

JOURNALIST'S RESOURCE

Knowledge-based reporting

Syllabus: Covering politics and elections

This course teaches students the fundamentals of covering the American political world, as well as larger concepts that can help generate deeper context. Many reporters at some time in their careers are tossed into covering local races for school boards, city councils or county offices. Others make careers out of covering large city governments or state and federal governments. This course is designed to provide a broad overview of this beat, from the grassroots to the White House.

The animating idea of this course is that political reporting should be informed by deeper knowledge. Theory and practice need not be at odds. Students can learn the “nut-and-bolts” through deadline exercises and spot assignments; but they can also develop a deeper sense of research insights about the system and its structural contours.

The course is built on the belief that the purpose of journalism is to serve the community and the purpose of political journalism is to give citizens the information they need to participate in civic affairs. To those ends, political reporting here covers government and governance, campaigns and candidates, tactics and strategies and policy issues in the public arena. Political journalists should serve as watchdogs to assure honest governance and campaigns and seek to focus their coverage on issues of importance to society and not just daily “spin.”

Course description

Emphasis is placed on deadline writing and critiquing of political and public policy news. Students are also encouraged to explore the use of social media to cover and explain campaigns and policy. Use of materials from [Journalist's Resource](#) is also required to add depth to spot news coverage. The course encourages familiarity with the methods and insights of political and social science; the selection of readings includes many pieces of original research. Students should come away with the confidence to use such materials to inform their future reporting.

Learning objectives

The purpose of this course is to help students develop:

- Critical thinking skills about political issues and dynamics
- Strong instincts for finding good political stories
- Sharp writing skills and an attention to detail and nuance in reporting
- The ability to operate effectively in deadline situations
- A fluency with political and social science research methods and insights

Course syllabus

This syllabus is a general plan for the course and its development; any changes deemed necessary by the instructor will be announced during class. Often, breaking political news or developments can and should change the syllabus. Debates, candidate appearances or spot news developments during a semester provide a learning opportunity for students to be assigned to cover events and critique media performances.

Required texts

- Shanto Iyengar, Jennifer A. McGrady, *Media Politics: A Citizen's Guide*. W.W. Norton, 2011.
- Doris Graber, *Mass Media & American Politics*. Congressional Quarterly Press, 8th edition, 2010.

Recommended books and articles

- *The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on the Media Law*. This book will be useful as a reference during writing exercises; the briefing on media law is required.
- Theodore H. White, *Making of the President 1960*. Atheneum House, 1961. The “fly on the wall” style of this book and its emphasis on personalities and tactics of campaigns changed American political reporting.
- Philip Meyer, *Precision Journalism*. Rowman and Littlefield, 2002. This classic work helps reporters understand statistic concepts and terms and the use of data.
- [“Statistical Terms Used in Research Studies; A Primer for Journalists,”](#) Journalist’s Resource, 2012.
- [“Introduction to Academic Research and Studies: How They Work and Why Journalists Should Care,”](#) Journalist’s Resource, 2012.

Required daily readings and news consumption

- Local daily newspaper, either in print or online.
- Political websites [Politico.com](#), [RealClearPolitics.com](#) and [FiveThirtyEight.com](#).
- Local political websites or blogs, including [“The Monkey Cage”](#) political science blog.
- Editorial pages, blogs or websites with various ideological perspectives.
- The political news programs of cable television networks.

A few minutes of each class period will be devoted to the past week’s major political stories and how they were covered. Examples of good stories and bad stories in all media should be critiqued.

Guest speakers

Instructor should seek to bring to class or Skype with political reporters and editors as well as political communications professionals such as pollsters or press secretaries. Subjects of discussion can include what they believe to be good and bad political reporting as well as the nature of their relationships with the media.

Expectations

One paper is required: Write a report about social media that considers some of the following questions: (1) How are political campaigns using social media? (2) How are political journalists using social media to cover campaigns? (3) What might journalists do to improve their use of social media to cover politics? (4) How does all of this affect citizen participation in campaigns and democracy? The paper should be long enough to cover the subject adequately, but no more than 2,500 words. One good background piece to consider is [“Effects of the Internet on Politics: Research roundup.”](#) at Journalist’s Resource. Other relevant readings can be found in the syllabus in week 7, class 2. The paper is due in class that session.

