

# Representation and Voting Rights - 84-35

**Professor Jonathan Cervas**

Assistant Teaching Professor

Carnegie Mellon University

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## Course Information

Democracy in the United States is looking a bit rickety. A notable portion of the American populace, often long before any ballots are cast, holds a persistent belief that the electoral process is flawed or ‘rigged’. This sentiment is exacerbated by instances where the majority’s preferences seem to be ignored or sidelined. In recent years, there have been notable shifts in the judiciary, with long-established legal precedents being overturned, often contrary to widespread public opinion. Additionally, the progress achieved in the realm of voting rights since the 1960s is facing setbacks in numerous states. A particularly alarming indication of the vulnerability of our democratic institutions occurred five years ago with the then (and now)-president’s unconstitutional attempts to maintain power, culminating in a violent insurrection against the U.S. government.

This course will provide an in-depth exploration of the essential aspects of representation and voting rights, concentrating on ensuring election integrity, achieving fair redistricting, and promoting a just democracy. We will confront contemporary challenges to our democratic processes and consider a range of reforms to strengthen democratic representation in our society. We will discuss how political polarization is impacting even non-political institutions. An example of this is the recent campaign against the former president of Harvard, who was both the university’s first Black president and second female president. Her academic background in political science, with a focus overlapping this course’s content, adds relevance to this discussion.

The course is structured to provide a comprehensive understanding of these issues, encouraging critical analysis and informed debate about the state and future of democracy in the United States. The course will combine lectures with interactive discussions, case studies, (potentially) guest speakers, and project-based learning. Students will engage in critical analysis of current events, participate in simulations, and conduct research projects to propose solutions for enhancing democratic representation.

1. *Materials*: We will use a variety of materials, all of which will be made available to you at no cost.
2. *Meetings*: We will meet on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 2:00pm to 3:20pm. **Posner Hall (POS) 153**
3. *Electronics*: In this course, the use of laptops and other electronic devices is permitted with the understanding that they are powerful tools for learning when used appropriately. However, it is crucial to recognize that any usage outside of regular course-related activities can be a significant distraction to both the user and surrounding peers. You may *not* use laptops, iPads, etc., in class except to the extent that it furthers your learning for our class. Please put away your phones before class begins. Failure to abide by this clause can result in a reduction in your grade.

4. *Evaluation*: Final Grades will be assigned based on the following weights:

**Surveys** = 2% of Final Grade.

**Online Discussion Board** = 15%

**In-class Exercises** = 18%

**Book Club** = 10%

**Redistricting Plan** = 5%

**Plan Comparison** = 5%

**“Expert” Report** = 15%

**Exams (2)** = 30%

- Exam 1 (15%)
- Exam 2 (15%)
  - Penalties for unpreparedness in class discussions

Grade cut points shall be:

A: 90%+

B: 80%+

C: 70%+

D: 60%+

R: 59%–

5. *Communication*: My office hours are Thursdays from 10:00 AM–12:00 PM in my office, 374 Posner Hall. If you would like to meet outside of these hours, please email me at [cervas@cmu.edu](mailto:cervas@cmu.edu) and we can arrange a time to meet, either in my office or on Zoom. In addition to course-related questions, I am happy to talk about broader issues related to your college experience, including whether law school or graduate school might be a good fit for you.

The Teaching Assistant for this class is Eli Half. Eli’s email is [elih@andrew.cmu.edu](mailto:elih@andrew.cmu.edu).

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## Key Topics

- *Redistricting and Gerrymandering*: Exploring the process of redistricting, its impact on political representation, and the ongoing debate over gerrymandering.
- *Election Systems and Their Impact*: Analysis of different electoral systems and their effects on political representation and voter engagement.
- *Challenges to Equitable Democracy*: Investigating contemporary challenges such as voter suppression, electoral integrity, and political polarization.
- *Reform and the Future of Democracy*: Discussing potential reforms like ranked-choice voting, redistricting commission

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## Course Plan

Throughout this course, we will delve into the multifaceted concept of representation, focusing on three key areas:

- 1) the intricacies of voting rights,

- 2) the dynamics of electoral democracy and representation, and
- 3) the technicalities of formal representation, particularly redistricting.

While the primary lens of our study will be the American political system, the universality of democracy and representation means that we may also draw valuable insights from other global systems. Our exploration will begin with an in-depth look at the theoretical foundations of representation, framed within the context of democratic norms and the legal and constitutional frameworks that define U.S. institutions. A significant portion of the course will be dedicated to a historical review of voting rights in America, tracing their evolution and current state. A crucial aspect of legislative elections in the U.S. is their organization in single-member districts, necessitating the redrawing of district boundaries every ten years. We will allocate several weeks to thoroughly understand this redistricting process. This will not only include learning how to create legally compliant electoral maps but also exploring the potential for and implications of manipulated districting, which can yield partisan or racial advantages. Additionally, we will develop the skills to identify and assess features in redistricting plans that may indicate such biases.

