Politics 421: Studies in Electoral Politics  
Spring 2011  
Wednesday, 7:00 – 9:00 in Rice 100b  
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Office Hours: Wednesday and Thursday, 3:00 to 4:00 in Rice 203

Congratulations on being selected as a Cole Scholar! The Oberlin Initiative in Electoral Politics has three major elements. You will begin by successfully completing this seminar before interning with a political campaign over the summer. You will then return in the fall to complete a seminar (Polt 422) in which you will use what you have learned to write a rigorous and original research paper. This program is intended to give you the practical and academic knowledge that will enable you to run for office one day.

This course has three core objectives:

1. to introduce you to the literature on campaigns and elections;
2. to teach you about the challenges of running for public office; and
3. to provide you with skills you will need during your internship and in later campaigns.

Class Structure
This class will be run as a seminar. You are required to complete all assigned readings before class. You should come to class prepared to discuss the readings and your reactions to them. Your active and positive participation is vitally important.

Course Requirements and Grading
Final grades will be based on class participation, weekly discussion questions, a research paper on the 2011 campaign, a book review, and a placement research paper. The relative weight and due date of each component is as follows:

- Class Participation: 15%  
- Discussion Questions: 15% (due each Wednesday before 3:00 pm)  
- 2011 Campaign Research Paper: 20% (due Wednesday, March 2nd at 3:00 pm)  
- Book Review: 20% (due Wednesday, May 4th at 3:00 pm)  
- Placement Research Paper: 30% (due Thursday, May 19th at 11:00 am)

Participation: Active and engaged participation is critical to the success of this class. Your participation grade will be based on the quality, not the quantity, of your participation. Quality participation requires consistent attendance, thoughtful contributions, and a positive attitude toward the class and its activities. Your comments are expected to be reasonable, well-considered, and on-topic. You should come to class prepared to engage in discussion at any moment. You should also participate actively in class exercises. From time to time, you will be asked to jump into the role of a campaign worker or candidate. When this happens, your enthusiasm, effort, and execution will be evaluated.

Discussion Questions: Each week that we have assigned readings, you are required to post a
question(s) on Blackboard before 3:00 pm on Wednesday. Your question will address a particular aspect of the week’s readings and may be used during class discussion. You should write insightful and thought-provoking questions that draw on class readings, and you should have some idea of how you might answer your own question before coming to class. (Please see Appendix 1 for more information on how these questions should be written.) You are also required to read and consider the questions posted by your fellow students before class begins. Your grade for this part of the course is based on your general ability to pose good questions—individual questions will not be graded although you must post a question each week.

2011 Campaign Research Paper: For your first writing assignment, you will research candidates who will be campaigning during the summer of 2011. You are required to identify and discuss at least four candidates. Your paper will provide a succinct, yet detailed, synopsis of each candidate, discussing things like his/her experience, opponent, chances of winning, relevant district attributes, contact information, and any other piece of information you deem important. You should try to make an argument for why it might be interesting to work for this particular candidate. Collectively, our goal is to generate a list of potential internship sponsors. To that end, you should try to find candidates who will not be listed by your classmates. You will distribute your 4-5 page paper prior to class on March 2nd (i.e., post your paper on Blackboard by 3:00 pm). Our meeting that evening will be spent discussing these candidates and their potential viability as internship sponsors.

Book Review: Near the end of the semester, you will read one of three selected “campaign manuals” and then write a 4-5 page review that briefly summarizes the book and evaluates its strengths and weaknesses. This assignment is intended to pull together course materials and have you think about campaigns holistically before heading out to your internship. Please submit your review via Blackboard before 3:00 pm on May 4th.

Placement Research Essay: This final project will help you prepare for your summer placement. Your paper should be approximately 12-15 pages long (double-spaced) and you should use parenthetical citations in the text with a corresponding bibliography. The purpose of the paper is to conduct research on topics that will be relevant to your placement. Your main objective is to write a “Campaign Plan” for your candidate (see the McNamara example and/or the Blodgett and Lofy chapter as a starter). It is absolutely essential that you explain why certain factors are important given what you know about campaigns and voters—i.e., your paper must incorporate evidence from class readings and discussions. Your goal is to present a clear, concise, and insightful analysis of the race on which you will work. Researching and writing this paper will enable you to “hit the ground running” when you arrive to do your internship.

All final papers are officially due on Thursday, May 19th at 11:00 am—of course, you are welcome to submit your paper earlier. Papers will NOT be accepted after this deadline unless an “incomplete” is granted by the college. In other words, you will receive a “0” and possibly fail the course if you do not meet this deadline, so plan accordingly.

