Syllabus for Honors 131
Contemporary Society in Multiple Perspectives:
The 2018 Congressional Election
Fall, 2018
Tuesday 9:00-11:45
Buchanan (formerly Mason) Hall D-001

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COURSE DESCRIPTION: The 2018 congressional election is shaping up to be the most consequential and hard-fought of any in recent memory, and we will follow it as it unfolds. You will be expected to stay abreast of the major developments nationally—and in one bellwether House or Senate race—by reading political news web sites and blogs. But you will also follow the election through the eyes of one Virginia voter who doesn’t share your political views, with whom you will speak weekly about the campaign. Most weeks, we will have a well-known guest speaker for the first part of the class who knows about politics and campaigns from the inside. And when it is all over, we’ll analyze what happened and why.
**CLASS SESSIONS.** This is a discussion seminar. What you get from a seminar depends in large part on what you and others contribute. Even shy persons will be expected to participate, even if you are shy. No free riding around.

Generally speaking, each weekly class session will begin with a guest speaker, whom I will “interview” before opening things up to your questions and discussion. Guests will include well-known politicians, a political journalist, a pollster, a campaign managers and others from the Washington area who know their way around campaigns and politics. This part of the class will be open to all Mason faculty and students, as part of a weekly series, “First Tuesday: 2018 Congressional Elections” sponsored jointly by the Honors College and the Schar School. The talks will be held not in our classroom but in the Main Reading Room on the second floor of the Fenwick Library. Coffee and donuts will be served.

After the talk, we will reconvene as a class in our seminar room to talk about political developments during the previous week, nationally and in each of the five bellwether House and Senate races that we will be following through the semester. One student from each of five reporting teams will briefly update the class on the developments in those races over the previous week. A general discussion will follow. In preparation for each class, your assignment will be to read the national congressional campaign coverage from *Politico, Real Clear Politics, Fox News and the Washington Post*, which will provide a common basis for our discussion.

On Election Day, Tuesday, March 6, there will be no regular class. Instead, you should plan to spend several hours conducting an exit poll in selected precincts in the area to get a better idea of who voted, how they voted and why. That evening at 7:30, we will gather in a commons room of one of the dorms and watch the returns together as they come in. Pizza will be served. **Please make the necessary arrangements to spend the entire evening unless we agree to other arrangements.**
During the weeks after the election, we will analyze the results nationally and in our six key races, discuss what you learned from the individual voters you spoke with during the semester, and analyze the state of American politics.

You will be expected to attend all class sessions, come to class having done the assigned reading, and participate actively in the discussions. Please pick up the tent card with your name on it at the beginning of each class, and return it at the end of class. If you will be unable to attend class, please let me know by email in advance.

Good news: There will be no midterm or final exam.

**WEEK-IN-REVIEW PRESENTATIONS:** Members of the class will be divided into five groups, each of which will follow one campaign in depth – two Senate races and four House races. The groups will be expected to work together outside of class to gather information on an ongoing basis on how the campaigns are progressing – new TV ads, speeches, reactions to national events, endorsements, fundraising, debates, polls—whatever is getting media and voter attention. At each class session, one member of each group will make a short minute presentation of the most important developments of the previous week, using visual material (photos, charts, video clips) whenever possible. These presentations will give us all a good window into how the campaign is shaping up nationally, and inform the class discussion that follows. The groups will be graded as a group at the end of the semester.

Students will be assigned to groups based, as much as possible, on preferences, so you might want to do some advance research on the six “bell-weather” races that we will follow:
Senate  Missouri  Seat now held by Claire McCaskill (D)
Arizona  Open seat now held by retiring Jeff Flake (R)

House  Virginia 10  Seat now held by Barbara Comstock (R)
Minn. 2  Seat now held by Jason Lewis (R)
Cal. 6  Seat now held by Steve Knight (R)

CONVERSATIONS WITH VOTERS: Each of you will be assigned one Virginia voter who has agreed to talk with you once a week, by telephone, about how they are thinking and feeling about the Virginia US Senate race, and the House race in their district, as the campaign proceeds. Voters will be chosen to be as different from you as possible in terms of lifestyle and political preference. You should set a convenient time each week to talk to your voter for 10-20 minutes about the events of the preceding week and how they have affected his or her view of the candidates and the races. During those conversations, you should probe not only what the voter is thinking and why, but how those views and reactions have been shaped by their upbringing, their work, and by their friends, family and community. You will find their answers will tend to be short and narrowly responsive. Your challenge will be to learn to draw them out, get them to tell stories, talk about how they are feeling rather than what they are thinking, so you can get to know them as a whole person. You should take extensive notes while they are talking that will become the basis of a running diary you will keep on Blackboard (see below).

