

Democracy's Data: Analytics and Insights into American Elections

[84-355] | Fall 2026

Prof. Jonathan Cervas

Updated: August 20, 2026

Professor Jonathan Cervas
Office: Posner Hall 374
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Location: PH A21A
Time: Tuesday & Thursday 11:00a-12:20p Eastern
Office Hours: Wed 10:30a-12:30p & 1:30p-3:30p, and by appointment (ar-
range via email)
CMU Academic Calendar

The most up-to-date version of this **syllabus can be found here**: <https://jcervas.github.io/teaching/2026-2027/class-cmu-2026-84-355/readme.html>

Prerequisites: 36-200 Reasoning with Data
Course Relevance: DC: *Perspectives on Justice and Injustice*

August	September	October	November	December
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1	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	1 2 3 4 5
2 3 4 5 6 7 8	6 7 8 9 10 11 12	4 5 6 7 8 9 10	8 9 10 11 12 13 14	6 7 8 9 10 11 12
9 10 11 12 13 14 15	13 14 15 16 17 18 19	11 12 13 14 15 16 17	15 16 17 18 19 20 21	13 14 15 16 17 18 19
16 17 18 19 20 21 22	20 21 22 23 24 25 26	18 19 20 21 22 23 24	22 23 24 25 26 27 28	20 21 22 23 24 25 26
23 24 25 26 27 28 29	27 28 29 30	25 26 27 28 29 30 31	29 30	27 28 29 30 31
30 31				
in person	remote	no class		

25 meetings, Tuesdays and Thursdays. One of them, **Tue, Nov 24**, meets on Zoom rather than in the room. The tinted days are closures — fall break, Democracy Day, Thanksgiving, and the Constitution Day Symposium.

How American elections actually work, taught through the data they produce. Tuesdays we read; Thursdays we put real election data on the screen and work out what it shows — through the 2026 midterms, live.

01 Assessment

The course grade will be a weighted average of the following components:

Category	Percent of Final Grade
Participation & Attendance	15%
Discussion Board	20%
Weekly Data Contributions	10%
Three Tests (10% each)	30%
Data Journalism Project	25%

What each one is:

- **Participation & Attendance** — Being here, prepared, and in the conversation — on both days.
- **Discussion Board** — By Friday night each week, one post about any of the data we talked about: the lab, a classmate's data slide, a figure in the reading. Something that surprised you, something we missed, something you do not understand, or an answer to somebody else's question. **A few sentences to a paragraph** — enough to show you engaged with what we did. One post is full credit.
- **Weekly Data Contributions** — Find data bearing on the question Tuesday ended with, name the source, and post it as a slide before Thursday. Each week two slides are drawn at random and worked through in class, and nobody presents the data they found themselves. **If your name is drawn and you are absent or have no slide, it costs 25% of your attendance grade for the semester** — expect your own data to come up once or twice all term. At the end of term you hand in a **newsletter**: every piece of data you found, each with a short write-up. **Build it as you go** — it is a paragraph a week, and an evening's work if you leave it all to December.
- **Three Tests** — In class, on paper, and **on the textbook only**. Test 1 on **Tue, Oct 20** (Sides et al., Chapters 1–5), Test 2 on **Tue, Nov 10** (Chapters 6–9), Test 3 on **Thu, Dec 3** (Chapters 10–13). We read the book straight through in its own order, so each test is a block of consecutive chapters: each covers the chapters read since the last one, **none is cumulative**, and every chapter appears on exactly one test. There is no final exam.

- **Data Journalism Project** — A data-driven news story about a trend or issue in electoral processes. Runs in three parts — draft, peer review, final — and **most of the marks are on the first two**. It is the only substantial piece of writing this term.

02 Due Dates

Assignment	Due
Data slide	before each Thursday
Discussion board post	Friday, 11:59 p.m. , each week
Data Session 4 board post (no Thursday session)	Tue, Sep 22 — no session to follow that week, so you get the weekend
Week 14 board post (Thanksgiving)	Mon, Nov 30 — Tuesday is the lab, and there is no Thursday
Data journalism: pitch	Thu, Oct 8 , in class
Test 1 — Ch. 1-5	Tue, Oct 20 , in class
Test 2 — Ch. 6-9	Tue, Nov 10 , in class
Data journalism: draft	Thu, Nov 19 — the last session before the break
Data journalism: peer reviews (two)	Tue, Dec 1
Test 3 — Ch. 10-13	Thu, Dec 3 , in class
Data newsletter	Fri, Dec 4 — the last day of classes
Data journalism: final	Fri, Dec 11 — after the last session

There is no final exam.

03 The Essentials

- **Required text:** Sides, Shaw, Grossmann & Lipsitz, *Campaigns and Elections* (W. W. Norton). Everything else is posted on Canvas — there is nothing else to buy.
- **No coding, and nothing to install.** Every lab arrives as a prepared data brief with the results already in front of you; what you do is work out what they show.
- **Tests are on the textbook only** — in class, on paper.
- **First day, in class:** the Cervas Election Study — link in **Canvas, under Assignments**; screenshot the confirmation screen for credit.

04 The Full Syllabus

The session-by-session schedule, every reading and lab, assignment details, and all policies:

<https://jcervas.github.io/teaching/2026-2027/class-cmu-2026-84-355/readme.html>