INF 320S/U: Civic Engagement and Technology

Unique ID: 30434; 30495; 30520;
Fall Semester 2026

Class Meets: Tuesday and Thursday
9:30 AM - 11:00 AM
SZB 3.802

Instructor: Brian McInnis
Office hours: Wednesday 11:30 AM to 1:00 PM, and by appointment
Location: TBD
Email: brian.mcinnis@austin.utexas.edu

Course Description
Civic engagement involves joining with others to identify and address issues facing a community. Examples include volunteering to clean up a park, participating in a town hall meeting, voting, and participating in a peaceful protest. Conversations about civic issues emerge in many public and private spaces, including public libraries, coffee shops, and through group messaging platforms, like WhatsApp. This course will investigate how computing systems have been used to help people surface issues in various ways---from community sensing systems to crowdsourcing budget issues---as well as address issues through online discussion, mutual-aid, and coordinating volunteer networks.

Technology can serve as a force multiplier for civic engagement; however, there are important considerations related to their design, deployment, and sustaining them over time. Civic technology is embedded within a policy, political, and technical environment that can be tricky to navigate. Many people also lack access to the time and training to fully engage with a technology; failure to recognize these barriers related to the "digital divide" can result in systematically preventing some groups of people from participating in civic activities. Additionally, there may be unanticipated risks associated with the way that civic technology collects, manages, and shares personal as well as group level information. These ethical issues deserve special consideration in a civic engagement and socio-technical context.

To help students weigh the socio-technical considerations associated with civic technology, this course will emphasize political theory, civic design, system design, and ethics.

1. Historical foundations: Students will be introduced to several theoretical lenses for studying civic engagement and will learn about long standing challenges, such as providing access, overcoming knowledge gaps, navigating power relationships, and facilitating decision making. Students will gain familiarity with key terms, including: deliberation, discourse architecture, and third-spaces.
2. Civic design: Students will be introduced to Civic Design research methods, which include participatory design, service design, and design fiction, as examples of how to engage with stakeholders in iterative cycles of discovery and prototyping around civic issues. These practices involve carefully paying attention to stakeholder needs, learning from their lived experiences, and working with them to explore possible solutions that may be technical or non-technical.
3. System design and analysis: Students will explore the mechanics of civic engagement technology, such as ConsiderIt, Deliberatorium, Hollaback!, SeeClickFix, as well as political mobilization via chatbot systems. Concepts from online community systems and crowdsourcing research will be applied as a framework for analyzing the design of civic engagement technology.
4. Possible ethical, legal, and social implications (ELSIs): Before deploying technology in a civic context, it is important to consider the potential for unintended consequences associated with technology use,

misuse, and non-use. For instance, how might some nefarious actor exploit the data collected by civic technology? If the policies associated with third-party services associated with the civic technology change, who is responsible for addressing the change (e.g., paying fees, making updates, error testing)?

Students will demonstrate mastery of the subject-matter by developing a public deliberation facilitation guide to help people engage with a specific civic issue facing Texans. The intended audience for the final project should be Texas high school teachers and students.

PREREQUISITES FOR THE COURSE

None.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

1. Explore historical roots associated with fundamental design challenges in the development of civic engagement technology, such as providing equitable access, facilitating discussion, promoting diverse perspectives, overcoming knowledge gaps, synthesizing perspectives, and decision-making.
2. Explore computer-supported threats to civic engagement, such as filter bubbles and rumor clusters, as well as coordinated misinformation campaigns and bot attacks.
3. Gain familiarity with methods for studying civic technology, drawn from academic literature.
4. Apply course concepts to identify and analyze an opportunity for civic engagement in Texas, thereby connecting course material to the core purpose of the University of Texas: "To transform lives for the benefit of society."

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING

Your success in this class and overall well-being are important to me. If there are aspects of this course that prevent you from learning or exclude you, please let me know as soon as possible. You can email me, talk to me after class, come to office hours, schedule a 1-1 meeting with me to discuss any issues, concerns, and ideas.

REQUIRED MATERIALS

There are no textbooks for this course. All readings are free and can be found on our course Canvas site (https://utexas.instructure.com/) under the "Assignments" tab. If you encounter any technical difficulties or barriers while doing work for this course, please let me know and I will work with you.

COMMUNICATION

The course Canvas site can be found at utexas.instructure.com. Please email me through Canvas. You are responsible for ensuring that the primary email address you have recorded with the university is the one you will check for course communications because that is the email address that Canvas uses.

TEACHING MODALITY INFORMATION

This course will be held in-person. This means that attendance in the classroom is expected. That being said, illness and emergencies happen. Please do not come to class sick, just let me know as soon as possible via email and I will work with you.

GETTING HELP WITH TECHNOLOGY

Students needing help with technology in this course should contact the ITS Service Desk.

ASKING FOR HELP WITH COURSE MATERIAL

During the lecture questions about the material should be shared on Canvas, so that we can address common questions before the end of class. Questions about the material that come up in between lectures should also be added as a Discussion post on Canvas, so that others in the class can respond and add to their discussion asynchronously. Regardless, the instructor will address all questions in between lectures during the recap at the

beginning of the next class period.