Your initial conversation should occur in the first week of class, and will take longer than the others. You should start by telling the voter a bit about yourself, both to break the ice and give them an idea of what you
want them to tell you. Then ask them to give you the 10-minute history of their lives – parents’ occupations, childhood, education, jobs and marital history, kids, where they have lived. Nail down basics such as age, race, religion, place where they grew up, ethnic background, household income (roughly), occupation of spouse, number and age of children and party registration. Then inquire about how they spend their time and money: hobbies and sports, what TV shows they like to watch, what music they like to listen to, what kind of books and magazines and websites they read, where they go on vacation, kind of car they drive, favorite foods, whether they belong to any clubs, do any volunteer work or are religious. Probe them about their views on major hot-button issues such as immigration, Obamacare, abortion, gay rights, welfare, taxes, gun control, climate change and their general views about Donald Trump. And most important: ask about where they get their political news and information and how they voted in past presidential and congressional elections.

As the campaign season unfolds, make sure to ask them how they expect their spouses, parents, kids, neighbors and co-workers to vote what they are hearing about the campaign at work, at church, at little league games or on the golf course. Your challenge is to figure out how their perceptions of the congressional races (House and Senate) evolve over the campaign in response to news coverage, campaign events, TV ads, debates and conversations with other people. You also need to come to an understanding of what their lives are like, what makes them tick, what gets them angry and sad and gives them joy, what worries them and what are their aspirations for themselves, their families and their communities. Your aim by the end of the semester is to be able to draw a detailed political portrait or your voter based not only on what they tell you directly, but what you sense about them as a person and a voter.

You should have one final conversation after the election to find out how they voted, why, and how they feel about the election results locally and nationally. Then send a handwritten letter to your voter by snail mail
thanking him or her for taking the time to participate and share views and experiences.

You need to write up a detailed diary of these phone conversations each week and post them on Blackboard. I will read the diaries to see how you are doing and make suggestions on for future conversations.

**BOOK REPORTS:** Other than keeping up with news reports, the assigned reading for the course consists of two books that will give you a good understanding about the major divisions and trends in American politics today. You should read them carefully, marking key passages, and then write a two to three page book report that (1) summarizes what you read and (2) gives your reaction to what you read, including what you learned that you didn’t know before and what you liked and didn’t like about the book. These are not research papers – no footnotes, please. And please don’t waste your time (or mine) with those opening paragraphs summarizing what you are going to say, and then again at the end summarizing what you just said. Just say it once, concisely in a simple conversational style. Papers will be graded as Superior, Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory. Grading will be based on how well you read and absorbed and analyzed the material, as well as on your ability to deliver a clear, concise essay. **The book reports will be due Sept. 11, two weeks after the start of the semester, so obviously you will have to begin reading during the summer.** Getting this reading out of the way early will allow you to focus on the unfolding campaign coverage as the campaign kicks into high gear after Labor Day.

The two books are available in print or electronic format from on-line sellers.

*Democracy in America? What Has Gone Wrong and What We Can Do About It*, Benjamin Page and Martin Gilens, Chicago, 2017
The Great Revolt: Inside the Populist Coalition Reshaping American Politics, By Salena Zito and Brad Todd, Crown Forum (hardcover only), May, 2018

FINAL PAPER: Between the election and the end of the semester, you are required to write an eight-to-ten page paper. For your topic, you should write about the one most interesting or important (and non-obvious) thing that you learned about American politics and campaigns during the semester, drawing on what you read and observed and heard during the campaign, what you heard from our speakers and during our class discussions, and what you took away from your conversations with your subject and voters at the polls. Once you chose a topic, you may want to do a small amount of additional research to fill out your understanding. I also strongly suggest you stop by my office and run your topic by me before you dive into researching and writing the paper. Papers are due no later than Tuesday, Dec. 4. Papers will be graded on the basis of the quality of the research, thinking and writing.

