First Year Seminar: Campaigns and Elections
Fall 2010
Monday and Wednesday, 2:30 – 3:45 in King 121
Michael Parkin
775-6197
mparkin@oberlin.edu
Office Hours: Tuesday and Friday, 11:00 – 12:30 in Rice 203

COURSE DESCRIPTION
Campaigns and elections are critical in any democracy. As such, there is an incentive for citizens to understand and engage with the process by which leaders are chosen. The reality is, however, that many Americans find campaigns daunting and maybe even a little unsettling. In this seminar, you will have the opportunity to analyze and interpret the 2010 campaign—to get a better sense of what candidates are doing, how the media covers the race, how voters react, and what the outcome means for American democracy. This seminar asks you to consider questions such as: What campaign strategies work best and why? Are voters easily manipulated and/or resistant to considering opposing political appeals? To what extent is the media’s campaign coverage helpful or harmful to voters? What does the nature of contemporary campaigns say about the health of American democracy and society at large? We will examine academic and popular literature, as well as documentary films, on these and other topics while simultaneously following the ongoing events of the 2010 campaign season. Through a combination of group projects, short assignments, and essays, we will learn what makes a campaign effective in the American political context, and what can be done to improve campaign quality.

COURSE OBJECTIVES
This first-year seminar provides an opportunity to learn about a critical element of the democratic process while improving your civic, social, and academic skills. While the course is nominally concerned with campaigns and elections, it also seeks to introduce you to the liberal arts by instilling the qualities of broad academic curiosity and rigor while emphasizing your ability (if not obligation) to affect change in the world around you.

By engaging with the campaign, you will gain a better appreciation for the wider political context and the important social consequences of political action and electoral outcomes. In many ways, elections represent a critical starting point from which to understand America’s political, social, and economic make-up. You will see that, in no small way, campaigns and elections help determine how the country will deal with vital issues of social justice, economic equality, and questions of war and peace. I will encourage you, through discussions and written assignments, to study elections as part of a whole range of knowledge that highlights the relative nature of concepts, hierarchies, and relationships—how things are valued, how political actors use their power to obtain them, and how actions and outcomes are associated with and caused by something else. Moreover, I hope that by understanding campaigns, you will be emboldened to participate in the political process with an aim towards improving the democracy and society within which you live. In this way, I envision an understanding of the campaign process as a gateway towards the careful consideration of complex social issues and a willingness to get involved.

This seminar is also intended to enhance your academic skills in a liberal arts environment, preparing you for a successful college career. You will read academic literature on campaigns and elections for each class meeting. To improve your reading and comprehension skills, you will be asked to reflect on these readings both with short written pieces and brief presentations to the rest of the class. You will engage in a detailed research project in which you draw on broad theories and existing knowledge to explain what we can learn
from the 2010 election. In the period after Election Day, you will present your paper to the class, receiving written and verbal feedback from the instructor and your fellow students, which can then be incorporated into the paper’s final draft.

CLASS STRUCTURE
This class will be run as a seminar. You are required to complete all assigned readings before class meets and you are to come to class prepared to discuss the readings and your reactions to them. We will also, from time to time, engage in various activities centered on the course objectives of (1) analyzing the campaign, (2) appreciating a liberal arts education, and (3) enhancing academic skills. Your active and positive participation is vitally important.

REQUIREMENTS AND GRADES
Grades will be based on the following assignments. Students are required to complete all of these assignments to pass the course.

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<th>Assignment</th>
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<td>Class Participation</td>
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<td>Discussion Questions</td>
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<td>Who Will Win in ’10 Paper</td>
<td>10% (due September 15th)</td>
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<td>Candidate Website Coding</td>
<td>10% (5% for each site, due Friday, October 22nd at noon)</td>
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<td>Final Paper Presentation</td>
<td>10% (December 6th, 8th, or 13th)</td>
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<td>Final Paper</td>
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Participation (20%): Your participation grade is based on your attendance in class, your attitude, and your ability to discuss the course readings. In terms of your active participation in class, the quality of your comments matters much more than their quantity—insightful comments that reflect an interest in and understanding of the course material will be rewarded much more than frequent commentary on how this stuff reminds you of a personal anecdote. Quality participation also requires a positive attitude toward the class and its activities—even if something irks you, hiding your distain and pretending you like it will improve your participation grade!

