

17.251
Fall 2008
Paper assignment

Due date: December 5, 11:59 p.m.
Submission format: e-mail, in Word or pdf format.

Overview

The upcoming congressional election will be important and interesting, from a number of perspectives. You will be responsible for taking a broad topic that is pertinent to the study of Congress and writing a 12–15 page paper about it in the context of the 2008 congressional election. Topics you might write about include new patterns of campaign finance, membership turnover, congressional redistricting, the performance of statistical models predicting the 2008 outcome, and “coattails” in the 2008 election.

Choosing the topic

You must run the topic by me for approval, so the sooner you get that taken care of the better. As I say in the overview, I want you to take a topic that we cover in class and write a paper that applies the outcome of the 2008 election to that topic. The most obvious set of papers concern elections themselves — patterns concerning candidates, voters, campaign finance, and redistricting. Less obvious, but still fun and instructive, are topics that focus on how the internal dynamics of the chamber will be affected by the results. This would include things like how turnover will affect committee and party leadership, the strength and cohesion of the parties, etc.

If I have not approved your topic by the date of the midterm, I doubt you (or I) will be happy with the paper you write.

Sources

I intend this to be a good, old fashioned “term paper.” That means I expect you to dip into a combination of sources that range from congressional documents to CQ Weekly to books and journal articles. Each paper will be different in the details. There is an essay at the back of my book about doing congressional research. Consult it.

Writing style

I expect your paper to conform to three sets of style books. Most generally, on matters of usage and style, rely on Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style*. For general matters of what the paper should look like (margins, headings, etc.) use Kate Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses and Dissertations*. (Just for future reference, Turabian is the “college paper” version of the *Chicago Manual of Style*. If you intend to continue writing seriously, I’d suggest getting a copy and internalizing it.) Turabian also has good advice on usage. On citations, rely on the APSA’s *The Style Manual for Political Science*. The Writing Center at the University of Wisconsin has a very good summary of the APSA citation rules at the following URL: <http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/DocAPSA.html>

Academic integrity

It is important that the work in the paper be your own. But, it's also appropriate to ask for some help. So, here are the guidelines.

The biggest issue is always plagiarism. Plagiarism is the appropriation of someone else's ideas or words as your own. Within the academic world, this is the worst offence you can commit. At some universities, like the University of Virginia, one infraction leads to expulsion and banishment forever from that university. MIT doesn't do it this way, but this is my rule: If you plagiarize a paper, you fail the class.

When in doubt, err on the side of attribution. The two basic rules are these:

- If you use someone else's language exactly, you must display it, or put it in quotes, and provide guidance about where precisely the reader can find it.
- If you make a claim that is not common knowledge, you must provide a citation to it.

The MIT Writing and Communication Center web site has links to a couple of very good web sites that deal with how to avoid plagiarism. Check out <http://mit.edu/writing/NEW/Citation/plagiarism.html>.

Another issue is receiving help from someone else. It is fine with me if you show a draft of your paper to a friend (or the Writing Center) and seek feedback concerning style and usage. It is also fine if you bounce ideas off a friend. If you do, make sure it is your words that go on the page. Just to be safe, you should thank anyone who gave you assistance in writing the paper, in the very first footnote or at the end of the paper, where the citations begin.