Week 1: Overview on politics and the press

Class 1: What makes for good political reporting?

Topic: Politics is often portrayed as a “game.” Indeed, sports and metaphors pepper political writing. Unlike other “games,” political ones have real world consequences: war or peace; high taxes or low; jobs or unemployment; health care or not. We discuss what constitutes “politics,” why it is important and how it affects daily lives; we will also look at the purpose of political reporting and what goes into good political reporting. Just how do political journalists do their job and what do they do? What are their goals, and whom do they serve?

Readings:

- Jack Shafer, [“Presidential Campaigns, Sports Writing and the Fine Art of Pretending.”](#) Reuters, 2012.
- Jay Rosen, [“Why Political Coverage is Broken.”](#) Jay Rosen’s Press Think, August 26, 2011.
- Jodi Enda, [“Campaign Coverage in the Time of Twitter.”](#) *American Journalism Review*, 2011.
- Jeremy W. Peters, [“Latest Word on the Trail? I Take It Back.”](#) *New York Times*, 2012.
- Paul Farhi, [“Off the Bus.”](#) *American Journalism Review*, 2009.
- John Harris, [“Shifting Influence From Institution to Individual.”](#) Nieman Reports, 2008.

Assignment: Assessment of your own consumption of political journalism; 300 to 350 words, due at the start of the next class. You should list the *average* amount of time per week you spend consuming political news, the sources (i.e., *Wall Street Journal*, Politico.com, CNN, etc.), medium (print, on-line, broadcast), and possible biases (does the source have inherent political, ethical, gender, race religious, economic, or other biases). What did you like/dislike about the political journalism you consume?

Class 2: Framing and crafting a political story

Topic: We will discuss how to write a political story and put facts in wider context. Other subjects include understanding your audience and the news itself; providing balance; how to write tight, declarative sentences, use quotes, and break through writers' block; and work with editors.

Readings:

- William Safire, "[How to Read a Column,](#)" *New York Times*, January 24, 2005.
- Michael Kinsley, "[Cut This Story,](#)" *The Atlantic*, January/February 2010.
- George Orwell, "[Politics and the English Language,](#)" 1946.
- Thomas Patterson, "[The Case for Knowledge-Based Reporting,](#)" *Journalist's Resource*, 2012.
- Brendan Nyhan, John Sides, "[How Political Science Can Help Journalism \(And Still Let Journalists Be Journalists\),](#)" *The Forum*, 2011.
- Hans Noel, "[Ten Things Political Scientists Know That You Don't,](#)" *The Forum*, 2010.
- "[Research chat: Nicholas Lemann on journalism, scholarship and more informed reporting,](#)" *Journalist's Resource*, 2012.

Assignment: In-class deadline writing exercise. You will be given the text of a recent speech or news program; write and submit a 250-word story about it by the end of the class period. The purpose of the exercise is to give you an idea of what it feels like to produce deadline political copy.

Week 2: Local-level politics, part 1

Class 1: City and town hall reporting

Topic: Covering local politics is the meat-and-potatoes beat of American journalism. Along with the police and courts, this has long been a “starter” beat for many reporters. However, today many news organizations don’t cover it regularly but instead parachute reporters in to spot news events.

Readings:

- *Mass Media & American Politics*, Chapter 4, “News Making and Reporting Routines”; Chapter 10, “Covering the Justice System and State and Local News.”
- *Media Politics: A Citizen’s Guide*, Chapter 4, “Reporters, Official Sources, and the Decline of Adversarial Journalism.”
- [“Ten Hints for Covering Government,”](#) Journalist’s Resource, 2011.

Class 2: Political reporter as watchdog

Topic: The role of the reporter is both to inform citizens about the formal workings of government and to serve as a watchdog on potential waste and abuse. We talk about what it takes to serve in this role and the structural factors that often contribute to corruption.

