POLITICAL SCIENCE COURSE HELPS CASE STUDENTS PUT VICE PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE IN HISTORICAL, ELECTORAL PERSPECTIVE

When Dick Cheney and John Edwards square off in the October 5 vice presidential debate at Case Western Reserve University, one group of Case undergraduate students will be following the proceedings with particular interest.

Students in the political science class “The 2004 Presidential Election” will be viewing the debate in the context of how the election is unfolding in each of the 50 states. They will also see it from the perspective of long-term trends in presidential voting patterns.

The course is taught by Alexander Lamis, associate professor of political science and editor of the books Ohio Politics and Southern Politics in the 1990s, and author of The Two Party South. The purpose of the course, according to its syllabus, is “to improve students’ understanding of American presidential elections with special emphasis on the 2004 battle to capture the White House.” Lamis has taught the course in every presidential election year since 1988, when he joined the Case faculty.

Forty two students have enrolled in this year’s class, up from 30 in 2000. “My guess is that recent events, such as September 11, the Iraq war, and unease over the economy and job prospects, have brought home to more students than usual the importance of politics and government in their lives,” Lamis said.

Required reading in the class includes Dynamics of the Party System: Alignment and Realignment of Political Parties by James Sundquist, and Change and Continuity in the 2000 and 2002 Elections by Paul Abramson, John Aldrich and David Rohde. In addition, students will read a book of their choice on past presidential elections and write a summary review of it. They will also be expected to follow developments in the current
election by reading the Washington Post and New York Times, and watching public affairs television programs.

Additional requirements are to attend the panel discussion Lamis will chair during the October 5 symposium “The Ohio 8: Ohio’s History in Presidential Politics,” which is jointly sponsored by Case, the Western Reserve Historical Society and the Cleveland Museum of Art, and to watch the vice presidential debate. Lamis also plans to throw an election-night party at which students can watch the results come in.

Lamis’s panel at the “Ohio 8” symposium will explore Ohio’s role in the election of modern presidents with special emphasis on the 2004 presidential election in Ohio. Panelists include John Green, director of the University of Akron’s Bliss Institute; Robert Bennett, chairman of the Ohio Republican Party; James Ruvulo, chairman of John Kerry’s Ohio campaign and a former chairman of the Ohio Democratic Party; Mike Curtin, publisher of the Columbus Dispatch; and Brent Larkin, editorial page director of the Cleveland Plain Dealer.

The major project for the class is a two-part research paper analyzing voting patterns in a specific state since the 1988 presidential election. The first part consists of reporting and analysis of the state’s electoral history from 1988-2002, with the second part covering the 2004 election and its outcome in that state.

“I want students to understand not just why a state or the country voted the way it did in this particular election, but to see where this election fits in with past electoral patterns,” Lamis said.