Good participation is critical to the success of any seminar. In fact, it is a skill that will serve you well throughout your college career and beyond. Therefore, I have provided two attachments at the end of this syllabus to help you become an engaged consumer of the class material and an effective classroom discussant. Please read and follow them carefully.

As part of your participation grade, you will be asked to bring to each class a recent news story about the 2010 congressional campaign. You should come prepared to discuss this story if asked. Your presentation should very briefly summarize the story and then explain its significance to the course—we want to know what is happening and why you think it matters.

Discussion Questions (15%): Throughout the semester (see below), you will be required to pose a question for class discussion based on that day’s readings. Your question must be posted on Blackboard before 11:00 am on the day of the class meeting (i.e., Monday or Wednesday). You should endeavor

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1 Adapted from Prof. Dawson’s syllabus for Polt 305: The Presidency.
2 Please ask me if you’d like more guidance on these questions. Each submission should introduce the topic, describe some of your thoughts, and then pose a question. For example, during the week on campaign ethics, the question portion of your submission might ask: “Many candidates (e.g., Paul Wellstone) have found a way to attack their opponents while still coming out as the ‘nice guy’. How can candidates go negative nicely?” After reading about how votes are counted in US elections, you might wonder “With so many people voting, do isolated incidents of alleged voter fraud really change anything?” “Might these allegations adversely affect citizens’ trust in American democracy?”
to write insightful and thought-provoking questions, and you should have some idea of how you might answer your own question before coming to class. You will also be required to read and consider the questions posted by your fellow students before class begins. Your grade for this part of the class is based on your general ability to pose good questions—individual questions will not be graded although you must post a question whenever one is required.

Who Will Win in ’10 Paper (10% due September 15th): For your first formal writing assignment in this class, you will write a 4 to 6 page (double-spaced) paper predicting the outcome of the 2010 House and Senate contests—i.e., how many House/Senate seats will go to the Democrats and how many to the Republicans? Your paper should provide a thoughtful and rigorous analysis of why you think the race will unfold as you predict. You may use as little or as much outside research as you like—the key is to persuade readers that your prediction is correct. You will submit your paper through Blackboard by 11:00 am on September 15th.

Candidate Website Project (5% for each of 2 websites): The Internet has become a vital new media tool for nearly all candidates, regardless of office level. Indeed, some of the 2010 congressional candidates have developed highly sophisticated and elaborate campaign websites. In mid-October, you will participate in a candidate website coding project to familiarize yourself with empirical research and online campaigning. You will be given detailed instructions before coding two congressional candidate websites assigned to you by the instructor. Grades for this project will be based on the completeness, precision, and clarity of the coding.

Final Paper Presentation (10%): Near the end of the semester, each student will have an opportunity to present his/her work in progress. You will make a formal presentation (about 12-15 minutes) in which you discuss your final project research to date. Your objective is to engage your classmates in a discussion of your work. You should outline your project while seeking feedback from others. (Please see the “Conducting a Good Workshop” handout for more information.) Your final project should be nearly done at this point although you are welcome to incorporate feedback from this presentation into your final draft.

Final Paper (35%): What did we learn from the 2010 election? For your final paper, you will discuss, in detail, what you think the 2010 election taught us about American campaigns and elections. You can consider the 2010 campaign season in general; focus on a small group of races; or concentrate on a specific 2010 race. For example, you might write about how a 2010 race demonstrated:

- the importance of creating a strong personal image for candidates
- that many voters react to emotional appeals more than fact-based appeals
- the importance of money in winning elections
- that there are systematic flaws in how votes are counted in US elections
- the importance of emerging communications media in winning an election
- the importance of the candidates’ race/ethnicity in voters’ minds

You will write this paper in steps throughout the semester (see below). This will give you an opportunity to incorporate feedback into your final product. All final papers are officially due on Tuesday, December 21st at 4:00 pm—of course, you are welcome to hand-in your assignment earlier. The penalty for handing in your assignment late is 10% per day (including weekends).
Final letter grades will be assigned in the following way.

