

Congressional Elections
POLI:3130
Department of Political Science
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
University of Iowa

Instructor: Prof. Colin Case
Meeting Time: TuTh 9:30-10:45
Classroom: 1022 Main Library (LIB)
Email: colin-case@uiowa.edu
Office: 359 Schaeffer Hall
Office Hours: Tu 11-12:30 & Th 1:30-3:30
DEO: Julie Pacheco
DEO Email: julianna-pacheco@uiowa.edu

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Why do some congressional candidates win while others falter? How do the rules of congressional elections shape who decides to run, how campaigns unfold, and what elected officials do once in office? Every two years, all 435 members of the U.S. House and one-third of the U.S. Senate stand for re-election—a constant cycle that shapes representation, policy outcomes, and the balance of power in Washington, D.C. Although these elections often receive less attention than presidential races, they are the backbone of American democracy. This course provides an in-depth examination of how congressional campaigns function and why they are significant for representation, governance, and electoral accountability. By the end of the semester, you will have a deep understanding of how congressional elections shape political outcomes in American politics.

We will begin by exploring the strategic environment in which candidates decide to run, craft messages, raise money, and compete in both primary and general elections. Early units focus on the institutional foundations of congressional elections—such as redistricting and gerrymandering, primary election rules, and patterns of competition—and how these structures shape both candidate and voter behavior. We also analyze the major determinants of electoral success, including incumbency advantages, challenger quality, national conditions, and strategic ambition.

Building on this foundation, we will then turn to how campaigns actually operate. Topics include campaign finance, budgeting, donor and interest-group motivations, issue strategy, voter targeting, messaging, and navigating today's media environment. We conclude by examining how campaigning extends into governing, including perpetual campaigning, follow-through on campaign commitments, and the electoral forces that shape legislative behavior.

A core piece of this course is its hands-on, immersive learning approach. Students will engage in a series of case studies and simulations that mirror real-world decisions faced by congressional candidates and elected officials. These activities are designed to deepen understanding while cultivating the analytical skills needed to evaluate and participate in real election scenarios using the theories and evidence discussed in class. A unique feature of this semester is that the course will unfold alongside the 2026 congressional primary elections, including contests in Iowa's four congressional districts and Senate race, many of which are expected to be competitive. Hands-on exercises will directly connect course concepts to the behavior of candidates in these ongoing races.

The semester culminates in a capstone project in which students design a comprehensive campaign and governing strategy for a candidate running in the 2026 congressional primary elections. Drawing on course concepts, students will evaluate whether a candidate should run, how they should position themselves, how to manage resources, and how to align campaign choices with the realities of governing.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the course, you will be able to...

- Describe how the election context and institutions affect congressional election outcomes.
- Explain real-world election outcomes using course theories.
- Describe how election context, institutions, and incentives affect candidate behavior during and after elections.
- Analyze candidates' campaign strategies and behavior in the context of election circumstances.
- Design campaign recommendations to candidates running for office or in office.

REQUIRED TEXTS

There are no required books to purchase for this class. All assigned readings for the course will be posted on the course's ICON site under the files tab.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING

Grading Ranges

A+: 100-99.00

A: 98.99-93.00

A-: 92.99-90.00

B+: 89.99-87.00

B: 86.99-83.00

B-: 82.99-80.00

C+: 79.99-77.00

C: 76.99-73.00

C-: 72.99-70.00
D+: 69.99-67.00
D: 66.99-63.00
D-: 62.99-60.00
F: 59.99-00.00

Course Components

Short Quizzes (20%)

Throughout the semester, you will be assigned to take open-note quizzes that correspond to the material being covered at different points in the semester. The purpose of these quizzes is to ensure that you are comfortable with the content being covered so that you can effectively participate in the more hands-on portions of the class. There will be about eleven of these quizzes throughout the semester and I will drop your lowest score. I will announce the opening of a quiz at the end of class, and you will have 72 hours to complete it. I should note that these quizzes are designed to be short and low-stakes. They should not take longer than 20 minutes, assuming you are paying attention in class and doing the reading.

