



EXPOS

2020



The 2020 Election and American Democracy

It's a cliché for pundits and politicians to declare that each election is the most important in our lifetimes, maybe all of American history – at least, that is, until the next one. Even so, it's easier than usual to make the argument that the 2020 Election finds American democracy at a crossroads. President Trump's bid for re-election was bound to be contentious, given the shocking upset that brought him to the White House in 2016 and the divisive character of his policies and rhetoric. Less expected was that the 2020 Election would be held amidst a deadly pandemic that has ground normal life to a halt and raised uncertainty about how to conduct the vote safely and fairly. Or that the preceding summer would see a national reckoning with systemic racism and police brutality. Consider that all of this occurs within a political climate of intense polarization, refracted in a media environment which frequently distorts reality to fit partisan narratives, and it is clear that the 2020 Election will test America's democracy like none before. And yet, for all that makes this election unique, we have arrived at this critical juncture as a result of forces that are deeply rooted in our nation's history, from the bitter residue of the 2016 Election, to the unfinished work of the Civil Rights Movement, to paradoxes of democratic citizenship that date back to the nation's founding.

Whatever happens, we'll be studying this election for years to come. But only you will have the chance to study it as it happens.

The Course (And Why You Should Take It!)

Just as this election presents a unique moment in our nation's history, this Expos course will be a one-of-a-kind experience: this fall, we have the opportunity to watch history unfold before

our eyes and reflect on the experience together. In the classroom, we'll be engaging with work by political scientists, historians, journalists, documentarians, activists, and more, all the better to help us understand the stakes of the 2020 Election and the wider issues it raises about participation, representation, citizenship, and equality. Each of our writing assignments will give you a chance to think through fundamental questions about the power of your vote and the future of American democracy – and all the while, you and your classmates will watch the answers unfold in real time.

And by the way – we won't just be watching from the sidelines. Many of you are going to be casting your first ever votes in this election, and others will be following an election closely for the first time - either way, it's an experience that will define your generation. As an [Engaged Scholarship](#) Expos Course, "Expos 2020" will challenge you to make connections, start conversations, and find your own way to get involved in the action. That could mean contributing to voter activation efforts like the [Harvard Votes Challenge](#), talking to potential voters at Harvard or in your home community, or creating resources to help your peers vote early, absentee, or safely in person.

Whether the election has you feeling anxious, excited, or whether you're unsure how to feel at all, taking this course could be a great way to channel your energy into something constructive and empowering. Let's face it: a lot of us are going to be obsessing over the polls and headlines anyway, so instead of letting that distract you from your coursework, why not make it part of your coursework? And if you're *not* usually the type to geek out about politics – or maybe you're new to the American politics scene – then this course is a perfect chance to find out what all the fuss is about.

The "Expos 2020" Experience

In the first unit of the course, you'll be writing about voting as a right and as a responsibility. We'll consider the ideal of full and equal participation from the Constitution to the [Voting Rights Act of 1965](#) to the present day. Our readings will address barriers to the ideal of full and equal participation - such as low voter turnout, voter suppression, gerrymandering, and the Electoral College - and assess potential solutions, from the seemingly common-sense to the deeply controversial. Some of the questions you might choose to explore in your first paper include:

- [What is democracy](#) anyway?
- Why do [so few](#) Americans vote?
- Are we doing enough to [protect the right to vote](#)?
- Would it help if the [Electoral College](#) was abolished? If voting was [mandatory](#)? If we [lowered the voting age to 16](#)?
- What does the right to vote mean to [your generation](#)?

The second unit will challenge you to zoom out from the polls and take a broader view of the American democracy and the challenges it faces in the twenty-first century. As a class, we'll engage with cutting edge research on topics like polarization, authoritarianism, inequality, and the influence of money in politics. These readings will lay the groundwork for you to conduct original research and analysis on American politics in 2020 and beyond. In this part of the course, you'll have the freedom to develop an independent research project, along with the support and training you need to make the project a success. Some of the questions you might grapple with include:

- Could [political polarization](#) undermine American democracy – or even your [dating life](#)?
- How much does money matter in politics? Is democracy [for sale](#)?
- Does [the majority still rule](#)? Should it?
- How will democracy change as America [grows more diverse](#)?
- Does [the majority still rule](#)? Should it?
- Is America becoming more [authoritarian](#)? What would that look like? And what could we do about it?

Along the way, we'll be cataloguing our predictions and reactions as the electoral drama unfolds, curating our own archive of news items and campaign materials, and reflecting on our part in the process from the unique vantage of point of the University, where many students will be casting their ballots for the first time. This work will provide the materials for our third unit capstone, where students will contribute to a collaborative project that blends public writing with visual media and compose a personal reflection discussing their experience of this historic moment. As a class we'll decide how we want to bring our work together, but options include making an interactive map or timeline, producing a short film, or creating a profile of the voters who will decide this momentous election. The wizards at the [Bok Learning Lab](#) will support us in making a pro-level project that we'll be proud to look back on.

Your Voice, Your Choice

Here's one thing you should know up front: "Expos 2020" is a class that will depend on your active participation (just like democracy). So as the class progresses, I'll ask you to find connections between our in-class work and current events, offer opportunities for students to lead the discussion, and give you an active role in shaping our capstone project. And when it comes to your essays, you'll be collaborating with your classmates through workshops and peer-review groups, as well as working with one-on-one with me to develop and revise your papers, to develop an exciting research agenda, and to define your role in the capstone project. My hope is that all of this adds up to an experience you'll find more meaningful because it reflects the unique perspectives and interests that you and your classmates bring to the course.

But it won't always be easy - so come ready for a challenge. This is a class that's going to require you to take initiative, to take risks, and more than likely to have some hard and frank conversations along the way. But the pay-off is that you'll have the chance to develop your voice as a writer, scholar, and citizen all at once, plus unique opportunities to make that voice heard in ways that go beyond the academic essay.

If you want to learn more about the course, shoot me an email at mbenjamincole@fas.harvard.edu. I'm happy to answer your questions or set up a time where we can talk over Zoom during the shopping week. I hope you'll consider making "Expos 2020" part of your first-year experience. And whether you decide to take the class or not, [**REGISTER TO VOTE!**](#)