Readings:

- [“High Salaries Stir Outrage in Bell,”](#) *Los Angeles Times*, 2010-2012.
- [Pulitzer Prize-winning series on mayoral corruption,](#) *Detroit Free Press*, 2008.
- R. Alison Felix, James R. Hines, Jr. [“Who Offers Tax-Based Business Development Incentives?”](#) National Bureau of Economic Research, 2011.
- Filipe R. Campante, Quoc-Anh Do, [“Isolated Capital Cities, Accountability and Corruption: Evidence from U.S. States,”](#) Harvard Kennedy School, Singapore Management University, 2012.

Assignment: Attend a city council, town council or school board meeting. Write a 500-word story focusing on the most important issue addressed in the hearing; in addition, write a brief memo outlining story ideas that came from the meeting that you think merit further investigation.

Week 3: Local-level politics, part 2

Class 1: Budgets, boards and departments

Topic: A political reporter’s capacity to write great stories will only be as strong as his or her grasp of policy details and the specific mechanisms of power. Understanding how governance works and a willingness to examine it critically are crucial, no matter the area — from school board policies and public safety agencies to land use projects and municipal budgets.

Readings:

- Soni Sangha, [“Putting in Their 2 Cents,”](#) *New York Times*, March 30, 2012.
- LynNell Hancock, [“Tested: Covering Schools in the Age of Micro-Measurement,”](#) *Columbia Journalism Review*, March/April 2011.
- Amy Brittain, Mark Mueller, [“N.J. Doctor Supplied Steroids to Hundreds of Law Enforcement Officers, Firefighters,”](#) *Star-Ledger*, December 12, 2010.

Class 2: States, agencies, laws and regulations

Topic: Laws, rules and regulations can vary widely among the states, and their enforcement can be very uneven at the county and local levels. Part of a political reporter’s role is to hold agencies and officials accountable for the rules they oversee and the responsibilities to the public they have.

Readings:

- Raquel Rutledge, [“Cashing in on Kids,”](#) *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 2009.
- Danny Hakim, [“At State-Run Homes, Abuse and Impunity,”](#) *The New York Times*, March 12, 2011.
- Damian Paletta, [“States Mine Federal Funds Long After Need Is Gone,”](#) *Wall Street Journal*, April 18, 2012.
- Ryan Gabrielson, Paul Giblin, [“Reasonable Doubt,”](#) *East Valley Tribune*, 2008.
- James E. Alt, David D. Lassen, [“Political and Judicial Checks on Corruption: Evidence from American State Governments,”](#) *Economics & Politics*, September 10, 2007.

Assignment: Read the study [“Public Participation, Procedural Fairness and Evaluations of Local Governance”](#) in Journalist’s Resource and use it as a lens through which to see the budgeting process for a town, city council or local governing board of any kind. Given the study’s findings, examine the rules, procedures and opportunities for public input on the budget. How participatory is the process for constituents? Interview several people in the community involved in the budget, then write an 800-word blog post about these dynamics and your findings.

Week 4: Civic engagement and participation

Class 1: Citizens and governance

Topics: Though some citizens have a strong sense of civic duty, many do not, and commentators have long noted apathy and alienation among segments of the populace. A reporter is sometimes one of the few people at hearings and meetings. How can a reporter better connect the citizenry to the workings of government? What is the reporter's role in all of this?

Readings:

- [“How the Public Perceives Community Information Systems.”](#) Pew Research Center/Knight Foundation, on Journalist's Resource, March 1, 2011.
- [“The Open Society: Governments Are Letting in the Light.”](#) *The Economist*, February 25, 2010.
- Elisabeth Rosenthal, [“I Disclose ... Nothing.”](#) *New York Times*, January 21, 2012.
- Alex Howard, [“Data for the Public Good.”](#) *O'Reilly Radar*, February 22, 2012.

Class 2: Voting and participation

Topics: Nonvoting is far more prevalent in the United States than in nearly all other democracies. Elections, ballot measures and votes often record the opinions of tiny fractions of communities. Why is this? What implications does this dynamic carry for political reporters? What does this mean for American democracy? And how do the changing demographics of the country intersect with this issue?