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**Courtesy**

Please exercise common courtesy (e.g., no talking at inappropriate times, sleeping, newspaper reading, texting, web surfing) so that you and your classmates are able to get the most out of class discussions. Some of the topics we will be discussing are controversial; it is fine to disagree with one another, but please do so in a respectful manner. Also, please be sure to show up on time—we’d hate to start without you!

**Honor Code**

Oberlin College policy mandates that your performance in this class adhere to the honor code. In general, 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, I encourage you to visit:


**Disabilities**

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

**TOPICS AND READINGS**

You are expected to come to class each day having carefully read and considered the *required* readings. (The *optional* readings are simply there if you are interested. Please see me if you cannot locate any of the *optional* readings as they are not on Blackboard.) You are advised to read the *required* readings in the order they are listed. I fully expect that you will have something insightful (if not brilliant) to say in class about each required reading.

You are not required to buy any books for this course. All of the assigned readings will be made available through Blackboard. Login using your email user name and then select ‘Readings’. While you may elect to read the PDFs on your computer rather than printing them out, I still expect that you will read each article/chapter carefully and take detailed notes.

As mentioned above, you are required to follow the 2010 campaign. You should use two or three credible news sources (you can decide which sources). Indeed, your up-to-date knowledge of what is happening this campaign season is critical for you to get the most out of this course.

Class 1 (September 8) **Introduction and Class Overview**

Class 2 (September 13) **Are Campaigns and Elections Necessary?**

Why do we have campaigns and elections in the United States? Many simply assume that we “need” campaigns and elections because there is no other way to design a functioning democracy. Yet, there are many issues with the way campaigns and elections are currently run that suggest we might want to reconsider their necessity. In this class, we will discuss the importance of campaigns and elections—why do we have them and is there any other way to effectively run this democracy? There is only one
introductory reading for this class although I would like you to consider these questions carefully and come prepared to tell me why you think we have campaigns and elections in the US.

Required Reading:

Class 3 (September 15) Predictions for the 2010 Campaign: Who Will Win and Why?
This class will revolve around discussions of the 2010 race. As noted above, you will all present and defend your prediction as to the distribution of the House and Senate after Election Day 2010. You should have developed a fairly strong opinion (and logic) about which party will win these races and why. Our discussion will resemble a “round table” exchange commonly found on cable news channels and Sunday morning political shows (I’ll be looking for your best George Stephanopoulos or Bill Kristol impression!). You will also spend some time talking about your writing and ways to improve your paper.

Class 4 (September 20) Understanding Voters: How do Voters Form Political Attitudes and Opinions?
To truly understand American campaigns and elections, we must first understand American voters. To understand voters, we must understand their political opinions and attitudes. In this class, we will discuss the origins and nature of public opinion – i.e., how do voters think about politics and what matters most to them?

Post Discussion Question 1 on Blackboard by 11:00 am.

Required Readings

Class 5 (September 22) Understanding Voters: Do Voters Care Enough, Know Enough, and Do Enough?
Commentators often complain that American voters do not take their democratic obligations seriously. In this class, we will explore the degree to which American voters seem to care about campaigns and elections, how much they know about them, and what they do during them. We will then evaluate the degree to which we think American voters can do better and the effect that increased attention to campaigns and elections might have on the political system.

Post Discussion Question 2 on Blackboard by 11:00 am.

Required Readings
September 23rd: Lessons from the Battlefield
Oberlin College is somewhat unique in that it has a program (The Cole Scholars Program) that allows students to complete a paid internship with a political campaign. The 2010 Cole Scholars will be presenting “what they learned” from their summer internships during a public meeting at 7:00 pm on Thursday September 23rd, in place yet to be determined. You are strongly encouraged to attend this presentation to get a sense of what really happens inside some of the country’s most interesting races.

Class 6 (September 27) Understanding Voters: How do Voters Decide? (Cognition and Calculation)
How do voters make up their minds? How do they decide for whom to vote? This class focuses on how voters make vote choices. Indeed, there is a long scholarly tradition of studying voter behavior although many questions still remain. We will read about and discuss various understandings of how voters vote.

