

Lifelong Learning Collaborative Course Syllabus
HOW WE ELECT OUR PRESIDENTS
Spring, 2017

When: Thursdays, 1:00-3:00 pm at Temple Beth El
March 9-May 11, 2017

Coordinators: Dick and Sheila Brush

Course Description

The 2016 election was a shocker –for pundits, pollsters, party leaders and the American people. No matter what our political leanings, the 2016 presidential campaign and its results left many of us with troubling questions. This class offers an opportunity to learn more about our current election process, to better understand the various forces that influence the outcome of presidential elections and to discuss together some of the suggestions that are being considered for revisions to the process. We'll build a foundation for our exploration by looking at what our Founding Fathers envisioned and at the basic provisions for presidential elections established in our Constitution. Then we'll look at the evolution of the processes that make our American system unique – the Electoral College, the two-party system, primaries and caucuses and conventions. Next we'll get into campaigns themselves – how they're structured, what they cost and how they're financed – and the impact of current campaign financing laws and traditional and social media on the campaigns. Finally, we'll consider changing voter demographics, the voting process and questions about voter engagement, voter suppression and voter fraud.

What is the goal for the class?

To increase our knowledge of the presidential election process and our awareness of different factors that impact the process so we can be better informed citizens and voters.

Format

Each participant is asked to act as the leader for one session. The session leader will research the session topic, present key material and lead a class discussion. On the next pages, we have provided brief descriptions of session topics to give you an idea of material you might want to consider covering. These descriptions are offered as suggestions – it's up to you to decide exactly what you want to cover in your session.

Prior to each class, all participants will be encouraged to read short (about 5 pages) background articles which will be provided for each topic.

BRIEF DESCRIPTIONS OF SESSION TOPICS

Thursday, March 9

Class 1, Session 1: Introductions

Housekeeping details, class overview, participant introductions, resources

Class 1, Session 2: The thinking behind the Founding Fathers' design of our presidential election process

Thursday, March 16

Class 2, Session 1: The Electoral College

This session will look at how the Constitutional provision that each state appoint electors to vote for president and vice president has evolved into our current Elector College system and review how the system currently works in the different states.

Class 2, Session 2: The Two-Party System

While the Founding Fathers did not necessarily envision political parties, early in our history rivalries surfaced and two political parties emerged. This session might include examining the changing face of the two political parties over the years, exploring the question of why we have remained a two-party system while other democracies have tended to foster multiple political parties, looking at the role of the Democratic and Republican National Committees and/or the challenges of mounting a third-party candidacy under the current system.

Thursday, March 23

Class 3, Session 1: Primaries and Caucuses

In our political system, the political parties organize the nominating process, and the national parties have largely delegated that process to the state level. This has led to a wide variety of state-run primaries and caucuses. This session might include an explanation of how primaries and caucuses work from state to state, how the primary/caucus process affects the length of our campaign season, problems people perceive with the current system, and changes that have been suggested.

Class 3, Session 2: The Electoral College vs Popular Vote

In recent years there have been a number of suggestions that it's time to change our method of electing presidents from the elector college to a popular vote. This session will explore the pros and cons of the two approaches and get into the question of what would have to be done to change our current system.

Thursday, March 30

Class 4, Session 1: The Roles of National, State and Local Party Committees

The Democratic and Republican Parties are organized at the national, state and local levels. We have invited guest speakers from both parties to discuss the roles of the national, state and local organizations and the relationship between the different levels, particularly in respect to Presidential elections.

Class 4, Session 2: Elements of a Campaign

A presidential campaign has many components, including policy research and development, fundraising, communications, obtaining endorsements, organizing events, and getting out the vote. This session might provide an overview of the different elements and/or look at some game-changing campaigns that altered the way future campaigns would be organized.

Thursday, April 6

Class 5, Session 1: What campaigns cost and how they're financed

The cost of presidential campaigns has skyrocketed in the last few decades, and recent campaigns have seen the emergence of new fundraising tools and strategies. Small donations solicited over the internet were hallmarks of both Obama campaigns and more recently of Bernie Sanders' campaign. This session could explore the reasons behind soaring campaign costs, explain traditional and innovative fundraising approaches and how fundraising is regulated, and raise questions such as whether there should be limits on campaign financing.

Class 5, Session 2: Citizens United, Super PACS and "Dark Money"

On January 2, 2010, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in a 5-4 decision that freedom of speech prohibited the government from restricting independent political expenditures by non-profit corporations. This principle has now been extended to for-profit corporations, labor unions and other associations and has led to the rise of SuperPACS and vast amounts of money spent on political campaigns. What have been the impacts of this decision on campaigns, political advertising, and other campaign functions?