Readings:

- [“The Impact of Race and Ethnicity, Immigration and Political Context on Participation in American Electoral Politics.”](#) *Journal of Social Forces*, 2012.
- Robert Putnam, [“Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America.”](#) *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 1995.
- Ron Brownstein, [“Our Diverse Suburbs.”](#) *National Journal*, 2012.
- Thomas Patterson, [“The Vanishing Voter: Why Are the Voting Booths So Empty?”](#) *National Civic Review*, Winter 2002.
- Mark Seibel, [“Making Reporting About Voting Part of the Political Beat.”](#) *Nieman Reports*, Spring 2004.

Assignment: Read the study [“Voter Participation in Presidential Primaries and Caucuses”](#) and then interview 10 people of voting age about when they last voted and their thoughts on why they did or didn't participate. Write an 800-word blog post about voter participation that is informed by the study and that includes information from your interviews.

Week 5: Political communication: Messages that matter

Class 1: Spinning: How politicians use the media to make policy

Topic: We analyze how politicians use and control the media to lead public opinion. Vast resources and effort are used to stage events and manipulate reporters. Much of what is now called “governing” is simply developing and executing strategies designed to further a political agenda.

Readings:

- *Mass Media & American Politics*, Chapter 6, “The Media as Policy Makers.”
- *Media Politics: A Citizen’s Guide*, Chapter 7, “Going Public: Governing Through the Media.”
- Nicholas Lemann, [“The Controller,”](#) *The New Yorker*, May 12, 2003.
- David Barstow, [“Message Machine: Behind TV Analysts, Pentagon’s Hidden Hand,”](#) *New York Times*, April 20, 2008.
- Sarah Allen Gershon, [“Press Secretaries, Journalists, and Editors: Shaping Local Congressional News Coverage,”](#) *Political Communication*, April 26, 2012.
- John G. Bullock, [“Elite Influence on Public Opinion in an Informed Electorate,”](#) *American Political Science Review*, August 2011.

Class 2: How the media shape public opinion — scandal, sensation and getting it right

Topic: We examine the power and limitations of the media to shape public opinion and the tendency of the media to overplay scandal and sensationalize news. We look at the tactics that do and don’t work to shape how Americans view issues and those of politicians; we’ll discuss the difficulty of countering spin and misinformation once narratives are established, facts have been asserted and assumptions have become hardened.

Readings:

- *Mass Media & American Politics*, Chapter 7, “Media Influence on Attitudes and Behavior.”
- *Media Politics: A Citizen’s Guide*, Chapter 8, “News and Public Opinion.”
- Brendan Nyhan, [“Why the ‘Death Panel’ Myth Wouldn’t Die: Misinformation in the Health Care Reform Debate,”](#) *The Forum*, 2010.
- Riccardo Puglisi¹, James M. Snyder Jr., [“News Coverage of Political Scandals,”](#) *Journal of Politics*, August 2011.
- Dennis Chong, James N. Druckman, [“Dynamic Public Opinion: Communication Effects Over Time,”](#) *American Political Science Review*, December 10, 2010.
- Brendan Nyhan, Jason Reifler, [“Misinformation and Fact-Checking: Research Findings from Social Science,”](#) New America Foundation, February 28, 2012.

Assignment: Review the available media releases and press appearances of a prominent politician over the past month that relate to a particular policy issue. Write an article about the politician’s apparent strategy, and interview sources who can speak to the effectiveness of the given messages.

Week 6: The campaign: Television

Class 1: Television ads

Topic: We'll chart evolution of political television commercials. To do this, let's begin by going to Livingroomcandidate.org starting with 1952 and watching a few commercials from each party in each cycle. Pay special attention to the 1952 "I Like Ike" ad and Kennedy ads in 1960 and contrast them with the "Daisy ad" run by the Democrats in 1964. Also watch the 1988 "Willie Horton" ad run by Republicans against Michael Dukakis. How are ads changing? What techniques do producers use? Are the Web ads replacing broadcast political commercials? Are negative ads effective and if so, in what way? How are stereotypes and prejudices used?

