

The Politics of Direct Democracy
POS 4931 & POS 6279 (362614/28159)

Fall 2025

Professor: Dr. Daniel A. Smith

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Office: Anderson Hall 303

Class: T 8:30-10:20am & R 9:35-10:20am

Classroom: MAT 119

Office hours: T 10:30-noon & by appt.

1 Course Description

This course is intended to provide undergraduate and graduate students with a scholarly and practical overview of direct democracy, focusing on statewide ballot measures in the American states, and Florida in particular. It is our goal not only to critically assess whether direct democracy promotes democratic norms and representative public policies, but also to investigate the “educative” and “spillover” effects of the process itself. Some of the central questions we will address include: What are the origins and historical development of direct democracy in the American states? How are ballot measures placed on the ballot, by whom, and for what reasons? What are the direct and indirect effects of the initiative process in the making of public policy? How do systems of direct democracy—and the regulation of direct democracy—differ across the states? What is the role of money and the media in direct democracy contests? How informed is the public about ballot questions and can citizens make rational decisions? Are minority rights jeopardized by direct democracy’s majoritarian nature? What are the educative effects of direct democracy, and do ballot measures have spillover effects on candidate elections? And perhaps most significantly, does direct democracy complement or undermine our system of representative democracy? These are not easy questions to answer, as the study of direct democracy is anything but settled.

Course Overview In this course we will be exposed to the theory and practice of direct democracy in the American States, with a particular focus on direct democracy in Florida. We will be thinking about direct democracy analytically, from the perspective of scholars, but students will have the opportunity for hands-on analysis of documents and data.

Prerequisites None. This course has a mix of advanced undergraduates and M.A. and Ph.D. students. The expectations and goals of these sub-populations may at times vary, but I will do my best to ensure that this seminar caters to your educational and professional interests.

UF Policies This course complies with all UF academic policies. For information on those policies and for resources for students, please see this link (<https://syllabus.ufl.edu/syllabus-policy/uf-syllabus-policy-links/>). Students may only attend classes if they are registered officially or approved to audit with evidence of having paid audit fees.

Course Materials All course materials will be provided by Dr. Smith via Canvas, in class, online, or by other means. No books are required for purchase. Students may need to access UF’s VPN to access some materials.

2 Course Objectives

Students are exposed to a variety of readings by scholars and practitioners of direct democracy in the American states, particularly in Florida. Students analyze scholarly readings, primary documents, administrative data, and survey data. Students conduct extensive research on a particular topic. Successful completion of this class results in an understanding of the scholarly literature on direct democracy as well as the practice of direct democracy over time in the American states.

Relation to Program Outcomes This class serves as elective UG credit for the Political Science major. It is most suitable for advanced students with an interest in American politics, as the readings and data we analyze are primarily drawn from United States sources. Students with an international interest should speak with the instructor about the suitability of this class to their educational goals. For graduate students, this course falls within the American field.

Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Identify the characteristics and differences in direct democracy systems in the American states;
- Assess the practice and dynamics of direct democracy over time in the American states;
- Demonstrate theoretical competency in the initiative process in the American states;
- Apply the general theories of direct democracy offered by scholars in class to the practice of the initiative process in Florida and other states;
- Analyze complex documents and data to derive meaningful insights related to real-world, contemporary processes of direct democracy in Florida and other American states;
- Present findings from in-class projects;
- Compare and evaluate data on various aspects of direct democracy.

Course Evaluation At the end of the term, students are expected to provide professional and respectful feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing course evaluations online using the email they receive from GatorEvals, their Canvas course menu under GatorEvals, or the central portal at <https://my-ufl.bluera.com>

3 Course Requirements

All students are expected to show up to class on time, do the readings, think creatively, collaborate in small groups, engage in civil discourse, be accountable, and challenge assumptions.

3.1 Attendance

Students are expected to attend class, take notes, and carry out assignments in class, including accessing online resources (so bring a pen and your laptop). If a student does not participate in at least one of the first two class meetings of the course and has not contacted the department, the student will be dropped from the course, as other students are interested in enrolling.

3.2 Participation

All students are expected to participate in class discussions, which means not only showing up for class, but being fully prepared to critically discuss the required readings and actively engage in in-class projects. Participation is worth 15% of your final grade.