1 For example, you might write “according to Smith (2005, 24), lawyers are…” or “scholars (e.g., Smith 2005, 25; Jones 2003, 56) have argued that…”. Complete references are then given in the bibliography following the text.
Final letter grades will be assigned in the following way.

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**General Course Policies**

**Courtesy**
Please exercise common courtesy (e.g., no talking at inappropriate times, snoring, Internet browsing, cell phones) and come to class on time—pretty simple.

**Honor Code**
Oberlin College policy mandates that your performance in this class adhere to the honor code. In general terms, this means that you will be given significant freedoms in exchange for your promise to not cheat, plagiarize material, fabricate information, or participate in any other dishonest academic activity. If you have any questions about the honor code, you should visit: [http://www.oberlin.edu/students/links-life/rulesregs_pdf/Rules+Regs06_HonorCode.pdf](http://www.oberlin.edu/students/links-life/rulesregs_pdf/Rules+Regs06_HonorCode.pdf).

**Disabilities**
Any student with a documented disability should see me immediately so that we can make reasonable accommodations.

**Topics and Readings**
This course combines practical know-how with academic studies of electoral campaigns. As such, we will read work from both practitioners and scholars. The following book is *required* and can be purchased online or from the college bookstore. One copy should also be available on reserve in the library.


You are also required to get access to one of the following for your book review assignment:


Other required readings (e.g., chapters, articles) are available on Blackboard—log in to Blackboard with your email username and click on ‘Readings’ to find the material. You are expected to do all of the readings before the class meeting for which they are assigned. Optional readings are available from the instructor.

Class One (February 9th): Introduction
This class is obviously devoted to discussing the syllabus and providing a course overview. We will also watch the documentary “Can Mr. Smith Get to Washington Anymore?” to get a sense of the type of campaigns on which you may ultimately work.

Class Two (February 16th): Understanding Voters and Voting Behavior
Campaign success requires knowledge of voters and voting behavior. Campaigns need to understand what voters care about and how they think. This class introduces the academic literature on how voters vote. In large part, formal theories of voting behavior have given way to psychological explanations that highlight the role of emotion and cognitive processing. By the end of this class, you should have a solid understanding of what campaigns are dealing with when they go after voters’ support.

Required Reading:

Optional Reading:

Class Three (February 23rd): The General State of Campaign Strategy
This class introduces a number of key issues in contemporary campaigns. We will start by considering the idea, expressed by Thurber, that practitioners and academics differ in their approach to understanding campaigns. We will then analyze the general state of contemporary campaigns in America. What common practices are shared by candidates? How do campaigns differ based on geography, office level, and/or party? How do candidates win?
Required Reading:


Optional Reading:


Class Four (March 2nd): 2011 Campaigns Discussion
This class will revolve around discussions of the 2011 races you researched for your paper. As noted above, you will prepare a 4-5 page paper in which you write about at least four candidates who will be campaigning during the summer of 2011. We will then discuss these candidates and their potential suitability for internships during our class meeting. Our goal is to create a long list of potential internship opportunities.

Class Five (March 9th): Cole Scholars Dinner (5:30 pm in Wilder)
We will be having dinner at 5:30 in Wilder Hall with past Cole scholars this week. This is your opportunity to learn about their experiences and ask questions about the program and internship.

Class Six (March 16th): Political Finance: Fund-Raising and Campaign Spending
Money is an important factor in almost all American campaigns. Indeed, without it, candidates can do little to persuade voters and thus win the election. This class explores the ways in which candidates go about getting money and how they spend it. We will also engage in an activity aimed at assessing your fundraising abilities.

Required Reading:

• To get a sense of campaign spending, browse the following:
  - www.opensecrets.org
  - www.fecinfo.com
  - www.followthemoney.org

Optional Reading:

Class Seven (March 23rd): Placement and Personal Finances
This class is devoted to your placement and a discussion of how you will keep track of your personal finances during your internship. We will also discuss appropriate behavior during your internship both in regards to your employer and the Politics Department staff. You will have an opportunity to consider your internship budget and work on completing your assessment of expenses. Please note that we will be meeting at 12:15 rather than our regular meeting time. In exchange for this inconvenience, there will be pizza!

Required Reading:
• Oberlin Initiative in Electoral Politics “Internship Procedures”

No Class (March 30th): Spring Break

Class Eight (April 6th): Campaign Communications
There is much that goes into a campaign’s communication strategy. This class will introduce you to some of the work on political communications. What role does the news media play in a campaign’s success? What do candidates do to get their message across to voters? How do voters react to these appeals? Which strategies seem to work the best, and when do they succeed/fail? What role does the Internet play in modern campaign communications?

