

Political Science 151 Research Paper Assignment

1 Basic Information

For this course, you are required to write a term paper examining some aspect of voting and elections. The paper should be 8-10 pages of typed, double-spaced text, not including any figures, tables, footnotes, and references. It will be due before the final exam: *Thursday, December 14th, at 4pm*. Late papers will be marked down one letter grade per day unless prior arrangements are made.

Your paper should pose an interesting research question related to voting and elections, and use the theories and facts covered in class and several outside sources to provide an answer to this question. Be sure *not* to write a paper that merely restates the readings or what we talked about in class — you need to do some original thinking, research, and analysis in this paper. Stay away from normative arguments — don't write a journalistic account of a particular election, or an essay describing whether some recent even or trend in politics is "good" or "bad."

You will need to include at least 2 outside academic sources in your paper beyond the readings we have covered in class. Non-academic outside sources, such as online, newspaper, and magazine articles are perfectly fine, as long as you have included at least two outside academic sources (usually journal articles, books, or book chapters).

One good way to find sources for your research is to read the citations at the back of any articles in the reader you find interesting and track them down. Another valuable source for this kind of research is the JSTOR archive of academic papers. You can access this archive from any campus IP address at <http://www.jstor.org>. You can also set up your home computer as a proxy server, which will allow you to access this archive at home — see the UCSB library website for details). Typing in some search terms related to your paper topic will bring up a large number of academic papers. Many of these papers will be technical in places, but you should be able to at least see what other researchers have found in various settings. Another useful source is the library's electronic journal listing, available at <http://www.library.ucsb.edu/eresources/ejournals/index.html>. You can look up recent articles in many political science journals — some good ones to browse are *Perspectives on Politics*, *Political Science Quarterly*, and *PS: Political Science and Politics*. Of course, the library will also have other sources for your chosen topic, such as book or chapters in edited volumes.

2 Possible Paper Topics

Writing a research paper like this is always a difficult task, so below I list several possible paper topics, along with some initial sources and references you would need. Feel free to use one of these topics, or any other topic you might find interesting (as long as it is related to the material we've covered in class — email me if you have questions).

What can variation in voter turnout rates teach us about the costs of voting? This type of paper could draw on our readings on voter turnout, statistics on voter turnout (and differences in how these statistics are calculated), and different voter registration laws in a study of how different types of costs influence voter turnout. One possibility is to examine voter turnout across U.S. states — one source of data and further ideas is <http://www.eac.gov/>. You might also examine some specific attempts to increase voter turnout, such as the implementation of “motor-voter” laws in some states. You could also take an international perspective, comparing turnout rates and laws across two or more countries and using the theories discussed in class to explain the differences and similarities you see in voter turnout rates. Obvious topics here include contrasting voter turnout and election outcomes with and without compulsory voting, or in PR versus plurality systems. A JSTOR search on “voter turnout” will bring up a bunch of interesting papers related to this topic.

How do differences in voting systems influence election outcomes? This type of paper could examine how different types of voting systems would be expected to influence election outcomes from the perspective of the theories we have covered in class. For instance, many states in the U.S. are moving away from punchcard voting to electronic voting — will this change benefit some types of voters or some kinds of candidates more than others? Another possible topic is to consider Oregon's mail voting system, and how voter turnout and election outcomes might differ under this system versus they systems used in other states. An international perspective would also make for an interesting paper — how are elections administered in other countries in comparison to the U.S., and does it make any difference? Since this is a pretty new field in political science, JSTOR probably won't be too helpful here. One interesting source to consider is the Caltech/MIT voting technology project at: <http://vote.caltech.edu/>. Another place to look is the Election Updates blog, which has many interesting posts and links to other research: <http://electionupdates.caltech.edu/blog.html>. There are also some recent books on these topics at the library.

How does voting on ballot initiatives differ from more traditional voting for candidates or parties? Many of the theories of voting behavior we have seen focus on partisan identification. Can these theories explain voting on ballot initiatives or other elections where there is no explicit partisan cue, such as California proposition voting or European Union referenda? Similarly, many theories of elections focus on the incumbency advantage — but

what happens when there is no incumbent candidate or party? How do people obtain information to vote on ballot initiatives when many of the “low information rationality” cues they could rely on (such as personal morality or perceptions of competence) are unavailable? A JSTOR search on “ballot initiatives” and other variants on that theme would be a good place to start.

How would changing election systems influence campaigns and elections in a particular country? Suppose the United States changed its system for legislative elections from plurality elections in single-member districts to proportional representation. What changes do the theories of voter and candidate behavior we have examined in class predict we would see? Alternatively, what kinds of changes in campaigns and elections might we see in a PR country that switched to plurality elections? A JSTOR search on “PR plurality” might be a good place to start.

How does the advice of the election pundits compare to the political science research we have seen? As the 2006 midterm election approaches, countless election pundits are offering advice to the Democratic party for strategies to recapture the House and Senate, and ultimately the Presidency. Some say the Democrats must distinguish themselves from the Republicans, and avoid becoming the “Republican-lite” party. Others say the far left has captured the Democratic party, and thus the Democrats must return to the center if they hope to win any significant elections. Evaluate these and other proposed strategies drawing on the political science literature covered in class.

Of course, this is only a small sample of possible topics for your paper. Anything related to the class material that involves some original research and thinking is fine. Feel free to come by office hours or email me if you have some ideas for a paper you want to talk over.