COURSE EVALUATION:

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<th>Component</th>
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<tr>
<td>Class Participation</td>
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<td>Book Reports (2)</td>
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<td>Week-in-Review Presentations</td>
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<td>Voter Diary</td>
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<td>Final Paper</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aug. 28</td>
<td>Introductions, Team Assignments</td>
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<td>Sept. 4</td>
<td>[No Guest Speaker]</td>
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<td>Initial Group Presentations on Bellwether Races</td>
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<td>Discussion: Week in Review</td>
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<td>Sept. 11</td>
<td><strong>Book Reviews Due</strong></td>
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<td>Guest Speaker: Anne Holton, Mason professor, former secretary of education, wife of Sen. Tim Kaine (D-Va.)</td>
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<td>Discussion: Week in Review</td>
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<td>Sept. 18</td>
<td>Guest Speaker: Peter Hart, dean of American political pollsters</td>
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<td>Discussion: Week in Review</td>
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<td>Sept. 25</td>
<td>Guest Speaker: Danny Diaz, Jeb Bush campaign manager, campaign media consultant, GMU alum</td>
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<td>Discussion: Week in Review</td>
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<td>Oct. 2</td>
<td>Guest Speaker: Tom Davis, former Congressman from Virginia, Rector of GMU</td>
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<td>Discussion: Week in Review</td>
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<td>Oct. 9</td>
<td><strong>No Class: Columbus Day Shuffle</strong></td>
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<td>Oct. 16</td>
<td>Guest Speaker: Terry McAuliffe, former governor of Virginia, Visiting Professor at Mason’s Schar School</td>
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<td>Discussion: Week in Review</td>
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Oct. 23  Guest Speaker: Karen Timulty, political columnist, *Washington Post*
Discussion: Week in Review

Oct. 30  Guest Speaker: Robby Mook, Hillary Clinton’s campaign manager and/or Cory Bliss, executive director of GOP Congressional Leadership Fund
Discussion: Week in Review

Nov. 6  **Election Day**
Daytime: Exit polling
Evening: Watch returns starting at 7:30

Nov. 13  Guest Speaker: Norm Ornstein, American Enterprise Institute, author of *It’s Even Worse Than It Looks*
Discussion: Analysis of Election Results and Exit Poll

Nov. 20  Discussion: Conversations With Voters

**Thanksgiving Recess**

Nov. 27  Wrap-up Discussion: State of American politics

Dec. 4  **Final Papers Due**
Class Evaluation

**ELECTRONIC DEVICES:** All cell phones and communications devices should be shut off during class. You may open your computers in class only to look up material needed for our discussions—otherwise they should be closed. If
you are caught checking emails, texts or social media, you will be asked to leave.

**COMMUNICATION:** All students should check university e-mail accounts for class updates. I will access e-mail through Blackboard.

**ENROLLMENT:** Students are responsible for verifying their enrollment in the class. Last day to add or drop classes without penalty is Tuesday, Sept. 4. Please let me know if you drop the class either before or after that date.

**STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES:** If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodation, please see me and contact the Disability Resource Center at 703-993-2474.

**HONOR CODE:**

1. No help may be given or received by students when taking quizzes, tests or examinations, whatever the type or wherever taken, unless the instructor specifically permits deviation from this standard.
2. All work submitted to fulfill course requirements is to be solely the product of the individual(s) whose name(s) appear on it. Except with permission of the instructor, no recourse is to be had to projects, papers, lab reports or any other written work previously prepared by another student, and except with permission of the instructor, no paper or work of any type submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of another course may be used a second time to satisfy a requirement of any course. No assistance is to be obtained from commercial organizations that sell or lease research help or written papers. With respect to all written work, proper footnotes and attribution are required.