Course Title: Technology and the 2020 Election: How Silicon Valley Technologies Impact Our Elections and Shape our Democracy

Course Code: POL 58

Instructors: Rob Reich and Marietje Schaake

Course Summary:

The 2020 U.S Presidential Election season will be historic, taking place amidst a global pandemic, an upended economy, mass protests, and extreme polarization. While these crises grab the headlines, another force will quietly but no less inexorably shape this coming election: the digital tools and platforms born right here in Silicon Valley. This course will examine the unprecedented influence of technology on America’s democratic process, revealing how an array of digital technologies is affecting the election. With the help of expert guests, we will discuss technologies of the voting booth and reporting results; online filter bubbles, echo chambers, and polarization; amplification and content moderation of political candidates; online political advertising and micro-targeting; manipulation, misinformation, and disinformation; the U.S. in global perspective; and tech policy approaches.

This course will seek to draw lessons and insights about the legitimate and illegitimate uses of technology in the 2020 election and take stock of the health of American democracy. We will also explore questions about a tech policy agenda in a Trump or Biden administration. By the end of the course, students will have a deeper appreciation for the multifaceted ways in Silicon Valley technologies shape American political life and, because of their global reach, democratic societies everywhere. We emphasize how these forces can be better managed, if not harnessed for the public good.

*Please see course page for full description and additional details.*

Tentative Weekly Outline:

Week 1: High-tech or low-tech?
Elections and democratic rights amidst a pandemic
The technology of holding an election and election security – mail-in ballots, poll stations, reporting results.
Week 2: **Platform Effects 1**  
Echo Chambers, Filter Bubbles, and Polarization

Week 3: **Platform Effects 2**  
Content Moderation Policies

Week 4: **Political Advertising and Microtargeting**

Week 5: **Manipulation – Misinformation and Disinformation**  
The Covid-19 Infodemic  
Deep Fakes and AI  
Crossing the border: Foreign Interference and domestic manipulations

Week 6: **Policy Approaches**  
Checks and Balances: building trust through anti-trust; Privacy legislation  
GDPR as a model for the US?

Week 7: **Election Outcome and Tech Agenda for New Administration**

Week 8: **Technology and Democracy**

**Grade Options and Requirements:**
- No Grade Requested (NGR)
  - This is the default option. No work will be required; no credit will be received; no proof of attendance can be provided.
- Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)
  - Students must attend at least seven class sessions.

*Please Note: If you require proof that you completed a Continuing Studies course for any reason (for example, employer reimbursement), you must choose either the Letter Grade or Credit/No Credit option. Courses taken for NGR will not appear on official transcripts or grade reports.*

**Required Books/Materials:**

Suggested readings will be made available on the course website.