Representation and Voting Rights

[84-352/84-652] – Elections, Fair Redistricting, Equitable Democracy (Spring 2024)

Updated: January 19, 2024

Professor Jonathan Cervas
Email: cervas@cmu.edu
Location: Baker Hall A51
Time: Tuesdays and Thursdays 12:30p-1:50p Eastern
Office Hours: Tue 11a-12p or by appointment (arrange via Calendly)

Undergraduate Teaching Assistant:
- Anthony Cacciato (acacciat@andrew.cmu.edu)
- Office Hours: Mon 6:30p-7:30p, Posner Hall Conference Room

Undergraduate Teaching Assistant:
- Elijah Dourado (elijahd@andrew.cmu.edu)
- Office Hours: Wed 3p-4p, Posner Hall Conference Room

> Most up-to-date Syllabus: View Here[pdf]
>
> Full Course Schedule & Readings: View Here
>
> *If needed, our Zoom room will be https://bit.ly/representation_voting_rights*

Course Description:

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 three years ago with the then-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 examine the historical trajectory of voting rights in the U.S., confront contemporary challenges to our democratic processes, and consider a range of reforms to strengthen democratic representation in our society. Additionally, 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, 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.

Course Requirements:

Undergraduate Requirements	
In-class exercises	20%
Office Hours	2%
Book Review	15%
District map (and write up)	5%
Plan Comparison & Analysis	10%
Midterm Exam	14%
Final Exam	14%
Expert Witness Report	20%

Graduate Requirements	
Book Review I	11%
Book Review II	11%
District map (and write up)	5%
Plan Comparison & Analysis	10%
Midterm Exam	14%
Daily Questions	15%
Final Exam	14%
Expert Witness Report	20%

Key Topics:

- **Historical Overview of Voting Rights**: Tracing the development of voting rights from the founding of the United States to the present day, with a focus on key legislation and court cases.

- **Election Systems and Their Impact**: Analysis of different electoral systems and their effects on political representation and voter engagement.

- **Redistricting and Gerrymandering**: Exploring the process of redistricting, its impact on political representation, and the ongoing debate over gerrymandering.

- **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 commissions, and campaign finance reform, and their potential to create a more equitable democratic system.

Prerequisite Knowledge:

None required. This course will begin with the most basic understanding of democratic processes and attempt to "build the puzzle" of the complex systems that make up our representative democracy. Redistricting will be done on laptop computer running Dave's Redistricting App. Computer programming is optional but encouraged for those with Python or R skills.

Credits:

This course is suitable for both undergraduate [9 units] and graduate students [12 units].

Course Relevance:

The current state of democracy in the United States presents critical issues, particularly in how public opinion translates into governmental actions and outcomes. This course is crafted to delve deeply into the concept of representation. Though we will discuss the history of voting rights in the US, we will use it to contextualize the current state of American democracy.

Our study places significant emphasis on redistricting, which involves the redrawing of legislative and congressional district boundaries. Data from Google Trends indicates that public interest in redistricting reached its zenith in February 2022, and it continues to be a topic of considerable importance and attention. We will explore a range of boundary-drawing techniques aimed at achieving equitable representation and reflecting the diversity of communities. An important part of our discussion will focus on how district boundaries might be manipulated, potentially undermining minority representation or unduly entrenching a political party's dominance, which may not align with the electorate's preferences. Beyond theoretical knowledge, this course involves practical engagement in redistricting through the use of geographic information systems software, contributing meaningfully to the redistricting processes of state and local governments. To accommodate various interests, the course includes specialized tracks in computer science, mathematics, law, and geography, each focusing on different aspects of redistricting.

Our journey will also encompass an exploration of the 'one person, one vote' principle, a comprehensive understanding of the US Census and its implications, an analysis of the Electoral College's influence in elections, and an examination of federalism in the context of vertical representation, as well as the system of checks and balances integral to horizontal representation. We will pay close attention to the evolution and present challenges of the right to vote, highlighting key debates and issues in contemporary voting rights.

This course fundamentally addresses how representation in government mirrors public opinion and electoral results, extending to broader societal sentiments. Although focusing mainly on the United States, we will draw comparative insights from democratic systems in other countries. Recent trends towards anti-majoritarian outcomes in the U.S., raising concerns about the electoral link, will be a topic of analysis.