Readings/video:

- John Sides, Andrew Karcha, "[Messages That Mobilize: Issue Publics and the Content of Campaign Advertising.](#)" *Journal of Politics*, March 27, 2008.
- Alan Gerber, James Gimpel, et al, "[How Large and Long-lasting Are the Persuasive Effects of Televised Campaign Ads?](#)" *American Political Science Review*, February 2011.
- Deborah Jordan Brooks, "[A Negativity Gap? Voter Gender, Attack Politics and Participation in American Elections.](#)" *Politics & Gender*, September 20, 2010.
- T.W. Farnam, "[Obama Has Aggressive Internet Strategy to Woo Voters.](#)" *Washington Post*, April 6, 2012.
- Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "[Flackchecking Political Sneeze.](#)" Personal Democracy Forum, 2012.

Class 2: Television

Topic: Television is the most important force in our culture. How do political figures use it? A news director or television broadcast producer or journalist could be a helpful guest for this session.

Readings:

- Stephen J. Farnsworth, S. Robert Lichter, "[How Television Covers the Presidential Nomination Process.](#)" *The Making of the Presidential Candidates 2012*.
- Gabriel S. Lenz, Chappell Lawson, "[Looking the Part: Television Leads Less Informed Citizens to Vote Based on Candidates' Appearance.](#)" *American Journal of Political Science*, 2011.

Assignment: Read the *American Journal of Political Science* study "[Variability in Citizens' Reactions to Different Types of Negative Campaigns](#)" at Journalist's Resource. Review some negative ads from the last campaign cycle and interview 10 citizens about their feelings with respect to negative campaigns. Write an 800-word blog presenting your understanding of how negative advertising works in contemporary American politics.

Week 7: The campaign: Money and new media

Class 1: Campaign Finance

Topic: Who owns politicians? We try to make sense of campaign finance issues in the wake of recent court decisions.

Readings:

- Charlotte Grimes, [“Elements of Money in Politics Stories,”](#) Journalist’s Resource, 2011.
- Anthony Corrado, [“Financing Presidential Nomination in the Post-Public Funding Era.”](#) *The Making of the Presidential Candidates 2012.*
- R. Sam Garrett, [“State of Campaign Finance Policy: Recent Developments and Issues for Congress,”](#) Congressional Research Service, July 18, 2011.
- John Aldrich, [“The Invisible Primary and Its Effects on Democratic Choice,”](#) *PS: Political Science & Politics*, January 8, 2009.

Class 2: Internet campaigning and journalism

Topic: Since 2000, the Internet has become an increasingly crucial tool for organizing, campaigning and communicating. We look at how the digital space is being used by campaigns and activists.

Readings:

- *Mass Media & American Politics*, Chapter 8, “Elections in the Internet Age.”
- *Media Politics: A Citizen’s Guide*, Chapter 5, “New Media, New Forms of Campaigning.”
- [“Twitter and the Campaign,”](#) Pew Research Center, December 8, 2011.
- Julia K. Woolley, Anthony M. Limperos, Mary Beth Oliver, [“The 2008 Presidential Election, 2.0: A Content Analysis of User-Generated Political Facebook Groups,”](#) *Mass Communication and Society*, November 20, 2010.
- Aaron Smith, [“The Internet and Campaign 2010,”](#) Pew Research Center, March 17, 2011.
- Keith Hampton, et al., [“Social Networking Sites and Our Lives,”](#) Pew Research Center, June 16, 2011.
- [“Research chat: Nicco Mele on five ideas that animate the Internet,”](#) Journalist’s Resource, 2011.

In-class assignment: Campaign season means fast deadlines for reporters. You will be given the text of a recent speech or news program related to a political campaign. Write a 250-word story about it by the end of the class period. The purpose of the exercise is to give you an idea of what it feels like to produce political copy on a short deadline. Copy needs to be e-mailed to by the end of class.

Note: Social media paper due (instructions in syllabus introduction.)

Week 8: Polling and Election Day

Class 1: Topic Polls and Exit Polls.

Topic: We'll discuss use and abuse of polling, drafting questions, interpreting data and the pitfalls of writing about them.

