



# ISSUES FOR THE 2008 ELECTION

## Discussion Questions and Paper Assignment

### American Politics and Government (SL 261) – Fall 2008

We will be taking an in-depth look at the key issues surrounding the 2008 elections. This will be integrated into the course in two ways. First, these topics will form the basis for in-class discussions each week. Secondly, you will write papers on two of these topics (or an approved alternative). You will also have the option to revise and resubmit these papers for a potentially higher grade (see below).

The learning objectives of this assignment are multiple. In terms of American politics, you should emerge with a better understanding of the key issues in current political discourse as well as a sense of how media presentation, public opinion, party organization and strategy, candidates and campaigns, etc. interact to produce both electoral outcomes and policy changes. In terms of broader skills, this assignment will help you learn how to gather source material and decipher its utility; summarize complex arguments; hone your skills at presenting a reasoned, analytically sound, empirically valid, and well written essay; and, if you take advantage of the resubmission option, give you experience in incorporating criticism and revising written work.

**ISSUES FOR THE 2008 ELECTION:** The questions listed represent the key points of contention related to each issue. When gathering sources for in-class discussions, you should be *looking for sources that help to answer these questions* as these will help you get to the substance of the issue.

#### **National Security (Week 1)**

Has the 'surge' in Iraq been a success? Are we now winning the war? Should we set a timetable for withdraw from Iraq?

Are we doing enough to stabilize Afghanistan? How do we deal with the problem of Pakistan?

Has al Qaeda been effectively boxed in? Are we winning the larger War on Terror?

Should we pursue diplomatic negotiations with regimes like Iran and North Korea that are looking to develop WMD?

Does China pose a strategic threat to the US? What about an increasingly bellicose Russia?

Has America's standing in the world and alliance relations been badly harmed by the Bush Administration's policies? If so, how should we go about fixing these?

Given our military commitments, should the US consider re-imposing the draft?

*Are we safer now than we were eight years ago?*

#### **The Economy (Week 2)**

What is the cause of America's current economic downturn? Why do we have a 'credit crunch' and a 'housing crisis'? What policies would best address the current economic problems?

Should the Bush tax cuts be allowed to expire (raising taxes) or be permanently extended?

What is 'globalization' and is it something to be feared or embraced? Is outsourcing a threat to the 'American Dream' of a middle class life?

Why is the US budget deficit so high? Is the budget deficit a threat to American prosperity?

Should the federal government take active steps to lower the price of gas?

*How bad is the economy and what should the government do about it?*

#### **Energy and Climate Change (Week 4)**

Should the government actively pursue policies to achieve energy independence?

Should the US expand offshore drilling and drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Reserve (ANWR)?

Which is the most viable means of alternative energy? Nuclear? Wind? Solar? Biofuels? Etc.

Do you believe that greenhouse gas emissions must be drastically reduced within the next few years in order to avoid catastrophic climate change?

What sorts of policies should the government impose (if any) to help combat climate change?

Would you be willing to reduce your consumption in order to combat climate change?

Should the US sign on to international agreements (such the Kyoto Treaty) that specify reductions in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions?

*Can we have energy independence AND combat climate change?*

#### **Government Reform (Week 5)**

Is Washington fundamentally corrupt? If so, how?

Congress has exceptionally low approval ratings. In electoral terms, is the most harmful to Democrats (who control both the House and Senate), Republicans, or both?

John McCain has pegged himself as a reform candidate. Can he do this effectively when he represents the party in power?

Barack Obama also portrays himself as a reformer. Does his record in the Senate support this argument?

Have reforms of campaign finance laws (i.e., McCain-Feingold) made matters worse or better?

What reforms would you like to see in the structure or process of government? How and why would this make Washington more responsive and/or effective?

