expect that you will read the course material before the beginning of class and come prepared to engage in the discussion. I have posted a variety of handouts on my website which I hope will help you get the most out of the course. Attendance every day and active class participation are essential components of this class.

Course Requirements
In addition to a midterm and final exam, you will have three additional assignments to complete. All assignments are to be turned in at the beginning of class on the date indicated.

1. **Response Paper:** Write a 2-3 page response to a prompt I will provide. I am interested in seeing how you apply the theories discussed in the course to a real-world situation.

2. **Essay:** Limiting yourself to the course material, write a 5-6 page paper answering one of the questions provided on the handout on the course website.

3. **Independent Assignment:** You must complete either A or B.
   A. Make one 8-10 minute presentation applying a theory from class to news from the 2012 election AND write one 5-7 page paper (15% for the paper and 10% for the presentation)
   
   B. Write an 8-10 page term paper that asks and answers a question you find interesting extending from the course discussion or reading. You should come meet with me by the fourth week of class to discuss your topic. More information about this assignment can be found on a handout on the course website.

Grading
I reserve A’s for excellent work. B’s are for solid, above-average work while C’s are for work of average quality. D’s indicate work that is below average, and F’s indicate work that is substantially below expectations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Response Paper</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>September 13(^{th})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midterm</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>October 9(^{th})</td>
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<tr>
<td>Essay</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>November 6(^{th})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Assignment</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>Varies, see calendar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>December 12(^{th}) or 17(^{th})</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>Every day</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I will collect assignments at the beginning of class. Assignments turned in during class after I have collected them from students will be considered late (5% deduction). Assignments turned in after class will be penalized an additional half-letter grade (5%) for each day (or fraction thereof) they are late until the maximum grade possible is a 60. Weekend days count. So, if you turn in an assignment after class but before midnight on the day the assignment is due, the maximum grade possible is a 90. An assignment turned in the day after the due date will receive a maximum score of 85; two days late will receive a maximum of 80; three days late, 75, etc. I will not accept assignments after the Friday of the last week of classes. Computer malfunctions will not be considered a legitimate excuse for the late submission of assignments, so plan accordingly.

In fairness to everyone, students who arrive late for an exam may not work overtime. The only
valid reasons for missing and rescheduling an exam are due to a documented illness, religious observance, death in the family (or similarly grave family emergency), a W&M-sponsored travel commitment that you have discussed with me before the exam, or, during final exams only (as W&M allows), you have several exams in a row. If you miss an exam for another reason you can take a makeup exam for which the maximum grade you can earn is a C (75%).

Extra credit will not be available. Consequently, it is imperative that you do your best on each and every assignment. I do not communicate about grades over email. If you are not in class the day an assignment is passed back, it is your responsibility to come to my office hours or make an appointment to pick it up.

If you are dissatisfied with your grade on an assignment, you can choose between two options. If you want to talk about your work and discuss ways you can improve on future assignments, I am happy to meet with you in office hours or by appointment. You cannot appeal your grade after we have this conversation. Therefore, if you are positive that you want to appeal your grade, you need to write a one-page double-spaced explanation of why you think your work merits a higher grade. After reading your appeal, I will re-grade your assignment. Your grade can go up, stay the same, or go down. We will then schedule a meeting to talk about your work.

**Plagiarism**

I assume that students take the Honor Code and plagiarism as seriously as I do and that academic misconduct will not become an issue in this class. For any questions about policies regarding cheating, plagiarism, or other types of academic dishonesty, please see the William and Mary Honor Council’s web site and the discussion of the Honor Code and plagiarism in the Student Handbook. I will initiate an Honor Council proceeding for any student whom I judge to have plagiarized any part of their work or to have cheated in any way, and at a bare minimum, I will recommend that the student receive an F for the course.

