

PLSC 3256: Elite Behavior in Congressional Elections

W 3:30-5:20 PM
ISPS A001

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Course Canvas: <https://yale.instructure.com/courses/116340>

Most current syllabus: <https://yale.instructure.com/courses/116340/assignments/syllabus>

Course Description

This seminar examines the behavior of political elites in US congressional elections. Although voters ultimately determine election outcomes, the dynamics of electoral campaigns are fundamentally shaped by the choices of candidates, political parties, activists, and financial contributors. Political elites' behavior is a function of not just their straightforward preferences, but the incentives that they face. Among other topics, this course will cover the congressional election "fundamentals" in primary versus general elections, the positions and priorities candidates articulate in their campaigns, how parties, donors, and interest groups choose which candidates to support, and the potential effects of commonly proposed campaign finance and electoral reforms. Throughout the semester, special emphasis will be placed on the challenges involved in making inferences about strategic interactions among political elites. Students will not only become familiar with how political scientists conduct research, but learn to reflect critically on the merits and limitations of existing approaches.

We will consider a number of questions with important implications for representation, polarization, and the modern US Congress, such as:

- Whose priorities and positions are championed in congressional candidates' campaigns?
- How did *Citizens United* change the fundraising landscape in congressional elections?
- What incentives do current campaign finance laws create for congressional candidates?
- How would proposed reforms such as ranked choice voting, open primaries, and public financing of elections change candidates' incentives?
- In which congressional races do interest groups, donors, and political parties get involved?

Assignments

PARTICIPATION (30%)

Discussion Leader (15%). In Weeks 2-5 and 7-12, readings will be introduced and discussion will be guided by one or two students. You will either be assigned to lead one week by yourself or two weeks with another student.

Response Memos (15%). Starting in Week 2, you are expected to submit a one-page, double-spaced response memo which discusses at least one critical unanswered question related to each assigned reading for the week. No memos are due in the weeks that strategy reports are due.

STRATEGY REPORTS (70%)

You will write three brief reports related to the strategy of political elites in congressional elections. The assignments are meant to build on each other, but if you would like to focus on different candidates and contributors in each assignment, you can. Each report should be between 5 and 7 double-spaced pages in total.

Report 1: Candidate Strategy (20%). Due in Week 6 on 2/17. Choose a congressional candidate who is running in 2026 and has a campaign website with an issue platform. You should be able to find their website by typing the candidate's name into a search engine or *Ballotpedia.com*. You will write a report which will include the following:

- A summary of the relevant "fundamentals" of the race. Is there an incumbent running for re-election? Is the primary competitive? Is the district heavily skewed toward one party?
- A summary of your chosen candidate's platform. What are the key issues that are prioritized in the platform? Would you consider this platform relatively moderate or extreme overall? Do any of the particular issue stances stand out as particularly extreme or moderate compared to the others?
- Based on course readings and classroom discussions, provide a potential assessment of the candidates' motivations for employing the campaign strategy represented by their platform. Can you infer why they might have articulated certain positions and prioritized these particular issues based on the candidate's personal experiences, district context, and national political environment? Are they an incumbent known for championing certain district priorities in Congress? Are they seeking to represent an extremely partisan or moderate district? Has a recent political event raised the salience of an issue?

Report 2: Contributor Strategy (20%). Due in Week 11 on 4/7. Find the candidate's 2026 campaign contributors by searching on fec.gov or opensecrets.org and choose one of their major contributors. You will write a report which should include the following:

- A summary of the available information about the contributor. Are they a well known individual, or an organization? How long have they been active in politics? Are they in a certain industry or known for championing a particular policy area?

- An assessment of their contribution behavior in the 2026 congressional elections. Do they typically make independent expenditures or contribute directly to candidates? Do the recipients of their contributions tend to have something in common — partisanship, incumbency, geographic region, extremism?
- Based on course readings and classroom discussions, provide a potential assessment of the contributor's strategy, how your candidate fits into it, and a potential alternative explanation for the contributor's observed behavior. Does the contributor seem to be an access-oriented corporate PAC, and your candidate is chair of a congressional committee overseeing the contributor's industry? Is the contributor a progressive electioneering group, and the candidate is challenging a moderate Democratic incumbent?

Report 3: Strategic Responses to Political Reforms (30%). Due on the last day of the final exam period, 5/6. Choose a political reform which has been proposed or already implemented in certain states or localities. This can be an electoral or campaign finance reform discussed in class. You will write a report which includes the following:

- Identify the problem that reformers seek to fix. What is the evidence of this problem? Does everyone agree that this is a problem, or do some believe that it is acceptable or even desirable?
- Explicate reformers' logic for how the reform will address the aforementioned problem.
- Provide an assessment of other changes that this reform may induce if implemented across all congressional elections. In doing so, you should consider how the incentives of all relevant strategic political elites may be altered by the reform, and how elites may strategically adapt their behavior in ways that the reformers did not consider. Is the reform meant to change candidates' behavior but could also change contributors' behavior, or vice versa? Will it change the pool of candidates running in elections? Will contributors try to influence elections in other ways?