Summary:

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.

Learning Objectives:

Over the course of this class, students will acquire a comprehensive understanding of the political landscape, particularly in the context of voting and elections, through the lenses of law, political science, mathematics, sociology, and computer science. They will develop the ability to critically assess various electoral systems, recognizing their respective strengths and weaknesses in terms of representation and policy outcomes. A key focus will be on the correlation between voting rights and the lived experiences and opportunities of different groups. This exploration will extend to understanding the significance of voting rights across diverse communities, how these variations shed light on necessary improvements, and the impact of institutional design on incentive structures, including the potential for institutional biases against minority groups under majority rule systems. Students will also gain insights into how electoral system selection can address structural discrimination against minority groups.

The curriculum includes a thorough study of the US Census and the process of decennial reapportionment. Students will gain practical skills in designing legally compliant political district maps and analyze how the delineation of legislative districts can disproportionately affect groups, particularly marginalized ones, possibly leading to their under-representation. The course will cover data analysis techniques, introducing advanced methodologies from computer science and mathematics. Furthermore, students will devise strategies to reduce inequalities in voting rights and foster a more equitable society.

By the end of this course, students will be proficient in applying methodologies from their own academic discipline to identify and rectify shortcomings in voting systems, as well as in incorporating techniques from other disciplines to enhance democratic problem-solving approaches.

Late Submission Policy

For the efficient operation of this course, it's essential that assignments are submitted on time. This ensures timely feedback and maintains the interconnected flow of the coursework. Recognizing that unexpected situations may occur, a late submission policy is in place. Assignments turned in within 48 hours of the deadline are eligible for a maximum of 90% of the total grade. If you anticipate a delay beyond this 48-hour period, please inform TA Elijah promptly by emailing elijahd@andrew.cmu.edu, and make sure to include me in the communication by CC'ing cervas@cmu.edu. Note that this policy does not apply to in-class exercises.

Important Dates:

1/16	First day of class
2/22	Book Review due (graduate only)
2/27	Midterm Exam
3/4-3/8	Spring Break (no class)
3/17	Book Review due (undergrad only)
3/30	Maps and analysis due
4/6	Plan comparison due
4/9	Book Review II due (graduate only)
4/25	Final Exam
5/5	Expert Witness Report due
5/8	Final Grades for graduating seniors
5/14	Final Grades Due

Books:

- (**NCSL**) National Conference Of State Legislatures, Redistricting Law 2020 (2019) – Available Free Of Charge, Courtesy Of Wendy Underhill And Tim Storey at NCSL

- (**Streb**) Matthew J. Streb, Rethinking American Electoral Democracy (Routledge 3rd Edition) (2015)

Assignments:

Professor and TA Office Hours: It is mandatory for undergraduate students to participate in at least one office hour session during the semester, either with the professor or a teaching assistant (TA). The professor will have scheduled office hours each week and is also accessible for meetings by appointment. Teaching assistants will also be available for consultation, with their specific office hours announced on Canvas. Additionally, there might be informal gatherings titled "Lunch with the Professor", where students are invited to join the professor at a specified location (Conference Room on the third floor of Posner Hall) for a bring-your-own-lunch meeting.

Book Review: For your assignment, you have the flexibility to choose a book from the provided list (or select any other book that aligns with the themes of representation or voting rights, with approval from the instructor). Your task is to craft a comprehensive review of the chosen book. This review should include a succinct summary of the book's content. Beyond the summary, I encourage you to engage critically with the book, reflecting on the author's approach to the subject matter. Discuss aspects the author excelled in, as well as any potential weaknesses you perceive in their treatment of the topic. Feel free to explore possibilities for future research that the book might suggest, or consider the relevance of the book's evidence and arguments in the context of current political and social scenarios. Your book review should be concise and insightful, spanning no more than 5 single-spaced pages, although a well-articulated review might be effectively conveyed in as few as 3 pages.