**Course Materials**

I recommend that you purchase the following books, although there will be copies of the book available on reserve in the library. While they are on sale in the campus bookstore, I am confident sleuthing on Amazon, half.com, or abebooks.com will result in used copies at lower cost. I encourage you to get the current editions of the book as substantial changes have been made from earlier editions.


In addition to these two texts, additional original research articles and readings will be available via the course website on Blackboard.
Readings and Calendar

Books
(NWK)
Partisan Hearts and Minds, by Donald Green, Bradley Palmquist and Eric Schickler (GPS)
To Vote or Not to Vote: The Merits and Limits of Rational Choice Theory, by Andre Blais (Blais)
Red State Blue State Rich State Poor State, by Andrew Gelman (Gelman)

Articles and Excerpts (available on Blackboard)
Campbell et al. 1960. The American Voter, Chapter 9 and 10 excerpts.
Editorial readings about NSF funding
Gerber and Green. Get Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout. Chapters 1-3.
Lazer et al. “Computational Social Science” Science 323(5915): 721-723 (September 4th)
### Course Calendar

*Blue font indicates a due date for a subset of students*

*Red font and ALL CAPS indicates a due date for all students*

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**I. Foundations**

**August 30**  
**Intro Day**  
*Class logistics*  
*What is political behavior?*  
*Why do we study political behavior?*

### Readings

- Read one of these:  
  - Coburn Amendment  
  - Flake opening statement  
  - Stevens editorial

- Read one of these:  
  - Cohen editorial  
  - Nature editorial

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**Sept 4**  
**The measurement and study of political behavior**

*How do we measure political behavior?*  
*What are the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to studying political behavior?*

### Readings

- NWK 4-18  
- Newport, Saad and Moore 1997  
- Lazer et al. 2009

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**II. Political Orientations, Attitudes and Opinions**

**Sept 6**  
**Public Opinion**

*How do people form opinions about the political world?*  
*Do people have stable and coherent opinions?*  
*In what ways is public opinion malleable to survey effects? What are the implications of this?*

### Readings

- Zaller and Feldman 1992:  
  - read p. 579-586 and 606-612  
  - skim p. 587-605

**Sept 11**  
**Ideology**  
**Presentations #1: Ideology in the 2012 Election**

*What is political ideology?*  
*How does political ideology develop?*  
*Do people have coherent political ideologies?*  
*Does that matter?*

### Readings

- Campbell et al. 1960 Chp. 9 and 10 (pages 188-194, 218-227, 249-250, required; 227-248 optional)  
- Conover and Feldman 1981, p. 617-625  
- Jost and Amodio 2012

**Sept 13**  
**Party Identification (PID): Origins and Patterns**  
**RESPONSE PAPER DUE**

*What is the intellectual history of the concept of partisan identification (PID)?*  
*How do we measure PID? How does that affect our interpretation of the concept?*  
*What role does PID serve for citizens?*

### Readings

- NW p. 210-234  
- GPS p. 109-114
Sept 18  **PID as a Social Identity**  
Presentations #2: Partisanship in the 2012 Election

*Is PID a form of social identity?*

*What evidence exists for the social identity explanation compared to more instrumental conceptualizations?*

Sept 20  **Innate Explanations for PID and Ideology**

*Is political behavior rooted in our biology?*

*What are the implications of a biological basis for political behavior?*

Sept 25  **The Role of Information and the Consequences of Informational Differences**

Presentations #3: Key Policy Issues in the 2012 Election

*What kind of information do people have about politics?*

*What kind of information do people need to make good political decisions?*

Sept 27  **Heuristics**

*What heuristics do people use when making political decisions?*

*Do heuristics compensate for people's lack of political knowledge?*

Oct 2  **Affect and Cognitive Bias**

CLASS DEBATE

*How do people process the information they do receive?*

*Does emotion help or hinder good decision-making?*

Oct 4  **Vote Determinants and Election Forecasting**

*What role does the economy play in vote choice?*

*Does issue voting matter?*

*How do political scientists predict election outcomes?*

Oct 9  **MIDTERM**

### III. Voting, Campaigns and Elections

Oct 11  **Participation and Voting: Individual Factors and Institutional Factors**

