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 taxing and spending, deficits, health care, social issues, national security, military intervention, terrorism and race relations. The course will also look at the dynamics that drive elections, the causes and consequences of political polarization, the rise of political movements and their policy consequences.

Course materials (recommended for purchase)

Recommended for purchase:
John W. Kingdon, America the Unusual (Worth, 1999)


Additional readings in the course outline below will be placed on reserve.
Course requirements

1. Two papers (each approximately 1,200 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: How has public opinion affected, or not affected, policy? 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 the topic is scheduled for class discussion. The second paper (on the topic of your choosing) does not require a class report.

3. A final paper (approximately 1,500 words) answering this question: In a deeply polarized political environment, is there any middle ground on the issue you are writing about? Cite evidence to back up your argument. Paper is due on December 11.

Choice of issues: abortion, affirmative action, immigration, inequality, foreign trade, military intervention, climate change, gun control, government surveillance -- or any other issue you choose, subject to approval by the instructor.
Topics for presentations and class discussion:

- Populism
- Raising the debt limit
- Income inequality
- Tax policy
- Immigration
- Foreign trade
- Health care
- Climate change
- Same-sex marriage
- Religious freedom
- Gun control
- Abortion
- Terrorism
- Government surveillance
- Affirmative action
- Police accountability
- Political polarization
- The electoral college
- The 2016 election and Trumpism
- Syria and the Islamic State
- The Israel-Palestine conflict
- Infrastructure spending
- U.S. Russia relations
- Military intervention
COURSE SCHEDULE

August 31

Standoff: How the U.S. Became Ungovernable

September 7

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

Read Erikson and Tedin, chapter 4, "Macrolevel Opinion: The Flow of Political Sentiment"

September 14

a. Populism
Is it liberal or conservative -- or both?


George Packer, "Hillary Clinton and the Populist Revolt," The New Yorker, October 31, 2016

b. The electoral college

Andrew Prokop, "Why the Electoral College is the Absolute Worst, Explained," Vox, November 10, 2016
September 21

a. **Income inequality**
   Do Americans resent the rich?
   

b. **Tax policy**
   Why does the tax reform issue keep coming back?
   

September 28

a. **Immigration**
   What should be done about illegal immigrants?
   
   

b. **Trade**
   Is the U.S. public protectionist?
   

October 5

a. **Health care**
   Why has the public been so skeptical?
   
   

b. **Climate change**
   Why can't we deal with the problem?
   
   
October

Read Erikson and Tedin, chapter 7, "Group Differences in Political Opinions"

October 12

a. Same-sex marriage
   Why did public opinion change so dramatically?
   
   

b. Religious freedom
   Is it tolerant or repressive?
   
   

October 19

a. Gun control
   Why is it so difficult to pass?
   

b. Abortion
   Has public opinion changed since Roe?
   
October 26

a. **Terrorism**
   Does the public accept the trade-off of privacy for security?


b. **Government surveillance**
   How much are we willing to tolerate?


November 2

a. **Affirmative action**
   Do white Americans support it?


b. **Police accountability**


November 9

a. **Political polarization**
   What's behind it?

   Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* (Houghton Mifflin, 2008), chapter 1, "The Age of Political Segregation"

b. **The 2016 election and Trumpism**
   How did Trump win?

November 16

a. **The Israeli-Palestinian conflict**
   Is there a consensus?

   Connie Bruck, "Friends of Israel," *The New Yorker*, September 1, 2014

   Walter Russell Mead, "Change They Can Believe In," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2009

b. **Syria and the Islamic State**
   What should the U.S. do to defeat the Islamic State?

   Stephen Biddle and Jacob Shapiro, "America Can't Do Much About ISIS," *The Atlantic*, April 20, 2016


November 30

a. **The federal budget deficit**
   Why is it so difficult to control?


b. **Infrastructure spending**
   Why is spending on public works different from spending on social welfare?

   Knowledge@Wharton, "Can Infrastructure Spending Be a Silver Bullet?" October 11, 2016


December 7

a. **U.S.-Russia relations**
   A new Cold War?


b. **Military intervention**
   Where do Americans draw the line?

Academic Accommodation for a Disability

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and 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>