DEADLINES AND LATE POLICY

All response memos and strategy reports are due by 5PM on Tuesdays. Late work will receive a 5% penalty for each 24-hour period, such that your maximum possible grade on an assignment submitted between 5:01 PM on Tuesday and 4:59 PM on Wednesday is 95%, another 5% will be deducted after 5PM on Wednesday, and so on. Given Yale College's deadline for submitting final grades, **no late work will be accepted for the final strategy report.**

ASSIGNMENT SCHEDULE

| Due Date | Assignment |
|----------|--|
| 1/20 | Response Memo |
| 1/27 | Response Memo |
| 2/3 | Response Memo |
| 2/10 | Response Memo |
| 2/17 | Report 1: Candidate Strategy |
| 2/24 | Response Memo |
| 3/3 | Response Memo |
| 3/24 | Response Memo |
| 3/31 | Response Memo |
| 4/7 | Report 2: Contributor Strategy |
| 5/6 | Report 3: Strategic Responses to Political Reforms |

Class Policies

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY & AI

As discussed in the Yale College Undergraduate Regulations, you are expected to conduct yourself with the utmost integrity in your academic endeavors. While use of AI is not forbidden, it is unlikely to bolster the quality of your work given the nature of the assignments in this course. Additionally, I have previously found Google's AI Overview and ChatGPT to provide inaccurate information about topics covered in this course. **If you choose to use AI or generative language models for idea generation and/or writing assistance, at the end of your assignment you must include transcript(s) of the prompts that you provided and the answers which were returned.** If you are unsure of whether the use of certain materials or software is acceptable when completing an assignment for this course, ask *before* you do so.

ACCESSIBILITY

Yale is committed to ensuring that students receive access to the accommodations they require in order to succeed. If you believe you may have a need for accessibility accommodations in this class, please get in touch with both Student Accessibility Services and myself at your earliest convenience.

Reading Schedule

Course readings are available on Canvas, and will consist primarily of political science book chapters and peer-reviewed articles. Many of the latter employ sophisticated statistical methods with which you may not be familiar — and that is okay. If aspects of a reading are unclear or you have other questions, take note of them and bring them up in class. Rest assured that others will have had similar thoughts. To guide your reading in preparation for in-class discussion, keep these questions in mind:

- What is the author's main research question(s)?

- Why was this question unanswered previously and why does the answer matter?
- Does the purported theory make sense? Are its assumptions justified?
- What sources of data and research design approach were used to answer the question?
- What scope conditions limit the study's generalizability?
- What critical questions remain unanswered?
- How does this reading relate to others from this week or past weeks?

WEEK 1 (1/14): INTRODUCTION & SYLLABUS REVIEW

- Jacobson, Gary C., and Jamie L. Carson. 2024. *The Politics of Congressional Elections*. p. 7-34, 247-283.

WEEK 2 (1/21): CONGRESSIONAL ELECTION "FUNDAMENTALS" — INCUMBENCY

- Jacobson, Gary C., and Jamie L. Carson. 2024. *The Politics of Congressional Elections*. p. 35-59.
- Erikson, Robert S. 1971. "The Advantage of Incumbency in Congressional Elections." *Polity* 3(3): 395–405.
- Olson, Michael P. 2020. "The Direct Primary and the Incumbency Advantage in the US House of Representatives." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 15(4): 483–506.

WEEK 3 (1/28): CONGRESSIONAL ELECTION "FUNDAMENTALS" — DISTRICT PARTISANSHIP AND COMPETITION

- Abramowitz, Alan I., Brad Alexander, and Matthew Gunning. 2006. "Inc incumbency, Redistricting, and the Decline of Competition in U.S. House Elections." *Journal of Politics* 68(1): 75–88.
- Kenny, Christopher T., Cory McCartan, Tyler Simko, Shiro Kuriwaki, and Kosuke Imai. 2023. "Widespread Partisan Gerrymandering Mostly Cancels Nationally, but Reduces Electoral Competition." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 120(25).
- Hirano, Shigeo, and James M. Snyder. 2019. *Primary Elections in the United States*. Cambridge University Press. p. 165-185.

WEEK 4 (2/4): CANDIDATE STRATEGY — IDEOLOGICAL POSITIONING

- Downs, Anthony. 1957. *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York: Harper. pg. 114-122.
- Ansolabehere, Stephen, James M. Snyder, and Charles Stewart. 2001. "Candidate Positioning in U.S. House Elections." *American Journal of Political Science* 45(1): 136–59.
- Meisels, Mellissa. 2026. "Candidate Positions, Responsiveness, and Returns to Extremism." *Journal of Politics* 88(2).

WEEK 5 (2/11): CANDIDATE STRATEGY — ISSUE PRIORITIES

- Ansolabehere, Stephen, and Shanto Iyengar. 1994. "Riding the Wave and Claiming Ownership Over Issues." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 58(3): 335–57.
- Sides, John. 2006. "The Origins of Campaign Agendas." *British Journal of Political Science* 36(3): 407–36.
- Meisels, Melissa. 2025. "Strategic Campaign Attention to Abortion Before and After *Dobbs*." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 122(20): e2503080122.