Readings:

- [“Polling Fundamentals and Concepts: An Overview for Journalists,”](#) Journalist’s Resource, November 17, 2011.
- Sheldon R. Gawiser, Ph.D., G. Evans Witt, [“20 Questions a Journalist Should Ask about Poll Results,”](#) National Council on Public Polls.
- Michael W. Traugott, Christopher Wlezien, [“Dynamics of Poll Performance during the 2008 Presidential Nomination Contest,”](#) *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 2009.
- Christopher T. Stout, Reuben Kline, [“I’m Not Voting for Her: Polling Discrepancies and Female Candidates,”](#) *Political Behavior*, 2011.

Class 2: Election Day

Topic: Coverage on Election Day has brought out both the best and worst in American journalism. Premature verdicts and faulty trends are among the many sins committed by journalists. Still, the public has a hunger to know results, voters have often faced obstacles, and the political reporter’s role during this period remains crucial.

Readings:

- Wendy R. Weiser, Lawrence Norden, [“Voting Law Changes in 2012,”](#) Brennan Center for Justice, October 3, 2011.
- Christopher F. Karpowitz, et al., [“Political Norms and the Private Act of Voting,”](#) *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Winter 2011.
- Janine A. Parry, et al., [“When Ballot Issues Matter: Social Issue Ballot Measures and Their Impact on Turnout,”](#) *Political Behavior*, 2012.
- Michael Henderson, D. Sunshine Hillygus, Trevor Tompson, [“‘Sour Grapes’ or Rational Voting? Voter Decision Making among Thwarted Primary Voters in 2008,”](#) *Public Opinion Quarterly*, March 31, 2010.
- Thomas Patterson, [“Eleven Recommendations for Improving Election Night Coverage,”](#) Shorenstein Center, Harvard Kennedy School, 2004.

Assignment: Find a recent poll on a political issue that you think may be questionable. Analyze its results in an 800-word blog post and present some hypotheses as to why certain aspects of the polling may not tell the whole story. Be sure to look at the wording of the questions, the methodology, etc. Even if you cannot critique the poll’s statistical methods, at least ask critical questions about the poll’s approach and potential flaws. What questions might you put to polling experts?

Week 9: National politics and the federal system

Class 1: Congress

Topic: In the process of making laws, the members of Congress represent various interests within American society, giving them voice and attention in the national legislature. That at least is the theory. In recent years, many observers have noted the accelerating partisanship of the body and the gridlock associated. We look at the implications for political reporting and the reporter's role in covering the business of Congress.

Readings:

- Articles 1 through 3 of the [United States Constitution](#).
- James Madison, Federalist No. 10, "[The Union as a Safeguard Against Domestic Faction and Insurrection](#)," November 23, 1787. Note: The [Federalist Papers](#) were a series of essays written in 1788 by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton and John Jay during the debate over the Constitution's ratification.
- Alexander Hamilton or James Madison, Federalist No. 51, "[The Structure of the Government Must Furnish the Proper Checks and Balances Between the Different Departments](#)," February 8, 1788.
- Norman J. Ornstein, Thomas E. Mann, "[When Congress Checks Out](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2006.
- Norman J. Ornstein, Thomas E. Mann, "[The Hill Is Alive with the Sound of Hearings](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, March 21, 2007.

Class 2: President and commander-in-chief

Topic: Presidential power depends on the president's own abilities, but even more on circumstances — on whether the situation demands strong leadership and whether political support for that leadership exists. We look at the functioning of the White House, particularly the president's "power to persuade."

Readings:

- Ezra Klein, "[The Unpersuaded: Who Listens to a President?](#)" *The New Yorker*, March 19, 2012.
- Louis Fisher, "[Teaching the Presidency: Idealizing a Constitutional Office](#)," *PS: Political Science & Politics*, January 2012.
- Robert F. Trager, Lynn Vavreck, "[Political Costs of Crisis Bargaining: Presidential Rhetoric and the Role of Party](#)," *American Journal of Political Science*, July 2011.
- Matthew A. Baum, Tim Groeling, "[Shot by the Messenger: Partisan Cues and Public Opinion Regarding National Security and War](#)," *Political Behavior*, 2009.