Required Reading:
• Jeff Blodgett and Bill Lofy. 2008. “Working with Reporters and Communicating Your Message through Earned Media” in Winning Your Election the Wellstone Way. Minneapolis, MN:
University of Minnesota Press. 137-164.


To view presidential campaign ads, check out:
- http://livingroomcandidate.movingimage.us/support/pitch.php

To view congressional campaign ads, check out:
- http://projects.washingtonpost.com/politicalads/

Optional Reading:

Class Nine (April 13th): **Image and Public Speaking**
This class meeting will give you a chance to improve your personal presentation style. Indeed, self-presentation is a critical aspect of politics and life in general. Having the ability to present yourself in a confident and engaging way will serve you well in your internship and other endeavors. You are required to prepare your own stump speech before this class. Then, during class, you will deliver your speech and take feedback on your performance. This exercise should not only improve your presentation abilities but also help you understand some of the things that might make your candidate successful.

**Required Reading:**
- To watch famous political speeches, check out:
  - http://www.politicalesspeeches.net/

Class Ten (April 20th): **Polling and Field Operations**
This class will start with a discussion of polling and its role in modern campaigns. Most campaigns either do their own polling or rely heavily on the polling of others. It is, therefore, important to understand how polling is done correctly and how to interpret the results. We will also consider the methods used to research the opponent’s campaign—always a seemingly sneaky but useful strategy. We will then look at “Field” operations—the laborious efforts of campaign workers to ensure that supporters get to the polls to cast their votes. Field is not the most glamorous of campaign activities but
it is often considered quite important to the outcome.

Required Readings


Optional Reading:


Class Eleven (April 27th): Campaign Ethics and Personal Behavior

In this class, we will discuss the role that ethics play in a campaign. We will consider the boundaries for appropriate and inappropriate behavior by the candidate and his/her staff. We may also watch parts of the documentary “Street Fight” to get a sense of some of the ethical issues that can arise in a campaign. Is it wrong to lie to voters? Are mudslinging and/or going negative fair campaign tactics? Is there a limit to the resources that a candidate can use to win an election?

Required Readings


Optional Readings

Class Twelve (May 4th): Putting it All Together
Prior to this class, you will read and review one of the campaign manuals listed below. Please submit your 4-5 page (double-spaced) review via Blackboard before 3:00 pm on May 4th. Your review should briefly summarize the book, point out the book’s major strengths and weaknesses, and provide a summary evaluation. Your review should also tie the book to course materials. During class, each student will discuss their review, providing others with a sense of the book.

Books to Review (pick one):

Class Thirteen (May 11th): Placement Research Presentations
During this final meeting, you will present and discuss your placement research essay. You will have approximately 10 minutes to discuss the key factors in your race/district before answering questions. Active participation by all students is required.

Placement Essay is Due Thursday, May 19th at 11:00 am
Appendix 1: Discussion Questions

You are required, each week, to write a discussion question(s) based on the week’s topic/reading. Here are some pointers for writing a good discussion question:

1. Relate your question to the assigned readings and identify your sources.
2. Ask questions that are sure to generate debate and discussion—i.e., don’t write questions with easy and/or predictable answers.
3. Seriously consider and think about the topic before you write your question.
4. Feel free to connect your questions to material and discussions from past classes—i.e., put your question in the larger context of the class (but don’t simply repeat old questions).
5. Have an answer to your question in mind before coming to class.

Here are some examples of questions from the 2008 Studies in Electoral Politics class. All of these questions come verbatim from our class on negative campaigning and campaign ethics.

On Negative Campaigning:

It is hard to imagine campaigns without the candidates going negative, attacking each other or dishing the dirt on their opponents. I’m going to be an athlete for a minute and say that no one wins any sort of game by being nice, so why should campaigns be an exception? It was stated nicely in the Allen piece that voters like a fight, and the press will be more likely to cover a campaign or candidate if there are negative tendencies. This isn't to say that there are no disadvantages to going negative in a campaign and that we should move with reckless abandon when attacking the opponent. I think that we could have an endless discussion about what is right and wrong in a campaign, and the different legislation that can be put into place to forward more ethical campaigns. But, I don't think this will do anything to solve the "problem" of campaign ethics. Maybe it's just me being cynical, but I really believe that a candidate has the right to go negative, assuming that they accept the consequences for going negative (i.e. lost votes, less funding, a greater attack upon them etc...) and they know how to counter attacks. I know that this is a broad question, but does going negative really take away from the content of a campaign or the message of the candidate? Does the "average American voter" have the ability to sift through the "muck" of attack ads in order to choose who they want?