Post Discussion Question 3 on Blackboard by 11:00 am.

Required Readings

Optional Readings:

Class 7 (September 29) Understanding Voters: How do Voters Decide? (Emotions and Affect)
Voting is much more than a rational, cognitive calculation. Emotions are clearly important in determining who a voter will support. This week, we will focus on the role of emotions in voting behavior. We will look at how emotions influence vote choices and, in turn, how candidates seek to use emotional appeals to gain support.

Post Discussion Question 4 on Blackboard by 11:00 am.

Required Readings:
• Drew Westen. 2007. The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation. New York: Public Affairs. Introduction, Chapters 1, 2, 5 and 6.

Optional Readings:


Class 8 (October 4) Assessing Voters and their Opinions: Is Polling Good for Campaigns and Elections?
How do we know what people think about politics? The media often conducts polls, as do candidates, but there is much to learn about polling before we can take the results at face value. This class is devoted to understanding polling: both its pitfalls and benefits. We will look at how polls are conducted and how we, as voters, should interpret the results. We will then consider the utility of polling—does polling help or hurt the electoral process in the United States?

Post Discussion Question 5 on Blackboard by 11:00 am.

Required Readings:

Optional Reading:

Class 9 (October 6) Campaign Organization: How are Campaigns Run and Does it Matter? (Congressional Races)
We now shift our focus to candidates and their campaigns. During this class, we will watch the documentary “Can Mr. Smith Get to Washington Anymore?” This will provide us with some insight into the internal workings of a congressional race. It also highlights the (un)importance of internal campaign organization—to what extent does strong campaign organization matter to the outcome of a race?

Readings:
- There are no required readings for this class; however, the movie is roughly 100 minutes long so please plan to stay after class to see the end—you won’t want to miss it! You could also start on the reading for next class as there is quite a bit of it.

Class 10 (October 11) Campaign Organization: How are Campaigns Run and Does it Matter? (Presidential Races)
In this class, we will continue to look inside campaigns to see how they are run. We will focus specifically on some the 2008 presidential campaigns. Today’s readings will hopefully provide some rare insight into the challenges of running a national campaign. We will divide up the readings and each student will be responsible for summarizing sections of “Game Change”.
Required Reading:

Optional Reading:

Class 11 (October 13) **Ethics and Money in American Campaigns: Has Money Corrupted the Electoral Process?**

*Politics, particularly campaigns, is often characterized as a “blood sport” or “dirty”. Certainly, campaigns can be a tough business and there are many examples of unscrupulous campaign tactics. For this class, we will explore some ethical questions pertaining to American campaigns. In particular, we will look at the role that money plays in modern campaigns and address some of the ethical concerns raised by common campaign practices.*

Post **Discussion Question 6** on Blackboard by 11:00 am.

Required Readings:

Optional Readings:

Class 12 (October 18) **Candidate Strategies: What Makes a Campaign Ad Effective?**

*Advertising constitutes one of the most basic campaign strategies. Indeed, television ads allow the candidate to appeal directly to voters, without interpretation from the media. During this class, we will look at the history of political advertising and how candidates strategize about creating ads and buying airtime. Prior to class, each student will identify a campaign ad and then, using information from the class readings, explain during class why they think it is effective.*

Required Readings:

Optional Reading:

Class 13 (October 20) Campaign Strategies: Campaigning in a New Media Age
This class continues our investigation of how candidates attempt to persuade voters. We will focus specifically on “new media” strategies. We’ll look at how these campaign strategies have evolved over time and what makes them particularly effective. We will also spend some time discussing the candidate website coding project.

Post Discussion Question 7 on Blackboard by 11:00 am.

Required Readings:

Optional Reading:

(Candidate Website Coding due at Noon on Friday, October 22nd)

Fall Break (October 25 and 27)

Class 14 (November 1) Campaign Coverage: Do We Get the Campaign Coverage We Deserve?
Many people like to blame the media for the shortcomings of American campaigns and elections. This class provides some insight into how the media covers campaigns. We’ll think about the focus of campaign coverage and ask whether or not American voters get the campaign coverage they deserve. We will also spend some time, in anticipation of Election Day, revisiting our earlier predictions about which party will win. Is there anything that you would change about the paper you wrote at the start of the semester?