3.3 In-Class Projects

There are 9 (A thru I) in-class projects. Students will be evaluated individually or as a group for each of these projects. Each project is worth 5 points each, which account for a total of 45% of your final grade. It is not possible to earn credit for an in-class project if you're not in class.

3.4 Research Paper/Campaign Plan

A final Research Paper/Campaign Plan (depending on your matriculation status) is worth 40% of your final grade.

3.4.1 Research Paper (Undergrad Students)

Undergrad students will work in teams of two students and will write a 15-20 page research paper expanding on one of the topics covered in class. A two-page research prospectus is due in class on Thursday, October 9. Students are expected to meet with me to discuss their research paper before that date. The two-page research prospectus must state your research question, your tentative argument and hypotheses, and the data and research methods you plan to use, and any foreseeable limitations to your research. Students should also submit a bibliography of sources used for the theoretical section of the paper. On Tuesday, December 2, each team will present their research in class (approximately 10 minutes for each student). The final research paper is due on Monday, December 8, at 5:00pm, uploaded on Canvas. It is possible that I might be interested in collaborating on one of my ongoing research projects, as I have lots of data and have collected many archival materials with enterprising students interested in co-authoring a paper with me after the semester ends.

3.4.2 Campaign Plan (MA Campaigning Students)

MA Political Campaigning students will work in teams of two or three students and will write a 20-30 page campaign plan in support or against an initiative campaign currently ongoing in Florida. Students are expected to meet with me to discuss their plans before Thursday, October 7, when they must submit to me an outline of their campaign plan. The outline should include sections on the overarching strategy, likely political environment, theme and message (including sketches of sample direct mail, online engagement, TikTok, etc.), targeted demographics, fundraising goals, schedule and calendar, polling and

opposition research, voter contact, GOTV plans, and a preliminary budget. Students are expected to analyze campaign finance filings for the measures, analyze current or past exit polls on similar issues, and investigate comparable past ballot initiative campaigns in Florida or other states when preparing their plans. Students will present their campaign plans in class on December 2 (approximately 10 minutes for each student). The final research paper is due on Monday, December 8, at 5:00pm, uploaded on Canvas.

3.4.3 Research Paper (PhD and General MA)

Graduate students (PhD and General MA) will write an original research paper (18-25 pages) on an aspect of direct democracy or a research proposal (18-25 pages) on a topic for further research (specifically for those thinking of writing dissertations on an aspect of direct democracy). A two-page research prospectus is due in class on Thursday, October 9. Students are expected to meet with me to discuss their research paper before that date. The two-page research prospectus must state your research question, your tentative argument and hypotheses, and the data and research methods you plan to use, and any foreseeable limitations to your research. Students should also submit a bibliography of sources used for the theoretical section of the paper. On Tuesday, December 2, Ph.D. students will present their research in class (approximately 10 minutes for each student). The final research paper/proposal is due on Monday, December 6, at 5:00pm, uploaded on Canvas. It is possible that I might be interested in collaborating on one of my ongoing research projects. I have lots of data (aggregate-level, survey, and campaign finance), and I also have collected many archival materials that I will share with enterprising students who are interested in eventually co-authoring a paper with me after the semester.

4 Components and Calculation of the Final Grade

Assignment	Weight
Participation	15%
In-Class Projects (9 total, 5 points each)	45%
Research Paper/Campaign Plan	40%
Total	100%

A	100-92.5	B+	89.4-86.5	C+	79.4-76.5	D+	69.4-66.5	E	59.4-0.0
A-	92.4-89.5	B	86.4-82.5	C	76.4-72.5	D	66.4-62.5		
		B-	82.4-79.5	C-	72.4-69.5	D-	62.4-59.5		

5 Course Schedule

Students are expected to complete all listed readings prior to that day's class.

Week 1: Overview of Course

Thursday, August 21

1. Cronin, "The Paradoxes and Politics of Citizen Initiatives" (1998)

Week 2: Florida I & R in Contemporary Comparative Context

Tuesday, August 26

1. Florida Division of Elections, "Constitutional Amendments/Initiatives" (2025)
2. State Politicians Broaden Attacks on Direct Democracy (2025)

In-Class Assignment A: The Current State of Direct Democracy in the American states.