As a side note, it would be more frightening to me to see a squeaky clean candidate (or two for that matter) participating in a completely ethical campaign, than to see two candidates at each others' throats, (to use extremes). While I do view some of the tactics pulled by candidates to be dirty and unnecessary, I think it's a critical part of the campaign, and I also think that the "average voter" is smarter than some people give them credit for and can pick out what is right and wrong with a candidate.

Ethical Campaigns:

Carol Whitney gives a list of four categories of information use that she views to be unethical, but all four are major staples of campaign politics. False information (list item #1) is used to great effect all the time (just ask John McCain's illegitimate black daughter), and information appealing to base
human instincts (list item #4) has produced some of the most effective political ads of all time. (And also some of the most insidious.) Maybe I'm just morally bankrupt, but it seems to me like there couldn't be campaigns as we know them without these four unethical uses of information. (If all four were to be abolished, campaigns would just feature candidates talking plainly about their policy prescriptions, with no mention of their rivals. What's so great about that?)

It makes me think that maybe unethical campaigning is almost a necessary part of the process; is a candidate's job to be honest to voters, or is it to get elected and thus implement the policies that they think best? I like how right now it seems like we have a checks and balances system on campaign ethics, with candidates doing what they can to gain an advantage on their opponent, and with the media on hand to deliver a slap on the wrist (or punch in the gut) to candidates when they get caught acting unethically.

The Campaign Ethics They Deserve:

In her essay “Campaign Ethics and the Politics of Personal Destruction”, Linda Fowler makes the point that the episodic nature of campaigns and campaign season invites candidates to engage in vicious attacks on their opponents, backhanded or not, with the intent of scoring a few more critical votes in the race to the finish line: “Roughly two-thirds of the electorate decides on a candidate before or during the party conventions, but for the remaining voters the campaign starts on Labor Day.” Question: Are the voters themselves to blame for this? Does the typical American voter – not necessarily well-informed, generally politically inactive, somewhat inattentive – get the campaign ethics they deserve?

Fact Check:

The idea that not all attack ads are viewed equally in the eyes of voters (Freedman) and that there are right and wrong ways of engaging in negative campaigning (Allen) was something that was really interesting to me. It's perhaps easy to condemn all of negative campaigning until you read statistics saying that voters respond well to candidates who do respond to attacks--it shows character, and that the candidate will stand up for them if elected.

In the Whitney article, one of the unethical practices concerning communication was the use of a voting record to create a false impression of your opponent. In class, we have talked about spin extensively. Where do you draw the line between spin and false impressions?

Also to comment a bit on Elijah's post, I've been reading factcheck.org, produced by UPenn's Annenberg's School of Public Policy, to fill in the context of attack ads. The NY Times cites them often, and I found it to be thorough and responsible. To bring in an example off the site, I was wondering what you all thought about recent ads produced by Clinton and Obama in which they both lead viewers astray on the other's record on accepting money from PACs:

http://www.factcheck.org/elections-2008/pac-ing_heat.html
Do you think one is acting more unethically than the other? Clinton began the attacks by juxtaposing Obama's current presidential pledge with statistics from his state senate, and U.S. senate campaigns. Did that then give Obama the right to respond with his own misleading attack ad on Clinton's record?

**The Right Context:**

I am most interested by the ethics in making issue attack ads. I thought the Whitney and Fowler chapters' comments that it is not only wrong or underhanded, but unethical, to use information on your opponent out of context was very interesting. Obvious it is impossible to make a bright line distinction. However, I was wondering if we could discuss how far a candidate should go to present their opponent's statements within the correct context. After all, candidates only have a limited amount of time and they do not want to spend it making their opponent's arguments. Should we place our trust in the media to put the context back into the statements? Right now the media is doing a horrible job at that, if they are trying to at all, and especially when it comes to Obama.

**Online Negativity:**

One feature that recurs in this week's readings is how frequently candidates fumble the attempt to go negative without alienating voters. How do you think the advent of the internet era (and the resulting provision of anonymity) has changed this? Several examples of the internet's power to shape the news, such as George Allen's macaca slip, have had a distinctly partisan edge. With this profusion of new avenues for disseminating information incognito, leaking a story about your opponent can be done with a much greater level of impunity. A candidate no longer has to risk the possibility of fallout for approaching a reporter. The disclosure of Barack Obama's comments about "small town resentment," although reported by an ostensibly pro-Obama blogger, are one example of what I'm talking about.

Also, whereas other mechanisms for attacking opponents come with legal implications (push polling is a criminal offense in New Hampshire), the legality of many practices is still unsettled with regard to the internet.