Overview

The government of the United States was designed not to work. The Constitution was written 220 years ago by leaders who shared a deep distrust of government. They wanted it to be as weak as possible. Hence, they devised a system with divided powers and checks and balances. But somehow, it does work. What makes it work is public opinion. When there is an overwhelming sense of public urgency, all the pieces click into place. Things get done.

This course will look at government by crisis and the way public opinion shapes policy. Topics will include health care, gun policy, income inequality, military intervention, terrorism and affirmative action. The course will also look at the dynamics that drive elections, the causes and consequences of political polarization, the rise of political movements like Trumpism and their policy consequences.

Course materials

Recommended for purchase:


Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* (Mariner Books, 2009)
Course requirements

1. Two papers (each approximately 1,000 words). One paper will be assigned from the topics on the next page. The second paper will be chosen by the student from the same list. The papers should answer the question posed for that topic. Or, if approved by the instructor, the paper may answer a different question. Each paper is due on the day that topic is scheduled for class discussion.

2. A 20-minute class presentation based on the first paper (written for requirement #1 above), due on the day that topic is scheduled for class discussion. The second paper (on the topic of your choosing) does not require a class report.

3. A final examination (approximately 1,500 words) answering this question: How can American government function in a deeply polarized political environment? Cite examples of success and failure.
   The final examination is due on December 9.
Weekly topics:

August 29  How America Became Ungovernable

September 5  America the Unusual

September 12  a. Populism  
b. Political polarization

September 19  a. The 2016 election and Trumpism  
b. The electoral college

September 26  NO CLASS

October 3  a. Gun policy  
b. Immigration

October 10  a. Abortion  
b. Affirmative action

October 17  a. Health care  
b. Inequality

October 24  a. Same-sex marriage  
b. Sexual harassment

October 31  a. Taxes  
b. Infrastructure spending

November 7  a. Foreign trade  
b. Economy and elections

November 14  a. The press and politics  
b. Presidential impeachment

November 21  a. Terrorism  
b. Government surveillance

December 5  a. The Israel-Palestine conflict  
b. Military intervention
COURSE SCHEDULE

August 29

How the U.S. Became Ungovernable

September 5

America the Unusual

For discussion:
Students will be assigned questions based on the John Kingdon book.

John W. Kingdon, America the Unusual (Worth, 1999)

September 12

a. Populism

Is it liberal or conservative -- or both?

Schneider, Standoff, chapter 2.

Dani Rodrick, ‘‘What’s Driving Populism?’’ Project Syndicate, July 9, 2019.

Michael Kazin, ‘‘Trump and American Populism.’’ Foreign Affairs, October 6, 2016.
(https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-10-06/trump-and-american-populism)
b. **Political Polarization**

What divides Americans?

Schneider, *Standoff*, chapter 3

Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* (Mariner Books, 2009), chapter 1, "The Age of Political Segregation"

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**September 19**

a. **The 2016 election and Trumpism**

How did Trump win?

Schneider, *Standoff*, chapter 11.


b. **The electoral college**

Can it be reformed?

September 26

NO CLASS

October 3

a. Gun policy

Why is it so difficult to pass gun laws?


b. Immigration

Why is it so difficult to pass immigration reform?

Schneider, *Standoff*, Chapter 6, pp. 128-134.


October 10
a. **Abortion**

Has public opinion changed since Roe?


b. **Affirmative action**

Do white Americans support affirmative action?


October 17

a. Health care

Why not Medicare for all?


b. Climate Change

Why can't we do much about it?


October 24

a. Same-sex marriage

How did public opinion change so quickly?


b. Sexual harassment

Compare the impact of the Clarence Thomas and Harvey Weinstein episodes.

Schneider, *Standoff*, Chapter 7, pp.135-140.


October 31

a. Taxes

Why does the issue of tax reform keep coming back?


b. Infrastructure spending

Why is spending on public works different from spending on social welfare?


November 7

a. Foreign trade

Are Americans protectionist?


b. Economy and elections

Does the state of the economy determine election outcomes?


November 14

a. The press and politics

Why does President Trump call the press ``the enemy of the American people’’?

Schneider, Standoff, Chapter 11.


b. The Invisible Primary 2019

Is the Democratic Party moving to the left?

Peter Beinart, ``Will the Left Go Too Far?’’ Atlantic, December 2018. 

November 21

a. Terrorism

   Why do terrorists target the U.S.?


b. Government surveillance

   Are Americans willing to accept a trade-off of surveillance for security?


December 5

a. The Israel-Palestine conflict

Are Americans now divided over Israel?


b. Military intervention

Where do Americans draw the line?


Students with disabilities

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please contact the Disability Resource Center (DRC) at 703-993-2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through the DRC.

Policy on Plagiarism

The profession of scholarship and the intellectual life of a university as well as the field of public policy inquiry depend fundamentally on a foundation of trust. Thus any act of plagiarism strikes at the heart of the meaning of the university and the purpose of the School of Public Policy. It constitutes a serious breach of professional ethics and it is unacceptable.

Plagiarism is the use of another's words or ideas presented as one's own. It includes, among other things, the use of specific words, ideas, or frameworks that are the product of another's work. Honesty and thoroughness in citing sources is essential to professional accountability and personal responsibility. Appropriate citation is necessary so that arguments, evidence, and claims can be critically examined.

Plagiarism is wrong because of the injustice it does to the person whose ideas are stolen. But it is also wrong because it constitutes lying to one's professional colleagues. From a prudential perspective, it is shortsighted and self-defeating, and it can ruin a professional career.

The faculty of the Schar School takes plagiarism seriously and has adopted a zero tolerance policy. Any plagiarized assignment will receive an automatic grade of "F." This may lead to failure for the course, resulting in dismissal from the University. This dismissal will be noted on the student's transcript. For foreign students who are on a university-sponsored visa (eg. F-1, J-1 or J-2), dismissal also results in the revocation of their visa.

To help enforce the Schar School policy on plagiarism, all written work submitted in partial fulfillment of course or degree requirements must be available in electronic form so that it can be compared with electronic databases, as well as
submitted to commercial services to which the School subscribes. Faculty may at any time submit student's work without prior permission from the student. Individual instructors may require that written work be submitted in electronic as well as printed form. The SPP policy on plagiarism is supplementary to the George Mason University Honor Code; it is not intended to replace it or substitute for it.

<http://www.gmu.edu/facstaff/handbook/aD.html>