Assignment: Using the C-SPAN video library, locate and review videos relating to a single national security issue that was the subject of both a Congressional hearing and was featured in a speech by the president. Write a 1,000-word blog post referring to the two videos and examining the different tactics of rhetoric and persuasion, and political framings, around the issue. The ideas in the two political science studies listed above should inform your discussion.

Week 10: The interplay of the three branches

Class 1: Legislative-executive dynamics

Topic: In America’s system of divided government, the constitutional power to enact legislation rests with Congress. Yet, on issues of national significance, the president often serves as “chief legislator.” The White House typically initiates major programs, setting the stage for congressional action on the proposal. We will discuss the interplay of the presidency and Congress in the making of laws, and how reporters can properly interpret these dynamics.

Readings:

- *Mass Media & American Politics*, Chapter 9, “The Struggle for Control: News from the Presidency and Congress.”
- *Media Politics: A Citizen’s Guide*, Chapter 10, “The Consequences of Going Public.”
- Matt Bai, [“Obama vs. Boehner: Who Killed the Debt Deal?”](#) *New York Times*, April 1, 2012.
- Norman Ornstein, [“Worst. Congress. Ever.”](#) *Foreign Policy*, July 19, 2011.
- Brendan Nyhan, et al., [“One Vote Out of Step? The Effects of Salient Roll Call Votes in the 2010 Election.”](#) *American Politics Research*, March 6, 2012.

Class 2: The federal judicial system

Topic: Though their job is to deliver impartial verdicts, federal judges and justices are political officials — they constitute one of the three coequal branches of the national government. Because the Constitution is a sparsely worded document and must be applied to new and changing situations, a debate over exactly how the law should be interpreted and enforced has remained at the heart of American politics.

Readings:

- U.S. Constitution, [Amendments 1 through 10](#) (collectively known as the Bill of Rights) and [Amendment 14](#).
- Brandon L. Bartels, Christopher D. Johnston, [“Political Justice? Perceptions of Politicization and Public Preferences Toward the Supreme Court Appointment Process.”](#) *Public Opinion Quarterly*, October 2011.
- [“The Establishment of Judicial Review.”](#) FindLaw, 2012.

Assignment: Read the *New York University Law Review* study [“The Declining Influence of the U.S. Constitution”](#) at Journalist’s Resource. Write an 800-word blog post presenting the findings of the study and explaining what U.S. domestic dynamics may be at work in this apparent trend. Explore in particular the issue of Constitutional interpretation and intensifying political controversy in recent decades.

Week 11: Special interests and lobbying

Class 1: Interest groups: Influence and coverage

Topics: Interest groups have an organized membership and pursue policy goals that stem from members' shared interests. But the nation's various interests are not equally well organized. We look at their influence and the challenges of covering their role in the democratic process.

Readings:

- Nicholas Lemann, "[Conflict of Interests?](#)" *The New Yorker*, August 11, 2008.
- Kenneth T. Andrews, Neal Caren, "[Making the News: Movement Organizations, Media Attention, and the Public Agenda,](#)" *American Sociological Review*, 2010.
- Eric Pooley, "[How Much Would You Pay to Save the Planet? The American Press and the Economics of Climate Change,](#)" Shorenstein Center, Harvard Kennedy School, 2009.
- Jacob S. Hacker, Paul Pierson, "[Winner-Take-All Politics: Public Policy, Political Organization, and the Precipitous Rise of Top Incomes in the United States,](#)" *Politics & Society*, June 2010.

Class 2: Lobbying and the money trail

Topic: Lobbying is the effort by groups to influence public policy through contact with public officials. We'll look at both "inside" and "outside" lobbying — and the strategies employed, from public pressure to direct donations to politicians. Students should come to class familiar with the latest findings from the resource and watchdog websites listed below.

Readings:

- Robert G. Kaiser, "[Citizen K Street: How Lobbying Became Washington's Biggest Business,](#)" *Washington Post*, March 4, 2007.
- Christopher Witko, "[Influence of Corporate Campaign Contributions in Government Contract Award Decisions,](#)" *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, March 18, 2011.