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## Course Components and Grading

### Missing and Late Assignments

This course proceeds according to a strict progression from topic to topic, which ensures fairness, consistency, and a shared baseline of preparation for all students. Failing to complete the readings will derail your progress and undermine our ability to build on prior material. For that reason, **late work frowned upon**, and any materials not submitted by the assigned deadline will have an automatic point deduction of *1% per hour*.

I am taking this opportunity to make my expectations for CMU students explicit. Course assignments are designed to reflect these expectations, and students will be graded accordingly. If you feel you need to strengthen any of the skills described below, please visit during office hours or schedule an appointment outside of the posted times.

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### Assignments

I have made all of the readings available in our Canvas page, for your convenience.

- (i) Matthew J. Streb, *Rethinking American Electoral Democracy* (Routledge 3rd Edition) (2015) (“**Streb**”);
- (ii) National Conference Of State Legislatures, *Redistricting Law 2020* (2019) (“**NCSL**”);
- (iii) Mazo, Eugene D. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of American Election Law*, Oxford Handbooks (2024; online edn, Oxford Academic, 22 Oct. 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197547922.001.0001> (“**Mazo**”); or
- (iv) Additional readings available either at the websites noted below or on Canvas.

## About the Instructor

Jonathan Cervas is an Assistant Teaching Professor in political science at Carnegie Mellon University, where he teaches courses on American politics, constitutional law, elections, and quantitative methods. His research focuses on political institutions, elections, redistricting, and voting rights, and has been published in leading journals across political science, law, economics, and geography. He has served as a court-appointed special master and expert in major redistricting and voting rights cases across multiple states, and is a Research Associate with the Electoral Innovation Lab and the Princeton Gerrymandering Project. Dr. Cervas earned his PhD from the University of California, Irvine.

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## Course Outline

Listed under “Modules” in Canvas. Readings for the next session will be assigned at the of each session.

Prospective outline can be found online at: <https://github.com/jcervas/teaching/blob/main/2025-2026/class-cmu-2026-84-352/course-outline.md>

**Online Discussion Board:** Students are expected to participate in online discussion boards for each class. You must include three interactions on the discussion board. This participation includes either (a) posting a discussion question or (b) answering other questions posted by your colleagues. You should have three separate entries in the discussion board, and one post with three questions will be counted as a single interaction. These entries must be posted before midnight on the day before class and start on January 20th. When posting, please avoid duplicate questions, and responses should show critical engagement with the questions beyond “I agree” or “Nice question.” You can skip the posts for four classes of your choosing and do not have to complete an entry for the midterm or final exam classes. If you register late for the class – you have one week following your course registration to complete any missed posts.

**In-class exercises:** Throughout the semester, we will have several in-class exercises. These are short, creative-type assignments designed to support your other assignments and to provoke thoughtful evaluations of our democracy. You will be able to collaborate in teams, but each student must submit individually. You will begin these in class and will have until the following day at midnight to submit on Canvas. They will be graded as either satisfactorily completed or in-complete. You can miss up to one exercise and still receive full points. This replaces “participation” as part of your grade, and can not be excused or made up.

**The Book Club** is not a presentation or writing assignment. It is a discussion-based component of the course. Your responsibility is to read carefully, show up prepared, and engage seriously with your peers.

**Redistricting Plan** (400-600 words): Create a legislative plan for a specified region consisting of a predetermined number of districts. Your plan should aim for fairness as you interpret it, necessitating deliberate design. Write a concise report explaining why your plan is fair. Limit your report to one single-spaced page and include maps and tables to display statistics about your plan (like compactness scores, population deviation, and minority representation). You may also discuss any preserved communities of interest.

**Plan Comparison** (1000-1500 words): Compare various alternative plans created by your classmates for the same region. Analyze at least three plans, comparing them to the map adopted by the region’s legislative body, which might be challenged for biases such as partisanship or racial gerrymandering. Your comparison should include traditional criteria and measures of partisan and racial equity. Prepare a succinct write-up, capped at three single-spaced pages, and enhance your analysis with maps, tables, and other visuals (not included in page count).

*Alternative Technical Comparison:* Instead of the plan comparison, you will use computer simulation to generate and assess alternative districting plans for the specified region, focusing on the fairness and legality of the enacted plan. Use either GerryChain (Python) or rdist (R) for this analysis. Compare each simulated plan to the region’s 2023 legislative plan. This involves critically analyzing redistricting plans, emphasizing computer simulation over creating new plans from scratch.