Thursday, August 28

1. FloridaRighttoCleanWater.org v. Byrd
2. "Federal judge blocks part of Florida's ballot initiatives law"
3. "Florida seeks go-ahead on ballot initiatives law"
4. "Voting-rights groups appeal after judge refused to block parts of Florida's new ballot initiatives law"

Week 3: History of Direct Democracy

Tuesday, September 2

1. Goebel, *A Government of the People* (2002) (available on Canvas)
2. Piott, *Giving Voters a Voice* (2003) (available on Canvas)
3. Matsusaka, *Let the People Rule: How Direct Democracy Can Meet the Populist Challenge* (2022) (available on Canvas)

In-Class Assignment B: Analysis of historical articles on Direct Democracy.

Thursday, September 4

1. Kerber, "The Initiative and Referendum in Florida, 1911-1912" (2003)

Week 4: Precursor of Direct Democracy in Florida

Tuesday, September 9

Archival Visit to Smathers Library. Meeting with UF Archivist Dr. Murphree at 8:30am in Smathers 100. Analysis of primary materials. You will be taking notes.

In-Class Assignment C: Antecedents of Direct Democracy in Florida.

Thursday, September 11

NO CLASS: APSA

In-Class Assignment C: Antecedents of Direct Democracy in Florida.

Week 5: Adoption and of Direct Democracy

Tuesday, September 16

1. Smith & Fridkin, "Delegating Direct Democracy: Interparty Legislative Competition and the Adoption of the Initiative in the American States" (2008)
2. Lawrence, Donovan, & Bowler, "Adopting Direct Democracy: Tests of Competing Explanations of Institutional Change" (2009)
3. Bridges & Kousser, "Where Politicians Gave Power to the People: Adoption of the Citizen Initiative in the U.S. States" (2021)

Thursday, September 18

1. Adkins, "The Same River Twice: A Brief History of How the 1968 Florida Constitution Came to Be and What it Has Become (2016)
2. Jameson & Hosak, "Citizen Initiative in Florida" (1996)

Week 6: Special Interests & Financing Initiative Campaigns

Tuesday, September 23

1. Smith & Lubinski, "Direct Democracy during the Progressive Era" (2002)
2. Garrett & Smith, "Veiled Political Actors and Campaign Disclosure Laws in Direct Democracy" (2005)
3. Damore & Nicholson, "Mobilizing Interests: Group Participation and Competition in Direct Democracy Elections" (2014)

In-Class Assignment D: Who Finances Direct Democracy Campaigns in Florida?

- Initiatives / Amendments / Revisions Database
- "Committee Database Search"

Thursday, September 25

1. de Figueiredo, Ji, & Kousser, "Financing Direct Democracy: Revisiting the Research on Campaign Spending and Citizen Initiatives" (2011)
2. Rogers & Middleton, "Are Ballot Initiative Outcomes Influenced by the Campaigns of Independent Groups? A Precinct-Randomized Field Experiment Showing That They Are" (2014)

Week 7: Regulating Direct Democracy in Florida

Tuesday, September 30

1. Florida's *Initiative Petition Handbook*

In-Class Assignment E: Regulating Direct Democracy in Florida

Thursday, October 2

1. Smith, "Direct Democracy: Regulating the 'Will of the People'" (2012)
2. Bowler & Donovan, "Measuring the Effect of Direct Democracy on State Policy: Not All Initiatives Are Created Equal" (2004)

Week 8: Voting on Initiatives: Do Voters have a Cue?

Tuesday, October 7

1. Bowler & Donovan, *Demanding Choices* (1998) (chapter 1) and Bowler & Donovan, *Demanding Choices* (1998) (chapter 2)
2. Lupia, "Shortcuts versus Encyclopedias" (1994)
3. Nicholson, "The Political Environment and Ballot Proposition Awareness" (2003)
4. Barth, Burnett, & Parry, "Direct Democracy, Educative Effects, and the (Mis)Measurement of Ballot Measure Awareness" (2019)

Thursday, October 9

NO READINGS. Your two-page research prospectus/campaign plan *must* be uploaded to Canvas by 5:00pm on Wednesday, October 8, the day before class. We will be discussing each of your proposals in class.