Post Discussion Question 8 on Blackboard by 11:00 am.

Required Readings:


Optional Reading:


Class 15 (November 3) Analyzing the Outcome
In the aftermath of Election Day, we will analyze the outcome (assuming we know it by Wednesday afternoon). We’ll discuss what the outcome means and the implications of a Democratic- or Republican-controlled Congress. We’ll also start to consider what can be learned from the 2010 election.

Readings:

- No assigned readings but you should follow Election Night coverage closely

Class 16 (November 8) Counting the Votes: Reflecting the Will of the People?
Recent elections in the United States have raised serious questions about the way in which votes are counted (or not counted). This has generated significant research and debate over the extent to which elections truly represent the will of the people. This class will introduce you to many of these debates. We may also, depending on time, watch a documentary entitled Hacking Democracy that makes some alarming accusations about our current vote counting system.

Post Discussion Question 9 on Blackboard by 11:00 am.

Required Readings:


Optional Readings:

Class 17 (November 10) Gov. Christine Todd Whitman
On November 10th, we will welcome former New Jersey Governor and EPA Secretary Christine Todd Whitman to class. You are expected to learn all that you can about Ms. Whitman before her visit and come prepared to ask her intelligent and thought-provoking questions. It’s not every day that you get to meet a Governor/Cabinet Secretary!

Required Reading:
• Read anything you can about Christine Todd Whitman (her Wikipedia entry is NOT enough!)

Class 18 (November 15) How Well Do American Elections Work?
In our last formal classroom discussion, we will take up the question of how well American elections really work. After all that we have considered this semester, do you believe that American elections, despite their faults, generally serve the will the people? We will also consider what could be done to improve elections and how you might personally get involved with making elections more effective.

Post Discussion Question 11 on Blackboard by 11:00.

Required Readings:

Classes 19 (November 17) Writing a Good Research Paper
This class is focused on writing a good research paper. We will spend some time going over the steps to writing a good research paper. We will also work a little on our writing skills and do some exercises designed to help us as writers.

Class 20 (November 22) Final Project Ideas and Discussion
This class is devoted to discussing ideas for your final paper. As a group, we will talk about your paper ideas and offer feedback. You will start to work on a one-paragraph abstract of your final paper idea in which you address the following: the question you’d like to explore; the importance of answering this question; and the argument you plan to make in the paper. Please post your abstract on Blackboard before you leave for Thanksgiving.
November 25 is Thanksgiving (No Class on November 24)

Class 21 (November 29) Library Research Skills
Rather than our usual classroom meeting, we will meet in Mudd Library (room 113) to learn about using the library system. The skills you will learn during this session will help you with your final paper and, in fact, all of the research that you will do as a college student.

Class 22 (December 1) Detailed Outline / Draft Discussion
We will not meet as a class on December 1st. Instead, you are to meet with me concerning your final paper. You must submit a detailed outline (3-4 pages) before midnight on November 30th so that we can discuss your progress. This should include the following: (1) a proposed title for your paper, (2) a clear statement about what you think we have learned from the 2010 election, (3) an explanation of why this lesson is important, (4) some bullet point notes on the cases (i.e., races) you will be looking at, (5) a list of related literature/studies, (6) an outline of how you see the body of your paper being organized, and (7) a list of points you plan to make in the conclusion. Our meeting will allow us to “touch base” on your work and make sure that your paper is coming along.

Classes 23, 24 and 25 (December 6, 8, and 13) Final Project Presentations
Each student will have an opportunity to present their final paper research during these last three meetings. Your presentation should follow the instructions laid out in the document: Conducting a Good Workshop (see below). Each student will have about 10-12 minutes to present their work.

Final Papers are due Tuesday, December 21st before 4:00 pm
Attachment One: How to Actively Engage with the Readings

Almost anyone can read a book or journal article. In this class, it is important that you really engage with the reading to ensure that you have gained a good sense of the author’s argument and evidence. To do this, you might answer the following questions about each article or book you read in this class (or in any class).