Thursday, April 13

Class 6, Session 1: Role of Traditional Media (Newspapers, TV, Radio)

The function of the press is a fundamental principle of American democracy, and until recent years the American public depended on, and trusted, traditional media (newspapers, magazines, network TV and radio) to provide coverage of political campaigns. The 2016 campaign, however, underscored the sharp decline of public trust in the media. This session could explore the historical role traditional media has played and how and why public faith in the media has eroded.

Class 6, Session 2: Televised Debates

The first televised presidential debate, between Richard Nixon and John Kennedy on September 26, 1960, was watched by 65-70 million viewers and many believe it contributed to Kennedy's subsequent victory. Since that time every presidential campaign has featured one or more debates. Some believe they continue to be important factors in the campaign; others believe their effect is diminishing; many question the current structure of the debates. This session could look at who is actually responsible for organizing debates, highlight memorable debate moments over history, and/or have a class discussion about the most effective way to structure debates going forward.

Thursday, April 20

Class 7, Session 1: The impact of social media on campaigns and elections

Our guest speaker, a political science professor, will explain the workings of social media such as Facebook and Twitter so that we can all better understand what makes these applications both powerful campaign tools and potentially dangerous purveyors of misinformation.

Class 7, Session 2: Fake news, false news and fact-checking

The 2016 election campaign saw many examples of websites and other media that deliberately published hoaxes, propaganda and disinformation. Some of this "fake news" even found its way into mainstream media and social media, such as Facebook. In addition, there were numerous examples of candidates in both parties who offered partially false information. This session could look at examples of fake news and false news, examine the effects that fake news and false news have on campaigns, and discuss questions such as whether it's up to traditional and social media to "police" news stories and, if so, how that should be done.

Thursday, April 27

Class 8, Session 1: How the voting process works

Our guest speaker, RI's Secretary of State Nellie Gorbea and her Director of Elections, will take us through the voting process – from voter registration through the mechanics of collecting votes to tallying the results – and talk about the perception of fraud in the voting process.

Class 8, Session 2: Voter demographics and turnout

Voter demographics are changing. Presidential election voter turnout hit a 20-year low in 2016 – 55.4%. In 2008 it was 67.7%. Why is American presidential election voter turnout so low compared to other Western democracies, many of which have turnouts of over 80%? This session is an opportunity to look at both changes in voter demographics and at approaches that could be used to increase voter turnout. What can we learn from other countries? Who would have to institute these changes?

Thursday, May 4

Class 9, Session 1: How to promote a better informed electorate

Everyone agrees that a well-informed electorate is essential for a thriving democracy. With the proliferation of fake news and false news and the complex policies discussed during presidential campaigns, the need for a well-informed electorate is greater than ever. How can we ensure that? Once-required high school civics classes have largely disappeared from current curricula. Should civics be made mandatory again?

Class 9, Session 2: The Evolving Role of the US President

Dianne Isenberg is going to talk about how the Presidency has changed over time.

Thursday, May 11

Class 10: Lunch and discussion

GUIDELINES FOR PRESENTATIONS

Each weekly class will be divided into two sessions, with a break between sessions. We have tried to organize the session topics into a logical order, and so presentations will need to be done in specific classes. For example, if you want to present the session on Primaries and Caucuses, you will need to do so in the 3rd class. So please think about your schedule as well as your interests when selecting a topic.

By the way, if you have an idea for a topic that's not on the schedule, that's great – we've intentionally left a session on March 30th and a session on May 4th as "Open Topics," so we can schedule you for one of those sessions.

We encourage you to select your topic and week early! Please email us as soon as you know what session you'd like to present.

Your total session should be no more than 45 minutes in length. We really want to encourage active discussion during the sessions, so please be sure to include 15-20 minutes of discussion time.

There are different formats you can use for your presentation. For example, a session that explains how a process works would probably lend itself to powerpoint or class handouts. Or you may find a great YouTube piece or video clip on your topic. Talk to us if you need ideas or suggestions. And, if you don't have a lot of experience with powerpoint or using video clips, we're happy to provide some guidance.

As coordinators, we are assembling a list of short background readings for each class. We plan to have an initial list ready in a couple of weeks, but if you find one or two particularly good resources that you think participants might like to read in advance of your session, we'll welcome your additions to the list.

NOTE: The LLC webpage has a number of good resources for session presenters. Go to www.lifelonglearningcollaborative.com and click on Member Resources in the lefthand column.