Resource/watchdog sites: [Sunlight Foundation](#), [Opensecrets.org](#), [Followthemoney.org](#), [United States Senate lobbying database](#).

Assignment: Choose a politician now holding national office and, using the sites and resources above, analyze the patterns of his or her support. Write an 800-word blog post about your findings.

Week 12: Navigating the partisan minefield; gender issues

Class 1: Liberals, conservatives and reporters

Topic: We look at how to report fairly in an increasingly polarized and partisan political culture.

Readings:

- Sarah Sobieraj, Jeffrey M. Berry, [“Incivility and Outrage in American Politics: Political Discourse in Blogs, Talk Radio and Cable News.”](#) *Political Communication*, 2011.
- [“Beyond the Facts: A Partisan Era Requires a Vigorous Press.”](#) *Columbia Journalism Review*, January/February 2011.
- [“Partisan Polarization Surges in Bush, Obama Years.”](#) Pew Research Center, June 4, 2012.
- [“Twitter and Political Polarization.”](#) Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence, 2011.

Class 2: Gender and politics

Topic: We look at women’s rise in politics and the continuing challenges for female political figures and women involved in public life.

Readings:

- [“Women and News: Expanding the News Audience, Increasing Political Participation, and Informing Citizens.”](#) pages 32-62, “A Narrative Overview of the Research,” Shorenstein Center, Harvard Kennedy School, 2008.
- Richard L. Fox, Jennifer L. Lawless, [“Gendered Perceptions and Women’s Equality in Electoral Politics.”](#) *American Journal of Political Science*, October 25, 2010.
- Rachel Joy Larris, Rosalie Maggio, [“Name It, Change It: The Women’s Media Center’s Media Guide to Gender Neutral Coverage of Women and Politicians.”](#)
- Sarah F. Anzia, Christopher R. Berry, [“Why Do Congresswomen Outperform Congressman?”](#) *American Journal of Political Science*, July 2011.
- Alexis Gelber, [“Digital Divas: Women, Politics and the Social Network.”](#) Shorenstein Center, Harvard Kennedy School, Spring 2011.

In-class assignment: You will be shown a video of a short news event such as a stump speech or a Sunday TV appearance. In an email to the instructor, do mock tweets while you watch the event. Then post a 300-word blog at the bottom of the story. The purpose of the exercise is to give you an idea of what it feels like to produce deadline political copy.

Assignment: Read the *American Journal of Political Science* study [“Barriers to Sustaining Gender Diversity in Politics.”](#) Write an 800-word blog post on its findings and, based on further research, looking at the current configuration of Congress and the relative power of women within it.

Week 13: Freedom, fairness and ethics for the political reporter

Class 1: Ethics and rules

Topic: We'll discuss the ethics of political journalists, and the formal and informal rules of the game.

Readings:

- [“Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists.”](#)
- [“Principles of Journalism.”](#) Committee of Concerned Journalists, 1997.
- *Mass Media & American Politics*, Chapter 3, “Press Freedom and the Law.”
- *AP Stylebook*, briefing on media law section.

Class 2: Review and preview

Topic: What are the takeaways from this course? Where is this business headed, and what can students do now to prepare to meet it?

Readings:

- *Mass Media & American Politics*, Chapter 12, “Current Trends and Future Directions in Media Policy.”
- *Media Politics: A Citizen’s Guide*, Chapter 11, “Evaluating Media Politics.”
- Ken Auletta, [“Non-stop News.”](#) *The New Yorker*, January 25, 2010.
- Mark Leibovich, [“The Man the White House Wakes Up To.”](#) *New York Times Magazine*, April 25, 2010.
- Jemima Kiss, [“Andy Carvin: The Man Who Tweets Revolutions.”](#) *The Guardian*, September 4, 2011.
- W. Lance Bennett, [“Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations in the United States.”](#) *Journal of Communication*, June 1990.

In-class assignment: For your final exam, you will be shown a news situation in class and asked to email a series of tweets to the instructor while the event is taking place, posting a four- or five-paragraph blog followed by a 400-word news story. All copy must be emailed to the instructor by the close of the final exam period.