Presentations #4: Institutional Changes in the 2012 Election

*Which individual factors influence voter turnout?*

*How does the institutional context affect voter turnout?*

*What trends in voter turnout exist?*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Reading/Resource</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 16</td>
<td>Fall Break – no class</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oct 18</td>
<td><strong>The Calculus of Voting</strong></td>
<td><em>What is the calculus of voting?</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>How do voter perceive the costs of voting and the impact of their vote on the election outcome?</em></td>
<td>Blais: Preface, Introduction, Chapters 3 and 4</td>
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<td>Oct 23</td>
<td><strong>So why do people really vote?</strong></td>
<td><em>Why do people vote?</em></td>
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<td><em>Is rational choice a good framework to evaluate individuals’ decision to vote?</em></td>
<td>Blais: Chapters 5 and 6, Conclusion</td>
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<td>Oct 25</td>
<td><strong>Campaign Tactics</strong></td>
<td><em>What do campaigns do?</em></td>
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<td><em>Which tactics work best?</em></td>
<td>McCoy &quot;Creepiness Factor&quot;</td>
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<td>Lizza “Battle Plans”</td>
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<td>Oct 30</td>
<td><strong>Mobilization and Advertising</strong></td>
<td><em>When do GOTV efforts work? Why?</em></td>
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<td><em>Does negative advertising demobilize voters?</em></td>
<td>Lau and Rovner 2009</td>
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<td>Gerber and Green GOTV</td>
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<td>Nov  1</td>
<td><strong>The Media</strong></td>
<td><em>What evidence do we have that the media influences the way people think and act politically?</em></td>
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<td><em>What are the consequences of media bias, if it exists?</em></td>
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<td>Nov  6</td>
<td><strong>Election Day!</strong></td>
<td><em>Is the American media playing the role it should in a democracy?</em></td>
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<td>Nov  8</td>
<td><strong>Election Redux</strong></td>
<td>Read/watch election coverage</td>
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<td><em>Presentations #7: Exit Polling in the 2012 Election</em></td>
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<td>Nov 13</td>
<td><strong>Social Networks</strong></td>
<td><em>What role do social networks play in our theories of political behavior?</em></td>
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<td><em>Does political discussion foster normative political outcomes?</em></td>
<td>Zuckerman 2006</td>
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<td>Assigned ARPS article</td>
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Nov 15  **Special Topics**  Assigned ARPS article

*Work in small groups to prepare presentations on various topics in political behavior.*

Nov 20  **Special Topics**  Assigned ARPS article

**SMALL GROUP PRESENTATION DAY**

Nov 22  **Thanksgiving – no class**

**IV. Polarization**

Nov 27  **Polarization**  Assigned ARPS article

Presentations #8: Polarization in the 2012 Election

*What is polarization?*
*How do we know if we’ve seen it?*
*Have the masses polarized, or only the elites?*

NWK p. 221-37 and p. 266-296

NWK p. 242-265 (optional)

NWK p. 297-318 (optional)

Nov 29  **Red and Blue America**  Assigned ARPS article

*Term paper due*

Gelman p. 3-40

Dec 4  **The Consequences of Polarization**  Assigned ARPS article

*What role do religiosity and income have on polarization?*
*Is polarization a blessing or a curse?*

Gelman p. 43-93

Dec 6  **Conclusions and Implications**  Assigned ARPS article

*What impact does polarization have on democratic outcomes?*
*Who—or what—is to blame for the problems in our political system?*
*Are Americans able to be responsible citizens?*

Gelman p. 111-136, 165-177

Exam  **FINAL EXAM**

Section 1: Monday, December 17th 9-12 p.m.
Section 2: Wednesday, December 12th 2-5 p.m.