Simulations (30%)

A significant portion of this course involves applying your knowledge of congressional elections to real-world scenarios. In pursuit of this, you will be required to participate in five in-class simulations throughout the semester. These simulations will differ in nature depending on the unit. For example, during congressional redistricting, students will be assigned various roles and participate in a mock hearing about a proposed redistricting plan and changes to primary election rules. Others, such as during the campaign operations unit, will involve advising a candidate on how their campaign should be organized and where to allocate funds.

Capstone Project (30%)

At the end of the course, you will complete a final “capstone” project that asks you to apply everything you have learned to a real-life candidate running for re-election in the 2026 primary elections. For the project, you will provide advice to the candidate on all aspects of their campaign: whether they should run for re-election, how they should organize their campaign, where they should spend money, how they should message, what issues they should message on, and how they should act in Congress if (re-)elected. You will submit a final paper and give a final presentation, which will take place during finals week. The final paper part of the project will be worth 25% of your final grade, and the presentation will be worth 5% of your final grade.

In Class Participation (20%):

As this grade indicates, you will need to be physically present during class and prepared to engage with the material. Beyond simply showing up, active participation in this course is essential for success – both for the class and your personal development as a student. Class participation can take

many forms, such as speaking and listening to others during small and large group discussions, raising questions for classmates to consider, or completing occasional in-class activities. I expect both quality and quantity in terms of class participation: your participation should demonstrate that you are thinking critically about the topics we cover and the assigned readings.

It should go without saying that if you do not regularly attend class, you cannot do well on your participation grade. You will be permitted three excused absences throughout the semester, and you do not need to justify why you are missing class. *This does not apply to simulation class days: missing those days without an excused absence will result in a 0 for that simulation.* Each additional absence will result in a 10-point reduction in your participation grade. Exceptions to this policy will be made in the case of multiple absences due to prolonged illness, religious holidays, military service obligations, and University-sponsored activities. If you anticipate missing more than three classes throughout the semester due to legitimate reasons, please discuss this with me during office hours.

Student Complaints

Students with a complaint about a grade or a related matter should first discuss the situation with the instructor and/or the course supervisor (if applicable), and finally with the DEO (Chair) of the department, school or program offering the course. Sometimes students will be referred to the department or program's Director of Undergraduate Studies (DUS) or Director of Graduate Studies (DGS). Undergraduate students should contact [CLAS Undergraduate Programs](#) for support when the matter is not resolved at the previous level. Graduate students should contact the CLAS Graduate Affairs Manager when additional support is needed.

COMMUNICATION

I am happy to meet with students outside of class time. Whether you have concerns about the course, questions about the material, or would like to engage further with the topic, please feel free to attend office hours. I will be holding office hours in 359 Schaeffer Hall. If you cannot meet during my office hours, which are listed at the top of this syllabus, please email me to set up an alternative time. Office hours are an important resource that should be utilized to improve understanding of the material or to ask more personalized questions.

Outside of office hours, e-mail is the easiest way to contact me. I will typically respond to emails within 48 hours. Please send a follow-up if I do not respond to your email within this time frame. Unless the question you are asking is easily expressed in a short paragraph or less, you should plan on attending office hours to ask course-related questions or ask questions during class. I will frequently send emails about the course. You should check your UI email regularly to stay on top of these updates. Students are responsible for all official correspondences sent to their UI email address (uiowa.edu) and must use this address for any communication with instructors or staff in the UI community. For the privacy and the protection of student records, UI faculty and staff can only correspond with UI email addresses.

ACADEMIC HONESTY AND MISCONDUCT

Cheating and Plagiarism

Academic dishonesty — including cheating, plagiarism, or any instance of taking credit for work that is not your own — will not be tolerated in this course. All students in CLAS courses are expected to abide by the [college's standards of academic honesty](#). Graduate academic misconduct must be reported to the Graduate College according to Section F of the Graduate College Manual.