Graduate Student Requirements: Each graduate student is required to conduct reviews of two distinct books. It's important that each graduate student selects a unique book for their review, and a sign-up document will be provided by the instructor to facilitate this process. In addition to the written review, graduate students will also prepare a PowerPoint presentation, approximately 10 minutes in length, to accompany their review. This presentation should succinctly summarize the main arguments of the book, provide essential context for understanding the author's conclusions, and present a critical analysis of the work. Your analysis should cover your perspectives on how effectively the author approached the subject, the strengths and weaknesses you've identified in the work, and the relevance of the book's content to current political and social issues. The aim of the presentation is to provide a clear and comprehensive overview of your book review, engaging your peers in the critical aspects of the book and your assessment of its contribution to the study of representation or voting rights.

Find the list of books online at https://github.com/jcervas/teaching/blob/main/2023-2024/class-cmu-84-352/books.md

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.

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 three options for this final assignment: 1) working alone 2) working with a team, both without doing technical work 3) working as a team to create a technical supplement

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. For team reports, extend the page limit to a maximum of 10 pages (minimum of 5 pages for team efforts).

Technical Expert Witness [team] (3000-6000 words): Collaborate with a group working on an non-technical report, using your findings to bolster their argument against the enacted plan. The minimum page length for submissions including this analysis is 6 pages, with a maximum of 12 single-spaced pages. Teams can expand to seven students for this option.

Midterm and Final Exam Exams will be conducted at two points during the semester. These exams will be multiple choice, true/false, or short answer. They will largely be based on the readings, but may include questions related to lectures. These are not intended to be difficult but instead to assess whether or not you did the required readings throughout the semester.

***Graduate Students* Daily Questions** By the end of each day in which we have class, you will submit three questions (multiple choice, true/false, short answer) based on the readings assigned that day. These will be used as the basis for the midterm and final exams.

CLASS SCHEDULE

Find the full schedule online at https://github.com/jcervas/teaching/2023-2024/class-cmu-84-352/schedule.md.

Date	Topic
January 16	First Class, Introductions & Syllabus
January 18	Voting Rights, an introduction
January 23	Voting in the Colonies, Democracy on ascend, and Backsliding before the Civil War

Date	Topic
January 25	Reconstruction and Jim Crow America
January 30	World Wars and civil rights
February 1	Democracy in the 21st century
February 6	Representation Overview
February 8	Turnout/The offices we elect/direct democracy (Guest Lecture?)
February 13	The Electoral College
February 15	Campaign Finance
February 20	Electoral Integrity and claims of election Fraud
February 22	FLEX DAY (TBD) - *Book Review presentations I (grad students)*
February 27	MIDTERM EXAM
February 29	Presidential Primaries
March 12	Immigration and Diversity
March 14	Geographic Sorting
March 19	The U.S. Census/ Malapportionment
March 21	Intro to DRA, Criteria for districting
March 26	Partisan Gerrymandering
March 28	Racial Gerrymandering
April 2	The Voting Rights Act
April 4	Election Reform
April 9	FLEX DAY (TBD) - *Book Review presentations II (grad students)*
April 16	Automated Redistricting
April 18	Ballot Laws/Voting Machines (Eugene Mazo Guest lecture)
April 23	The Future of American Democracy
April 25	FINAL EXAM (cumulative)

Parliament is not a congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests; which interests each must maintain, as an agent and advocate, against other agents and advocates; but parliament is a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole; where, not local purposes, not local prejudices, ought to guide, but the general good, resulting from the general reason of the whole. You choose a member indeed; but when you have chosen him, he is not member of Bristol, but he is a member of parliament. If the local constituent should have an interest, or should form an hasty opinion, evidently opposite to the real good of the rest of the community, the member for that place ought to be as far, as any other, from any endeavour to give it effect. – Edmund Burke

CMU Academic Calendar:

https://www.cmu.edu/hub/calendar/

Laptop and Electronic Device Policy

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's crucial to recognize that any usage outside of regular course-related activities can be a significant distraction to both the user and surrounding peers. Therefore, the following guidelines are established:

1. **Focused Usage**: Devices should be used solely for academic purposes relevant to the class. This includes note-taking, looking up relevant information, and accessing course materials.

2. **Minimizing Distractions**:

   - Ensure that all device notifications are muted to avoid disruptions.

   - Refrain from browsing non-academic websites, using social media, instant messaging, streaming content, gaming, or engaging in any other activities unrelated to the course.

3. **Respectful and Courteous Behavior**:

   - Keep your screen content appropriate for the classroom environment.

   - Avoid screen brightness levels and content that might distract others.