What will Class Look Like?

Each week will have a similar structure.

- Recap of concepts from the prior week
- Lecture introducing a concept, technique, and/or analysis procedure
- In-class discussion about the weekly reading

Class Attendance and Participation

Being present is critical to achieving our goals for this course, which is why attendance and participation are graded components of this course. Please plan to attend the class every week. Points will not be deducted for excused absences. Illness and emergencies happen. Please do not come to class sick, let me know as soon as possible via email and I will work with you.

Assignments

Grades will be based on a total of **300 possible points** that you will earn through attendance, participation, and completion of several team based and individual assignments. Full descriptions of each assignment will be available on the course Canvas website. Unless specified otherwise, assignments must be submitted via Canvas.

Assignments	Points Possible	Due at 5pm CT
1. Completion of a weekly reading slide before class	100 points	
2. Facilitation Guide: Students will explore how technology has been used and might be used to help Texans identify and address a specific civic issue through public discourse. The intended audience for the proposal will be Texas high school students and teachers.	100 points	11/19
• Communicating Background Research	25 points	09/22
• Deliberation Questions and Decision-Making	25 points	10/27
• Computing Systems Support	25 points	11/10
3. Class Presentation	25 points	12/1 – 12/3

+/- Grading Policy

+/- grades will be used for the final class grade.

Grade Breaks

Grade	Cutoff
A	94%
A-	90%
B+	87%
B	84%
B-	80%
C+	77%
C	74%
C-	70%

Grade	Cutoff
D+ D D-	67% 64% 60%
F	<60%

COURSE OUTLINE

All lecture slides, assignments, readings, and rubrics as well as other essential information will be on the Canvas website at utexas.instructure.com. Check Canvas regularly. Changes to the schedule may be made at my discretion if circumstances require. I will announce any such changes in class and will also communicate them via a Canvas announcement. It is your responsibility to note these changes when announced, and I will do my best to ensure that you are notified of changes as soon as possible.

Week	Date	Class Topic	Assignments Due
1.	8/24	Introduction: What is civic engagement, and what roles have technologies played in the process?	
2.	9/1	Lecture: Frameworks for civic engagement activity design.	
3.	9/8	Lecture: Community-based research ethics and practices.	
4.	9/15	Lecture: Crafting discussion questions.	
5.	9/22	Lecture: Public forums and their problems.	**Assignment**: Communicating Background Research
6.	9/29	Lecture: Discussion facilitation practices.	NO CLASS 9/29
7.	10/6	Lecture: Technologies to support discussion facilitation, argumentation, and synthesis.	
8.	10/13	Lecture: Participatory budgeting at scale.	
9.	10/20	Lecture: Disagreement, conflicts, and forming a consensus, or not (with and without AI).	**Assignment**: Deliberation Questions and Decision-Making
10.	10/27	Lecture: Online deliberation system designs.	
11.	11/3	Lecture: Community moderation and public discourse.	
12.	11/10	Lecture: Public art, placemaking, and digital third spaces.	**Assignment**: Computing Systems Support
13.	11/17	Lecture: Public Protest and Community Organizing Systems.	**Assignment**: Facilitation Guide
14.	11/23	Fall break / Thanksgiving; no classes held.	
15.	12/1	Team Presentations (mandatory participation)	

Week	Date	Class Topic	Assignments Due
Study Days	04/28 & 29	Remember to take time to sleep, exercise, eat well, and spend time with friends.	

Community and Belonging

It is my intent that students from all backgrounds and perspectives be well served by this course, that students' learning needs be addressed, and that the lived experiences and perspectives students bring to this class can be comfortably expressed and viewed as a resource to all students. To do so, many of the course activities and assignments will involve small teams that will rotate throughout the semester, so that students are able to meet and gain experience working with each other. Each team assignment will include a peer-review survey, which should be used to provide me with feedback about the team dynamics.

Names and Pronouns

Class rosters are provided to the instructor with the student's legal name, unless they have added a "chosen name" with the registrar's office via the following link: https://utdirect.utexas.edu/apps/ais/chosen_name/

I will gladly honor your request to address you by a name that is different from what appears on the official roster, and by the pronouns you use (she/he/they/ze, etc.). Please advise me of any changes early in the semester so that I may make appropriate updates to my records. For instructions on how to add your pronouns to Canvas, visit the following link: https://utexas.instructure.com/courses/633028/pages/profile-pronouns.

University Policies and Resources

For a list of important university policies and helpful resources that you may need as you engage with and navigate your courses and the university, see the University Policies and Resources Students Canvas page. The page includes the language of the University Honor Code, Title IX legal requirements for Texas employees, and information about how to receive support through the office of Disability & Access.

Sharing of Course Materials is Prohibited

No materials used in this class, including, but not limited to, lecture hand-outs, videos, assessments (quizzes, exams, papers, projects, homework assignments), in-class materials, review sheets, and additional problem sets, may be shared online or with anyone outside of the class without my explicit written permission. Unauthorized sharing of materials may facilitate cheating. The University is aware of the sites used for sharing materials, and any materials found online that are associated with you, or any suspected unauthorized sharing of materials, will be reported to Student Conduct and Academic Integrity in the Office of the Dean of Students. These reports can result in initiation of the student conduct process and include charge(s) for academic misconduct, potentially resulting in sanctions, including a grade impact.