AI Policy

As I am sure you are aware, generative AI tools are changing the way our world works, particularly how we teach and learn. At times throughout the semester, we will use generative AI tools such as ChatGPT for educational purposes. Generative AI tools are incredibly powerful and can accomplish many tasks efficiently and effectively. But just as being exposed to tools like a calculator can prevent you from developing foundational mathematical skills and mental frameworks, pre-trained large language models can hinder students' ability to develop practical skillsets that will benefit them in their future careers. For this reason, the course will have the following AI policy:

When AI is allowed:

- “As a critical friend”: provoking reflection, suggesting structure, and providing organizational feedback.
- “Editing”: editing tone, improving clarity and readability, fixing grammar, or shortening text.
- “Feedback”: providing feedback and potential suggestions on original content.
- “Application”: all case study applications that ask students to use generative AI tools for case study problems.

When AI is NOT allowed:

- “Generating content”: writing some text without first being given author-generated text.
- “Evaluating” or “critical reasoning”: telling the student what to think about a scenario or problem where the student is not providing the reasoning first.

Students must disclose when and how they used AI tools. If students are not sure if their use of AI tools is appropriate for the course, they should ask. In addition, all students are responsible for the material they submit, including any mistakes, errors, or academic violations, even when using AI tools as allowed by the course.

MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES AND STUDENT SUPPORT

Students are encouraged to be mindful of their mental health and seek help as a preventive measure or if feeling overwhelmed and/or struggling to meet course expectations. Students should talk to their instructor for assistance with specific class-related concerns.

For additional support, visit wellbeing.uiowa.edu to see a complete list of mental health resources. The UI Support and Crisis Line is available any time via chat, phone, or text at 844-461-5420. University Counseling Service (UCS) offers free, confidential mental health services to students. Appointments can be scheduled at counseling.uiowa.edu. The UI also offers 24/7 peer support through Togetherall, an online support community where students can anonymously and safely share their thoughts and feelings without judgment. Visit wellbeing.uiowa.edu/togetherall to get started.

It can be difficult to maintain focus and be present if you are experiencing challenges with meeting basic needs or navigating personal crisis situations. The Office of the Dean of Students can help. Contact the office for one-on-one support, identifying options, and to locate and access basic needs resources (such as food, rent, childcare, etc.): [Student Care and Assistance](mailto:Student_Care_and_Assistance@uiowa.edu) (132 IMU; dos-assistance@uiowa.edu; 319-335-1162). Additional basic needs information can be found at [Food Pantry at Iowa](#), [Clothing Closet](#), and [Basic Needs and Support Resources](#).

ADMINISTRATIVE HOME

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS) is the home of this course, and CLAS governs the policies and procedures for its courses. Graduate students, however, must adhere to the [academic deadlines set by the Graduate College](#).

COURSE ICON SITE

To access the course site, log into [Iowa Courses Online \(ICON\)](#) using your Hawk ID and password.

DROP DEADLINE FOR THIS COURSE

You may drop an individual course before the drop deadline; after this deadline you will need collegiate approval. You can look up the drop deadline for this course here. When you drop a course, a “W” will appear on your transcript. The mark of “W” is a neutral mark that does not affect your GPA. To discuss how dropping (or staying in) a course might affect your academic goals, please contact your Academic Advisor. Directions for adding or dropping a course and other registration changes can be found on the Registrar’s website. Undergraduate students can find policies on dropping CLAS courses here. Graduate students should adhere to the academic deadlines and policies set by the Graduate College.