**Expert Witness Report:** There are two options for this final assignment: 1) working alone 2) working with a team.

*Non-Technical Report* [solo] (1500-3000 words): Expanding on your previous assignments and classwork, you will draft a report analyzing a legislative plan for the specified region. Imagine being hired to evaluate this plan in comparison to your own (referred to as “YOUR-LAST-NAME illustrative plan”). In your report, argue why the enacted plan could be considered unlawful. Reference reports by yourself or others as expert witnesses (available on your website). The report should range from 3 to 6 single-spaced pages (excluding tables and maps) and include links to each plan’s DRA page for accessibility. Start by summarizing the legal requirements for a redistricting plan in the region, incorporating relevant state and federal laws.

*Non-Technical Report* [team] (2500-5000 words): Collaboration with up to three others is allowed. If working in a team, evaluate each member’s map, choosing one as the primary illustrative map and others for comparison. You’ll also want to compare maps from other students. For team reports, extend the page limit to a maximum of 10 pages (minimum of 5 pages for team efforts). Given that this is prepared in tandem with others, the expectation is for a better developed report with more substance.

**Exams:** Exams will be held twice during the semester. It will test you primarily on the course readings, but may include questions stemming from lecture or class discussion. Many of the questions will be drawn from the *online discussion board*, where you will be providing questions.

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## AI Use Policy for Student Work

As artificial intelligence (AI) tools become increasingly accessible, it is important to clarify expectations for their use in this course. You are welcome to use AI technologies (such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, or similar tools) to support your independent work—such as brainstorming ideas, checking grammar, or improving the clarity of your writing. However, you **may not use AI to generate substantive content that you submit as your own original work**. All assignments, essays, and projects must reflect your own analysis, critical thinking, and voice.

### Permitted Uses of AI:

- Outlining or organizing your thoughts
- Checking grammar, spelling, or clarity
- Generating ideas or prompts to help you get started
- Reviewing your own drafts for readability

### Prohibited Uses of AI:

- Submitting AI-generated essays, paragraphs, or answers as your own work
- Using AI to complete assignments, discussion posts, or projects in place of your own effort
- Copying and pasting AI-generated content without substantial revision and personal input

If you use AI tools in your process, you must **disclose** how you used them in a brief note at the end of your assignment (e.g., “I used ChatGPT to help brainstorm ideas for my outline.”).

### Violations:

Submitting AI-generated content as your own is considered academic dishonesty and will be treated as a violation of the university’s academic integrity policy.

If you have questions about what is or is not allowed, please ask before submitting your work.

## Representation Statement

I am committed to including a broad range of perspectives in the readings and materials for this course. If you believe a critical voice is missing, please let me know so I can improve the syllabus now and in future offerings.

**We must treat every individual with respect.** We come from many different backgrounds, and this variety of viewpoints is fundamental to building and maintaining an equitable and inclusive campus community. “Representation” can refer to the ways we identify ourselves—race, color, national origin, language, sex, disability, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, creed, ancestry, belief, veteran status, or genetic information, among others. Each of these identities shapes the perspectives our students, faculty, and staff bring to campus. Promoting these varied viewpoints not only fuels excellence and innovation but also advances the pursuit of justice. We acknowledge our imperfections while fully committing to the work—inside and outside our classrooms—of building and sustaining a campus community that embraces these core values.

Each of us is responsible for creating a safer, more inclusive environment.

Unfortunately, incidents of bias or discrimination do occur, whether intentional or unintentional. They contribute to an unwelcoming atmosphere for individuals and groups at the university. Therefore, the university encourages anyone who experiences or observes unfair or hostile treatment on the basis of identity to speak out for justice and seek support—either in the moment or afterward. You can share your experiences using the following resources:

- **Ethics Reporting Hotline**

Submit an anonymous report by calling 844-587-0793 or visiting [cmu.ethicspoint.com](http://cmu.ethicspoint.com).

All reports are documented and reviewed to determine whether further action is needed. Regardless of the incident type, the university will use your feedback to transform our campus climate into one that is more equitable and just.

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## Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

If you have a documented disability and an accommodations letter from the Office of Disability Resources, please discuss your needs with me as early in the semester as possible. I will work with you to ensure that accommodations are provided as appropriate. If you suspect you may have a disability and are not yet registered with the Office of Disability Resources, you can contact them at [access@andrew.cmu.edu](mailto:access@andrew.cmu.edu).

## Student Well-Being

The past few years have been challenging. We are all under significant stress and uncertainty. I encourage you to find ways to move regularly, eat well, and reach out to your support system—or to me at [cer-vas@cmu.edu](mailto:cer-vas@cmu.edu)—if you need help. We can all benefit from support during stressful times, and this semester is no exception.

As a student, you may experience a range of challenges that interfere with learning, such as strained relationships, increased anxiety, substance use, feeling down, difficulty concentrating, or lack of motivation. These mental health concerns or stressful events can diminish your academic performance and reduce your ability to participate in daily activities. CMU offers services that can help, and treatment does work. Learn more about confidential mental health services available on campus at:

- **Counseling and Psychological Services:** <http://www.cmu.edu/counseling/>  
Phone (24/7): 412-268-2922

Please remember that support is always available—don't hesitate to reach out.