Syllabus for Political Science 428, "Practice of Politics" aka "Baker's Dozen

Fall Semester 2020   **Prof. Ross K. Baker**

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This syllabus is provisional due to uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 virus. We were originally scheduled to meet in person at the library at Woodlawn, the home of the Eagleton Institute of Politics on the Douglass Campus. That may not be possible, but I am assuming that we will find a way to have a stimulating and enjoyable seminar whatever the conditions under which we will be operating.

In the event that lives classes will not be possible I will endeavor to find a way to hold the seminar on line. I'm sure you'll agree that such an arrangement would be inferior to meeting face-to-face.

One feature of past Baker's Dozen classes has been an overnight visit to Washington, D.C. That may simply not be possible but if, somehow, conditions improve I will make every effort to organize the trip. Being in the capital and meeting members of Congress and influential journalists and representatives of interest groups has always provided a memorable event and I hope we can rescue it.

Organization of the Course

You may be amused by the idea that this is a course on current events, but remember that current events are the rough-draft of history. Our job—and it will an enjoyable one—is to become experts in the 2020 election. And although the main event in November will be the presidential contest between President Trump and former Vice-President Biden we will pay equal or even greater attention to the elections for seats in the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives.

To drill down into these elections in each state, we will divide the class into four teams that correspond roughly to the four regions of the country (for our

purposes) The level of competition for seats in Congress will vary from region to region and I have tried to construct four groups in which there will be comparable levels of political competition. Bear in mind that presidential coat-tails will have a profound effect of many of these races especially those in the so-called "battleground states": populous states that have historically been competitive at the presidential level. The number and composition of battleground states is a matter of debate. And we can debate it.

State Groupings:

Group One: Maine, NH, VT, MA, RI, CT, NY, NJ, PA, DE, MD

Group Two: VA, WVA, KY, NC, TN, NC, SC, GA, FL, Al, MS, LA ,AR, TX, OK

Group Three: OH, MI, WI, MN, IL, IN, IA, NE, MO, ND, SD, KS

Group Four: NM, AZ, CA, NV, UT, MT, WY, ID, OR, WA, CO, AK, HI

The Field:

All members of the U.S. House are up for re-election

35 U.S. senators are up for re-election: 23 Republicans and 12 Democrats

The Current partisan balance in the Senate is 53 Republicans and 45 Democrats along with 2 independents who caucus with the Democrats (the balance is effectively 53 to 47) To become the majority party the Democrats would have to defeat three Republican plus win the presidency and the Democratic vice-president which would give them 51.

Which Senate seats are competitive?

Answering this question is more of an art than a science. Republican senators in the following states could be vulnerable: ME, AZ, CO, IA, MT, NC. One Democrat seems doomed to defeat in AL.

As for the House, the Democrats enjoy a comfortable 233-197 majority. There are 5 vacant seats.

We will be paying special attention to competitive seats in both the House and Senate but these may change.

To help us understand both the structure and function of congressional elections and in-depth k knowledge of the individuals we have two books:

The first is <u>The Almanac of American Politics </u>(National Journal, 2020)

This book is the required desk equipment for anyone interested in U.S. Politics. It provides up-to-date information on members of the House and Senate and detailed information about the congressional districts (including maps) that provides demographic information, voting history, and many other useful data including committee assignments, previous election results, and seniority. This will be your Bible.

The second book is the <u>Politics of Congressional Elections </u>by Gary Jacobson and Jamie Carson. Rowman and Littlefield, 2020.

This is the "political sciency" text that provides the research results on decades of studies of congressional elections including such things as campaign finance (PACs and Super PACs and "dark money", etc. It also explores in depth the ingredients of the phenomenon known as "incumbent advantage" and also advertising techniques.

This will be the book from which you get your reading assignments. The Almanac

is your reference book for class discussions and your final paper.

<u>The Weekly Reports</u>

At each session we will go around the class and each of you will discuss developments in your region of the country or any observations about the presidential election.

You'll be assisted by an abundance of free (or almost free) online material from the following online sites:

The New York Times, The Washington Post, Politico, Roll Call, The Hill, Axios, USA Today plus regional news sites from the areas you will be covering.

Many of these sites are either free or have modest paywalls.

The Final Paper

This is the only written assignment you will have. Writing it will test not only your knowledge of how the congressional campaigns were conducted in the four regions of the country but also you your ability to **work well with others** because you will be asked to pick and region of the country and monitor their campaign activity there from week to week but also to present, at the end of the semester, a report on the activity and outcomes in your region and write it up with the other members of your group. *Note: A good way to get started is for each regional group to divide up the states.*

Working together with others on your team gives you an opportunity to get to know your classmates and enables me to answer that question that I am asked to address in all requests for letters of recommendation: does this person work well with others. It also helps you to build up a network of politically-minded people who you might want to stay in touch with after graduation.

A Personal Note: This class has always been a great deal of fun. It's a group of people interested in politics who sit around for three hours on a Wednesday

And talk informally about the great American pageant that unfolds in a national election.

Note of Caution: If we are forced to conduct is course on Zoom or Webex it will obviously be a different kind of course.

Schedule of Class Meetings

September 2: Introductory meeting. General discussion of the terrain of the 2020 elections and make you choice of which region you would like to cover. Reading assignment for next class: Jacobson and Carson, pp. 1-66

September 9: Discussion of what regions you have chosen and which individual states you will be covering. Discussion of the readings in Jacobson and Carson. Reading assignment for next meeting: Jacobson and Carson, pp. 66-115.

September 16: Reports of campaign developments in your region/state. Readings for next session: Jacobson and Carson, pp. 115-149.

September 23: Reports of developments in your region and the presidential contest. Reading for next session: Jacobson and Carson, pp. 149-186.

September 30: Reports on developments in your region/state. Readings for next session: Jacobson and Carson, pp 187-221.

October 7: Reports and discussion of the relationship between presidential candidate activity and the House and Senate campaigns. Readings for next session; Jacobson and Carson, pp. 221-257.

October 14: Descriptive and virtual representation, majority-minority districts. Race, ethnicity and political power. Readings for next session: Jacobson and Carson, pp. 559-302

October21: Here's where it gets really interesting: Your prediction, or forecasts for the region/states you have been covering.

October 28: Predictions and Forecasts (Continued)

November 4: After-action reports: How your predictions measured up to the outcomes.

November 11: Discussion of outcomes (continued)

November 18: Discussion of outcomes (continued)

November 25: No Class; Thanksgiving Break

December 2: Presentation of Group reports

December 9: (Final Meeting) Presentation of Group reports.

December 15: Turn in final papers.

September 16

September 23

September 30

October 7

October 14

October 21

October 28: Here is when you have to go on record with your predictions of the election that will take place on November 3.

November 4: Here is where we begin to report what happened and to figure out why. This and all subsequent meetings will be devoted to reports from the four groups.