WEEK 6 (2/18): CAMPAIGN FINANCE OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND

- FEC contribution limits for 2026: [https://www.fec.gov/help-candidates-and-committees/candidate-taking-receipts/contribution-limits/](https://www.fec.gov/help-candidates-and-committtees/candidate-taking-receipts/contribution-limits/)
- Overview of *Citizens United v. FEC* (2010): <https://www.fec.gov/legal-resources/court-cases/citizens-united-v-fec/>
- *SpeechNOW.org v. FEC* (2010): <https://www.fec.gov/legal-resources/court-cases/speechnoworg-v-fec/>

WEEK 7 (2/25): POLITICAL PARTIES

- Bawn, Kathleen, Martin Cohen, David Karol, Seth Masket, Hans Noel, and John Zaller. 2012. "A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics." *Perspectives on Politics* 10(3): 571–97.
- Hassell, Hans J. G. 2016. "Party Control of Party Primaries: Party Influence in Nominations for the US Senate." *Journal of Politics* 78(1): 75–87.
- Aldrich, John H., Andrew O. Ballard, Joshua Y. Lerner, and David W. Rohde. 2017. "Does the Gift Keep on Giving? House Leadership PAC Donations before and after Majority Status." *Journal of Politics* 79(4): 1449–53.
- Thomsen, Danielle M. 2014. "Ideological Moderates Won't Run: How Party Fit Matters for Partisan Polarization in Congress." *Journal of Politics* 76(3): 786–97.

WEEK 8 (3/4): INDIVIDUAL DONORS

- Magleby, David B., Jay Goodliffe, and Joseph A. Olsen. 2018. *Who Donates in Campaigns?: The Importance of Message, Messenger, Medium, and Structure*. Cambridge University Press. Ch. 2.
- Barber, Michael J. 2016. "Representing the Preferences of Donors, Partisans, and Voters in the US Senate." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80(S1): 225–49.
- Barber, Michael, Brandice Canes-Wrone, Joshua Clinton, and Gregory Huber. 2026. "Donors and Dollars: Comparing the Policy Views of Donors and the Affluent." *Journal of Politics*.

- Meisels, Mellissa, Joshua D. Clinton, and Gregory A. Huber. 2024. "Giving to the Extreme? Experimental Evidence on Donor Response to Candidate and District Characteristics." *British Journal of Political Science* 54(3): 851–73

WEEK 9 (3/25): CORPORATE CONTRIBUTIONS

- Fouirnaies, Alexander, and Andrew B. Hall. 2014. "The Financial Incumbency Advantage: Causes and Consequences." *Journal of Politics* 76(3): 711–24.
- Li, Zhao. 2018. "How Internal Constraints Shape Interest Group Activities: Evidence from Access-Seeking PACs." *American Political Science Review* 112(4): 792–808.
- Meisels, Mellissa. 2025. "Everything in Moderation? The Effect of Extremist Nominations on Individual and Corporate PAC Fundraising." *Political Science Research and Methods*.

WEEK 10 (4/1): INTEREST GROUPS AND ACTIVISTS

- Barber, Michael, and Mandi Eatough. 2019. "Industry Politicization and Interest Group Campaign Contribution Strategies." *Journal of Politics* 82(3): 1008–25.
- Meisels, Mellissa. "Campaign Agendas and Issue Group Strategy in Congressional Primaries." *Working paper*.
- Karol, David. 2015. "Party Activists, Interest Groups, and Polarization in American Politics." In *American Gridlock: The Sources, Character, and Impact of Political Polarization*, eds. James A. Thurber and Antoine Yoshinaka. Cambridge University Press.

WEEK 11 (4/8): CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORMS

- Gilens, Martin, Shawn Patterson Jr, and Pavielle Haines. 2021. "Campaign Finance Regulations and Public Policy." *American Political Science Review* 115(3): 1074–81.
- Kilborn, Mitchell, and Arjun Vishwanath. 2022. "Public Money Talks Too: How Public Campaign Financing Degrades Representation." *American Journal of Political Science* 66(3): 730–44.
- Yorgason, Chenoa. 2025. "Campaign Finance Vouchers Do Not Expand the Diversity of Donors: Evidence from Seattle." *American Political Science Review* 119(1): 508–16.

WEEK 12 (4/15): ELECTORAL REFORMS

- Henderson, John A., Brian T. Hamel, and Aaron M. Goldzimer. 2018. "Gerrymandering Incumbency: Does Nonpartisan Redistricting Increase Electoral Competition?" *Journal of Politics* 80(3): 1011–16.
- Patterson, Shawn. 2020. "Estimating the Unintended Participation Penalty under Top-Two Primaries with a Discontinuity Design." *Electoral Studies* 68: 102231.
- Colner, Jonathan. 2025. "Running Toward Rankings: Ranked Choice Voting's Impact on Candidate Entry and Descriptive Representation." *American Journal of Political Science* 69(3): 1010–28.