Confidentiality of Class Recordings

Class recordings are reserved only for students in this class for educational purposes and are protected under FERPA. The recordings should not be shared outside the class in any form. Violation of this restriction by a student could lead to Student Misconduct proceedings.

CLASSROOM RECORDING STATEMENT

HOP 2-9970 prohibits students from recording class instruction (audio or video) unless a student obtains the instructor's permission or Disability & Access has approved audio recording as an accommodation.

COURSE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE POLICY

In accordance with the University's Institutional Rules on Student Services and Activities, Chapter 11, students accept the responsibility to always uphold academic integrity and an honor code reflective of a scholarly community devoted to academic and personal success. All members of the University community are fully accountable and responsible for any output they produce as part of academic work. They are also responsible for following the guidance specified in the Texas Statement on Academic Integrity and avoiding prohibited uses of

generative AI tools outlined in the Information Security Office's guidance on Acceptable Use of Generative AI Tools. In this course, generative AI use is permitted on a partial basis.

LATE WORK AND MAKING UP MISSED WORK

Please submit assignments on time. If you become ill or experience an emergency, please let me know as soon as possible. Once the due date for an assignment has passed, it is more difficult to accept / grade late assignments, but I definitely want to know if something is going on so that I can work with you to give you the best opportunity to succeed in the class.

ABSENCES

Absences happen. If you need to miss class, please follow these steps:

1. Prior to class, email me via Canvas to let me know. These are not emails that I respond to (unless you ask a question), but they are emails I save to review when I calculate attendance/participation grades for excused absences.
2. Review the slides for class (posted on Canvas).
3. Ask your team and other classmates to get a summary and notes on any lessons you miss.

If you find there are topics that we covered while you were gone that raise questions, please come by during office hours or schedule a meeting to discuss. Email specific questions you have in advance so that we can make the most of our time.

RELIGIOUS HOLY DAYS

By UT Austin policy, you must notify me of your pending absence for a religious holy day as far in advance as possible of the date of observance. If you must miss a class, an examination, a work assignment, or a project in order to observe a religious holy day, you will be given an opportunity to complete the missed work within a reasonable time after the absence.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY EXPECTATIONS

Students who violate University rules on academic misconduct are subject to the student conduct process. A student found responsible for academic misconduct may be assigned both a status sanction and a grade impact for the course. The grade impact could range from a zero on the assignment in question up to a failing grade in the course. A status sanction can include a written warning, probation, deferred suspension, or dismissal from the University. To learn more about academic integrity standards, tips for avoiding a potential academic misconduct violation, and the overall conduct process, please visit the Student Conduct and Academic Integrity website at: http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/conduct.

COUNSELING AND MENTAL HEALTH CENTER (CMHC)

Students who are struggling for any reason and who believe that it might impact their performance in the course are urged to reach out to Bryce Moffett if they feel comfortable. This will allow her to provide any resources or accommodations that she can. If immediate mental health assistance is needed, call the Counseling and Mental Health Center (CMHC) at 512-471-3515 or you may also contact Bryce Moffett, LCSW (iSchool CARE counselor) at 512-232-4449. Bryce's office is located in FAC18S and she holds drop in Office Hours on Wednesday from 2-3pm. For urgent mental health concerns, please contact the CMHC 24/7 Crisis Line at 512-471-2255.

BASIC NEEDS SECURITY

Any student who faces challenges securing their food or housing and believes this may affect their performance in the course is urged to contact the Dean of Students for support. UT maintains the UT Outpost (https://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/emergency/utoutpost.php) which is a free on campus food pantry and career closet. Furthermore, please notify the professor if you are comfortable in doing so. This will enable them to provide any resources that they may possess.

SERVICES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

The university is committed to creating an accessible and inclusive learning environment consistent with university policy as well as federal and state laws. Please let me know if you experience any barriers to learning,

so that I can work with you to ensure you have an equal opportunity to participate in this course. If you are a student with a disability, or think you may have a disability and need accommodations, please contact the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD). Please refer to SSD's website for more information: https://disability.utexas.edu/. If you are already registered with SSD, please deliver your Accommodation Letter to me as soon as possible, so that we can discuss your approved accommodations.

CARRYING OF HANDGUNS ON CAMPUS

Students in this class should be aware of the following university policies related to Texas' Open Carry Law:

- Students in this class who hold a license to carry are asked to review the university policy regarding campus carry.
- Individuals who hold a license to carry are eligible to carry a concealed handgun on campus, including in most outdoor areas, buildings and spaces that are accessible to the public, and in classrooms.
- It is the responsibility of concealed-carry license holders to carry their handguns on or about their person at all times while on campus. Open carry is NOT permitted, meaning that a license holder may not carry a partially or wholly visible handgun on campus premises or on any university driveway, street, sidewalk or walkway, parking lot, parking garage, or other parking area.