

Democracy's Data: Analytics and Insights into American Elections

Prof. Jonathan Cervas

Updated: August 22, 2025

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Office: Posner Hall 374

Email: cervas@cmu.edu

Location: WEH 4623

Time: Tuesday 11:00a-12:20p Eastern

Office Hours: Wednesdays 2-4p & by appointment

CMU Academic Calendar

The most up-to-date version of this **syllabus can be found here**

Prerequisites: 36-200 Reasoning with Data

Course Relevance: DC: *Perspectives on Justice and Injustice*

Course Description:

American democracy is rich with data — from historical vote tallies to modern polling, turnout, and campaign finance. In this course, we'll investigate how democracy functions by analyzing this data, uncovering the political, social, and structural forces that shape electoral outcomes. Students will engage with historical case studies (e.g., 1876, 1960, 2000) alongside contemporary elections to see how past events illuminate present dynamics. Through lectures, labs, and projects, students will gain the tools to collect, analyze, and interpret electoral data — and apply these skills to real-world political questions.

Course Goals

By the end of this course, students will:

- Understand how data can illuminate the functioning of democratic systems.
- Identify historical and contemporary forces that shape electoral outcomes.
- Feel comfortable looking at, wrangling, and interpreting data
- Connect patterns in data to broader questions about political power, representation, and change.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Collect and clean real-world electoral datasets.
2. Conduct (basic) statistical analyses to identify trends in voting behavior.

3. Interpret and visualize election data for academic and public audiences.
4. Evaluate the impact of historical events on present electoral dynamics.
5. Critically assess the strengths and limitations of various data sources.

Assessments

- **Participation & Attendance** – 20%
Active engagement in lectures and labs.
- **Weekly Lab Assignments** – 50%
Hands-on data analysis exercises using real election datasets.
- **Data Journalism Project** – 10%
Produce a data-driven news story that investigates a significant trend, pattern, or issue in electoral processes.
- **Policy Proposal or Data Journalism Project** – 10%
Develop a policy proposal that addresses a specific issue in the electoral process.
- **Weekly Data Contributions** – 10%
Submit one relevant data point related to politics or democracy, accompanied by a brief explanation and visualization to illustrate its significance.

Topics

1. **Introduction** – Why study democracy with data?
2. **Elections as Data** – Sources, structures, and pitfalls.
3. **Population & Demographics** – How population shifts shape politics.
4. **Racial Threat Theory vs. Contact Theory** – How racial dynamics shape voting and policy.
5. **Racial Resentment vs. Principled Conservatism** – Prejudice or ideology?
6. **Public Opinion & Survey Data** – Using the ANES and other sources to understand attitudes.
7. **Role of Partisan Identity** – How party affiliation influences voter behavior.
8. **Malapportionment and Formal Representation** – The impact of districting and institutions on representation.
9. **Electoral College** – How it works, its effects, and alternatives.
10. **Campaign Strategies** – Messaging, media, and targeting.
11. **Redistricting & Gerrymandering** – The geometry of representation and its impact.
12. **Voter Turnout** – What drives participation? Which parties benefit from higher turnout?

13. **Rational Voter vs. Low-Information Voter** – Are voters policy-driven or guided by heuristics?
14. **Economic vs. Cultural Polarization** – Are partisan divides driven by economics or cultural identity?
15. **Political Polarization** – Causes and consequences for governance.
16. **Polling & Forecasting** – Methods, models, and uncertainty.
17. **Media Effects** – Does media reinforce views or change minds?
18. **Partisan Media** – The rise of partisan news sources and their effects.
19. **Misinformation & Trust in Elections** – Data and public opinion.
20. **Campaign Finance** – Who funds elections and why it matters.
21. **The Parties in Our Heads** – How partisanship shapes our views of the world.
22. **Election Administration** – Laws, technology, and integrity.
23. **Median Voter Theorem vs. Party Polarization** – Do parties converge or cater to their bases?
24. **Economic Inequality's Impact on Democracy** – Does inequality weaken democracy?

Assignments

1. Current Events Data Snippets:

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- You can access free articles and archives from the New York Times and other major newspapers using your `cmu.edu` email.
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Example:

Voter Turnout: About two-thirds (66%) of the voting-eligible population turned out for the 2020 presidential election **Pew Research Center**. Create info-graphic visualizations to illustrate the data.

2. Weekly Lab Assignments

- Each week, you will complete a lab assignment that involves analyzing a dataset related to the week's topic.
- These assignments will help you practice data cleaning, analysis, and visualization techniques.
- The assignments will be graded on a completion basis (complete/incomplete).

3. **Data Journalism Project:** This project requires you to write a compelling, data-driven news story investigating a significant electoral trend, pattern, or issue. You'll combine original data analysis, at least two visualizations, expert interviews, and historical context to create an engaging narrative that explains how and why democracy functions as it does.

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This assignment asks you to develop a clear, evidence-based policy proposal addressing a specific electoral process issue such as voter turnout, election security, or poll accuracy. You'll use data, historical analysis, and real-world examples to identify the problem, propose a solution, and justify its effectiveness for policymakers.