4. **Active Participation**: Your engagement in class discussions and activities should not be hindered by device usage. Devices should enhance, not detract from, your learning experience.

5. **Accommodations for Disabilities**: Students who require specific accommodations for effective use of electronic devices should contact the Disability Services office.

6. **Instructor Authority**: The instructor reserves the right to ask any student to close their device if it's being used for non-academic purposes or causing distractions.

Non-compliance with these guidelines may lead to the loss of the privilege to use electronic devices in class and could impact participation grades.

The instructor may modify this policy as necessary and will communicate any changes promptly.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

Academic Integrity is a core CMU value, and as a member of the CMU community, it is important that the work you turn in for this class is wholly your own. As your instructor, I will strive to ensure that you develop the necessary knowledge and skills to meet the learning objectives for this class, just as it is your task to put in the effort to complete the work and ask for help if you need it. I do not like when politicians steal power from some voters, and likewise I do not like when students steal other's intellectual property. Do not do it, it is not worth it. I have created a course that everyone can be, and should be, successful.

As a reminder all students should follow CMU's Academic Integrity Policy.

ACCOMMODATIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES:

If you have a disability and have an accommodations letter from the Disability Resources office, I encourage you to discuss your accommodations and 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 that you may have a disability and would benefit from accommodations but are not yet registered with the Office of Disability Resources, I encourage you to contact them at access@andrew.cmu.edu.

STUDENT WELLNESS:

As a student, you may experience a range of challenges that can interfere with learning, such as strained relationships, increased anxiety, substance use, feeling down, difficulty concentrating and/or lack of motivation. These mental health concerns or stressful events may diminish your academic performance and/or reduce your ability to participate in daily activities. CMU services are available, and treatment does work. You can learn more about confidential mental health services available on campus at: http://www.cmu.edu/counseling/. Support is always available (24/7) from Counseling and Psychological Services: 412-268-2922

DIVERSITY STATEMENT:

It is my goal to create an inclusive and equitable learning environment in this course, where the diversity of all students is acknowledged, respected, and valued as a resource and strength. I will strive to address the learning needs of all students, both in and out of class, and will incorporate materials and activities that are respectful of diversity in terms of gender, sexuality, disability, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, and culture. I welcome and encourage feedback on ways to improve the course for all students, and am happy to accommodate any religious observances that may conflict with class meetings.

AI POLICY

AI is a powerful tool that can be used to enhance the learning experience for students. However, it is important to approach the use of AI with a positive attitude and a respect for its capabilities and limitations. This policy outlines the guidelines for using AI in the classroom, with a focus on creating a positive and inclusive environment for all students.

Guidelines for using AI in the classroom:

- AI should be used to supplement, not replace, human interaction and instruction.
- Students should be made aware of the limitations of AI, and encouraged to question and critically evaluate the information provided by AI systems.
- AI should be used in a way that is inclusive and respectful of all students, regardless of their background or abilities.
- AI should be used to enhance the learning experience, not to create additional barriers or challenges for students.
- AI should be used to promote collaboration and teamwork among students.
- Students should be encouraged to use AI in a responsible and ethical manner.

Responsibilities of students:

- Students are responsible for using AI in a way that is consistent with this policy.
- Students should be familiar with the capabilities and limitations of the AI systems they are using in the classroom.
- Students should use AI in a responsible and ethical manner.
- Students should seek assistance from instructors if they have any concerns or issues regarding the use of AI in the classroom.

By following these guidelines, we can ensure that the use of AI in the classroom is a positive and inclusive experience for all students. We believe that AI can be a powerful tool for enhancing the learning experience, but it is important to approach it with a positive attitude and a respect for its capabilities and limitations. Together, we can create a classroom environment that is both engaging and respectful of all students.

Note: This policy was written by ChatGPT.

Like American democracy itself, this syllabus is subject to amendment. The process of amendment is as follows: (1) all students and the professor get one vote; (2) a simple majority of voters agree to a change; (2) a student's vote is weighted as $1/n$ where n=number of students and a professor has a vote weighted as $n+1$. All amendments will be announced publicly and no student shall be injured by changes. You might notice that this clause creates uneven voting power. Basically, I'm a dictator; but I am benevolent, and I want you to succeed, so I will listen to all requests.