UNIVERSITY POLICIES

This course adheres to University policies set by the Provost’s office. To view University policies related to Free Speech and Expression, Accommodations for Students with Disabilities, Absences for Religious Holy Days, Non-Discrimination Statement, Classroom Expectations, Sexual Harassment/Sexual Misconduct and Supportive Measures, Conflict Resolution, Class Recordings, Absences from Class, and Absences for Military Service Obligations, please visit <https://provost.uiowa.edu/student-course-policies>.

The [final examination date and time](#) will be announced by the Registrar, generally by the fifth week of classes, and it will be announced on the course ICON site once it is known. **Do not plan your end of the semester travel plans until the final exam schedule is made public. It is your responsibility to know the date, time, and place of the final exam.** According to the Registrar’s final exam policy, students **have a maximum of two weeks after the announced final exam schedule** to request a change if an exam conflict exists or if a student has more than two exams scheduled for the same day (see the [policy](#) here).

COURSE SCHEDULE AND READINGS

Class Date	Readings and Due Dates
Jan 20	Course Introduction • Syllabus • Burlij, Terence. “CNN’s guide to the most important elections of 2026”
Jan 22	The Strategic Context and American Politics Refresher • Burgat, Casey and Charles Hunt. Congress Explained. Ch 2. (optional but recommended if you are unfamiliar with the U.S. Congress)
Jan 27	Congressional Districts and Redistricting
Jan 29	Gerrymandering • Kenny et al. “Widespread partisan gerrymandering mostly cancels nationally, but reduces electoral competition.”
Feb 3	Gerrymandering (cont.)
Feb 5	Primary Elections
Feb 10	Candidates’ Constituencies • Fenno, Richard F. “U.S. House Members in Their Constituencies.” (read pages 1-9 and skim the rest)
Feb 12	Simulation 1: Election Rules Debate • Read preparation materials before class
Feb 17	Incumbency Advantage • Jacobson, Gary C. “It’s Nothing Personal: The Decline of the Incumbency Advantage in US House Elections.”
Feb 19	No Class • Simulation 1 Reflection Due on ICON
Feb 24	Challenger Candidates • Skelley, Geoffrey. “Why More Inexperienced Candidates Are Running — And Winning”
Feb 26	National Factors and Macro-Partisan Trends • Galston, William A. “What history tells us about the 2026 midterm elections.”
Mar 3	Deciding to Run • Fowler, Stephen. “More than 10% of Congress won't return to their seats after 2026.”
Mar 5	Simulation 2: Electoral Success Simulation • Read preparation materials before class
Mar 10	Campaign Finance 101

Class Date	Readings and Due Dates
Mar 12	- Albert, Zachary. "Trends in Campaign Financing, 1980-2016" (skim) The Anatomy of a Campaign Simulation 2 Reflection Due on ICON
Mar 24	No Class
Mar 26	Campaign Finance and Electoral Success Koerth, Maggie. "How Money Affects Elections."
Mar 31	Campaign Finance and Donor Motivations Hersch, Eithan and Brian F. Schaffner. "Motivations of Political Contributors: An Audit."
Apr 2	Simulation 3: Budget and Fundraising Simulation Read preparation materials prior to class
Apr 7	Campaign Strategy and Candidate Presentation
Apr 9	Campaign Strategy and Issue Strategy Simulation 3 Reflection Due on ICON
Apr 14	Campaign Strategy and Issue Strategy (Cont.) Drutman, Lee. "The moderation debate fiddles with 2% while democracy's dimensionality collapses."
Apr 16	Campaign Communications Wesleyan Media Project. "Television and Digital Advertising in the 2024 Elections."
Apr 21	Simulation 4: Campaign Strategy Simulation Read preparation materials prior to class
Apr 23	Final Project Work Day (no class)
Apr 28	The Perpetual Campaign
Apr 30	Campaigns and Legislative Follow Through Sulkin, Tracy. "Campaign Appeals and Legislative Action." Simulation 4 Reflection Due on ICON
May 5	Electoral Accountability
May 7	Simulation 5: Legislative Behavior Simulation Read preparation materials before class
May 11	Final Project Presentations