- What is the author(s) central question(s)? Why is the question(s) important?
- What is the author’s theory? What predictions does s/he make about the answer to the question?
- What does the author find? What are the results of his/her analysis? What evidence does s/he offer to support or refute the proposed theory?
- What are the implications of the findings? What do the findings tell us? Why might these findings be important?
- What are some of the limitations of the research? How might these limitations be overcome?
- What are your reactions to the research? What questions are raised by the study? What comes to mind when you step back and think about the research?

If you can answer each of these questions, in detail, about each reading, you have probably engaged sufficiently with the material. When it comes to evaluating each reading, you should keep the following simple rules in mind:

Rule # 1: Don’t Whine! It is unfair to criticize a piece of scholarship until you completely understand it. Even then, your criticism ought to be followed by constructive suggestions for how the problems might be addressed.

Rule # 2: Understand the Limitations of Research! Conducting research is a daunting and very challenging endeavor. Researchers often do the best they can with what they have. Until you have conquered the challenges of primary research yourself, you may want to take it easy on those who have taken the leap.

Rule # 3: Don’t Believe Everything You Read! Most of the research you will read in this class (and in college in general) has been vetted by reviewers and editors to ensure its high quality. However, mistakes and misinterpretations (and even a little fudging) can still get into a final manuscript. It is your job to read everything with a healthy level of skepticism – don’t be a jerk but then again don’t believe everything you read just because it has been written in a peer-reviewed book or article.
Attachment Two: The Do’s and Don’ts of Classroom Discussion

Your participation grade in this class is largely based on your ability to effectively engage in a discussion of class material. Here are some hints for how you might become an effective discussant.

Do Not…

- Do NOT dominate the conversation
- Do NOT drone on or make vague statements
- Do NOT let anyone else (including the professor) dominate the conversation or drone on (actively, but politely, interject)
- Do NOT whine after class about the discussion (it is, after all, your discussion – take some ownership)
- Do NOT be disrespectful

Do…

- DO be prepared for the discussion
  - Doing the reading is not enough; you should actively read the assignment(s) and practice verbalizing the thesis and evidence offered by the author. You should also reflect on the readings so that you might have something ready to say about them in class.
- DO turn monologues into dialogues by asking others for their views
- DO state your point (succinctly and specifically) and ask others for their opinion
- DO interject when someone is droning on by asking questions about what they are saying
- DO strive to make the discussion better (rather than complaining about it afterwards) by actively trying to improve it
- DO relate your understanding of the class material to the wider world and other phenomena
- DO speculate about the significance of the text and the possible research questions it suggests
Attachment Three: Conducting a Good Workshop

Your objective is to engage your classmates in a discussion of your research. This ought to be interesting to them so that they might offer suggestions that you can use when writing your final draft. Here are some pointers on how you can conduct a good workshop.

1. The biggest sin is to be boring. You should come to your presentation with a controlled level of excitement. You should be well prepared and, please, do not read anything aloud.

2. The second biggest sin is to b--s--. This is no time to make it up or to engage in a rant in which you vent your personal feelings in the absence of logic and evidence.

3. You must engage the members of the seminar in your research process. To do so, make sure they understand the question (What is it you are trying to argue?) and, from time to time, come back to it, reminding them what you are trying to do.

4. To engage them in the research process, realize that you are trying to tell them how you actually went about looking for an answer to your research question. You want to show how your thinking on this topic has evolved and the steps that you have taken along the way.

It is understood that your presentation is of research-in-progress. You should, however, be able to cover the following questions.

- What is your argument?
- What is already known about your topic? In other words, what is the state of the literature? In what ways have other researchers already narrowed the research question with what they have found out? What does the seminar’s required reading contribute to a (partial) answer of the research question?
- If your argument is right, so what? What would that teach us?
- What is your evidence? How do we know if your argument is verified? For example, if you proposed that the 2010 campaign showed that a candidate’s image is more important than the substance of his/her positions, what “facts” (empirical indicators) do you have to signal that this is true?
- What do your findings mean? What inferences can you make from the evidence?
- What are your conclusions? What is the “take-home” point of your research?
- Speculate about the broader significance of what you found. What does it suggest about campaigns and elections in the United States? What does it tell us about American politics and society at large?