Week 9: Public Attitudes towards Direct Democracy

Tuesday, October 14

1. Bowler, Donovan, & Karp, "Enraged or Engaged? Preferences for Direct Citizen Participation in Affluent Democracies" (2007)
2. Tolbert, Smith, & Green, "Strategic Voting and Legislative Redistricting Reform" (2009)
3. Dyck & Baldassare, "Process Preferences and Voting in Direct Democratic Elections " (2009)
4. Biggers & Ross, "Strategic considerations and support for direct democracy in the United States" (2024)

In-Class Assignment F: What do Floridians think about Direct Democracy?

Thursday, October 16

NO CLASS: HOMECOMING (Good time to collect survey responses!!)

Week 10: Educated by Initiative?

Tuesday, October 21

1. Smith & Tolbert, *Educated by Initiative* chapter 1 (2004) [All read]
2. Tolbert, McNeal & Smith, "Enhancing Civic Engagement: The Effect of Direct Democracy on Political Participation and Knowledge" (2003)
3. Tolbert & Smith, "The Educative Effects of Ballot Initiatives on Voter Turnout" (2005)
4. Donovan, Tolbert, & Smith, "Political Engagement, Mobilization, and Direct Democracy" (2009)
5. Parry, Smith, & Henry, "The Impact of Petition Signing on Voter Turnout" (2012)
6. Burnett & Kogan, "Familiar Choices: Reconsidering the Institutional Effects of the Direct Initiative" (2012)

Thursday, October 23

1. Schlozman & Yohai, "How Initiatives Don't Always Make Citizens: Ballot Initiatives in the American States, 1978–2004" (2008)
2. Dyck, "Initiated Distrust: Direct Democracy and Trust in Government" (2009)
3. Dyck & Seabrook, "Mobilized by Direct Democracy: Short-Term Versus Long-Term Effects and the Geography of Turnout in Ballot Measure Elections" (2010)
4. Binder & Childers, "Engaged by the Initiative? How the Use of Citizen Initiatives Increases Voter Turnout" (2010)
5. Dyck & Lascher, "Direct Democracy and Political Efficacy Reconsidered" (2009)

Week 11: Spillover Effects of Direct Democracy? Agenda Setting & Priming Candidate Votes

Tuesday, October 28

1. Nicholson, *Voting the Agenda* (2005), chapters 1-2 [All read]
2. Bowler, Segura & Nicholson, "Earthquakes and Aftershocks" (2006)
3. Donovan, Tolbert, & Smith, "Priming Presidential Votes by Direct Democracy" (2008)
4. Smith & Tolbert, "Direct Democracy, Public Opinion, and Candidate Choice" (2010)
5. Biggers, "When Ballot Issues Matter: Social Issue Ballot Measures and Their Impact on Turnout" (2011)

Thursday, October 30

In-Class Assignment G: Measuring Spillover Effects of Direct Democracy in Florida.

Week 12: The Majoritarian Impact of Direct Democracy

Tuesday, November 4

1. Donovan & Bowler, "Direct Democracy and Minority Rights" (1998) [All read]
2. Tolbert & Grummel, "Revisiting the Racial Threat Hypothesis" (2003)
3. Haider-Markel, Querze, & Lindaman, "Lose, Win, or Draw? A Reexamination of Direct Democracy and Minority Rights" (2007)
4. Moore & Ravishankar, "Who Loses in Direct Democracy?" (2011)
5. Lewis, "Bypassing the Representational Filter? Minority Rights Policies under Direct Democracy Institutions in the U.S. States" (2011)
6. Flavin, "Direct Democracy and Political Equality in the American States (2014)

Thursday, November 6

In-Class Assignment H: Are Voters Concerned about Initiatives and Minority Rights?

Week 13: Research Meetings

Tuesday, November 11

NO CLASS: VETERANS DAY

Thursday, November 13

In-Class Assignment H (continued): Are Voters Concerned about Initiatives and Minority Rights?

Week 14: The More Things Change, the More Things Stay the Same

Tuesday, November 18

1. Ballotpedia Webcast, "Citizen Initiatives: The history of giving power to the people"

Thursday, November 20

1. Bernhard, "Does direct democracy increase civic virtues? A systematic literature review" (2024)

In-Class Assignment I: What is the Future of Direct Democracy?

Week 15: Thanksgiving Break

Tuesday, November 25

Thursday, November 27

Week 16: What We Know and Don't Know about Direct Democracy

Tuesday, December 2

Final Student Project Presentations

Final Projects Due Monday, December 8, 5:00pm