*If the general public has a negative view of Washington, which party does this help or hurt the most?*

**DISCUSSION ASSIGNMENT:** The questions listed for each issue above are a guide; you should attempt to gather sources that answer some or all of these questions. Beyond the obvious Google searches, sources can be found by consulting the news and election links listed on the course webpage. Another excellent source is the Academic Search Premier database on the Logan Library Website. This can be reached via the Research Center database dropdown menu on the Library's main page. **For each discussion, you are required to bring printed copies of three sources to class with the "Student Sources Worksheet" (see course website), which asks you to summarize the key points of those sources. No more than two of these sources can be websites.**

**PAPER ASSIGNMENT:** You will be writing TWO papers based on the key issues surrounding the upcoming elections. You may choose any two topics listed in the syllabus under "Issues for the Election" on which to write or, if you are interested in some other key issue (i.e., gay marriage, abortion), you may write on that *with my prior approval* (but the topic you pick must be significant in the upcoming election). Your paper need not cover every question listed in the issue areas above, but only a sub-set. That is, you don't have to address every national security issue; you can focus on the war in Iraq (or taxes, or energy independence, etc.). Papers may be turned in at any time, but your **first paper is due no later than Monday, September 29 (at the start of class)** and **your second paper is due no later than Monday, October 13 (at the start of class)**. Anyone missing either of the paper due dates will receive a zero for that paper.

Your assignment is an argumentative essay, but it is also a research paper and you are *expected* to do outside research. **At a minimum, your paper should have at least five separate sources and no more than two should be websites.** Given that you are required to bring three sources to each discussion, this should not be difficult. Do keep in mind, however, that you do not get any bonus for simply doing the *minimum*. Your goal should be to provide references for any factual information needed to support your

argument. For example, if you claim that global warming is exaggerated, you need to present credible data (cited with an appropriate source) to show that and explain why contrary arguments are not correct.

**PAPER FORMAT:** Again, you are required write two essays. Regardless of which issues you choose your papers should be divided into the following sections and address the general questions listed for each.

- **Introductory Paragraph:** An opening paragraph that specifies the topic and previews what you are going to argue in the sections that follow.
- **The Issue:** What the key questions and debates surrounding this issue? What are the main policy proposals currently being debated? What are the arguments for and against these proposals?
- **My Position:** What is your stance on the issue? What do you think would be the best policy to pursue and why?
- **The Politics of \_\_\_\_\_:** How do you think this issue will play out politically? What is public opinion on this issue? How salient is it to the average voter? Will this issue directly impact the 2008 elections? If so, how? Which party will likely benefit?
- **Concluding Paragraph:** Summarizes the arguments discussed above and draws out the key point(s) for the reader.

Papers should be typed, double-spaced (with normal margins and fonts), include a cover page, and be **stapled**. (No paper clips or folders please!!!) There is no required minimum or maximum length for these papers, but it is doubtful that you will be able to effectively address any of these issues in less than five pages. Equally, if you are getting up to ten or eleven pages you should perhaps think about tightening your arguments and deleting superfluous points. Your essay will be graded on the quality and depth of your research; your ability to present a reasoned, analytically sound, and empirically valid argument; and the clarity and coherence of your writing. A poorly written essay with multiple mistakes cannot make an intelligent and persuasive argument. Spelling and grammar thus are relevant to your grade.

**RESUBMISSION OPTION:** Additionally, your papers can be revised and resubmitted for regarding. However, you **must include the original paper with my comments** and you will only receive a higher grade if the revised version shows a **significant improvement** over the original. This includes not only correcting all minor errors in terms of spelling, grammar, citation formats, etc., but also improving the *substance* of your essay. This may require you to rewrite sections of your essay and/or seek additional sources for your arguments, among other things. In short, you are expected to address *all* the comments I made on your first draft. Papers may be resubmitted at any time, but are **due no later than Friday, November 7 (at the start of class)**.

**Most importantly, talk to me if you have any questions!!!** You are also very much encouraged to discuss your papers with me prior to turning them in. This almost always results in a higher grade.