5. **Attendance:**

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$$s(A) = 100 \cdot \left(1 - \frac{1 - e^{-kA}}{1 - e^{-kT}} \right)$$

where

$$k = 0.1$$

and

$$A$$

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$$T$$

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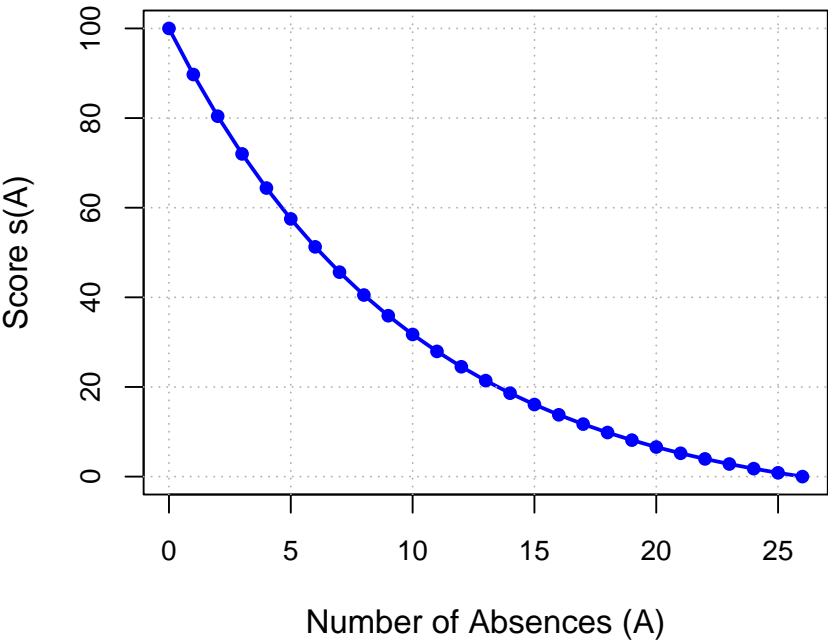
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Effect of Absences on Attendance Score

Figure 1: Effect of Absences on Grade



The course grade will be a weighted average of the following components:

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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:

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Major Debates in American Politics: Reference Sheet

1. Public Opinion & Political Behavior

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 - *Key Question:* Does diversity increase prejudice or reduce it through interaction?
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- **Economic vs. Cultural Polarization**
 - *Key Question:* Are partisan divides driven by economics or cultural identity?
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2. Institutions & Representation

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- **Descriptive vs. Substantive Representation**

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- **Electoral College & Malapportionment**

- *Key Question:* Do these features protect federalism or undermine equality?
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3. *Federalism & State Power*

- **Centralization vs. Decentralization**

- *Key Question:* Should policy be set nationally or locally?
- *Representative Scholars/Studies:* Riker (1964); Kincaid (1990)

- **Policy Diffusion**

- *Key Question:* Do states innovate and spread good policy or reinforce inequality?
 - *Representative Scholars/Studies:* Walker (1969); Berry & Berry (1990)
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4. *Political Polarization*

- **Elite-Driven vs. Mass-Driven Polarization**

- *Key Question:* Are elites or the public the primary driver of polarization?
- *Representative Scholars/Studies:* Fiorina et al. (2005); Abramowitz & Saunders (2008)

- **Asymmetric Polarization**

- *Key Question:* Is polarization equal on both sides or skewed?
 - *Representative Scholars/Studies:* McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal (2006); Mann & Ornstein (2012)
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5. *Race, Ethnicity, & Politics*

- **Linked Fate vs. Individualism**

- *Key Question:* Do marginalized groups vote as a bloc due to shared fate?
- *Representative Scholars/Studies:* Dawson (1994); McClain et al. (2009)

- **Racial Resentment vs. Principled Conservatism**

- *Key Question:* Is opposition to minority-focused policy driven by prejudice or ideology?
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6. *Political Economy*

- **Median Voter Theorem vs. Party Polarization**

- *Key Question:* Do parties converge to the median voter or cater to their bases?
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- **Economic Inequality & Democracy**

- *Key Question:* Does inequality weaken democracy or can institutions buffer it?
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7. *Political Communication*

- **Media Effects: Minimal vs. Strong**

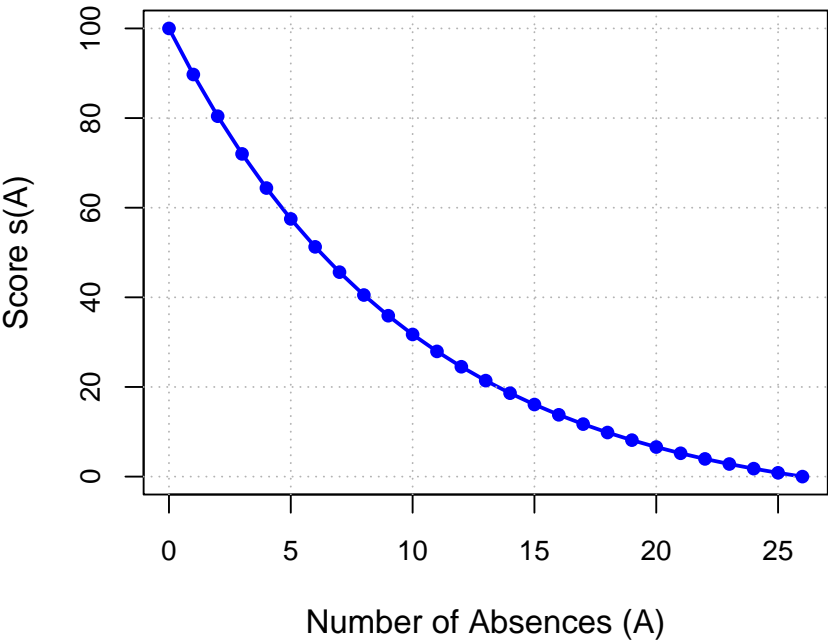
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- *Key Question:* Is social media polarizing politics or reflecting existing divides?
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