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:


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 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 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 examination (approximately 1,200 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. The final examination is due on December 10.

Weekly topics:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>August 30</td>
<td>How America Became Ungovernable</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 6</td>
<td>America the Unusual</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 13</td>
<td>a. Populism</td>
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<td>b. Political polarization</td>
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<td>September 20</td>
<td>a. The 2016 election and Trumpism</td>
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<td></td>
<td>b. The electoral college</td>
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<td>September 27</td>
<td>a. Climate change</td>
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<td>b. National debt</td>
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<td>October 4</td>
<td>a. Gun policy</td>
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<td>b. Immigration</td>
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<td>October 11</td>
<td>a. Abortion</td>
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<td>b. Affirmative action</td>
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<td>October 18</td>
<td>a. Health care</td>
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<td>b. Inequality</td>
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<td>October 25</td>
<td>a. Same-sex marriage</td>
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<td>b. Sexual harassment</td>
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<td>November 1</td>
<td>a. Taxes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>b. Infrastructure spending</td>
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<td>November 8</td>
<td>a. Foreign trade</td>
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<td>b. Economy and elections</td>
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<td>November 15</td>
<td>a. The press and politics</td>
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<td>b. Presidential impeachment</td>
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<td>November 29</td>
<td>a. Terrorism</td>
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<td></td>
<td>b. Government surveillance</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 6</td>
<td>a. The Israel-Palestine conflict</td>
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<td></td>
<td>b. Military intervention</td>
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COURSE SCHEDULE

August 30
How the U.S. Became Ungovernable

September 6
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 13
a. Populism

Is it liberal or conservative -- or both?

Schneider, Standoff, chapter 2.

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 (Houghton Mifflin, 2008), chapter 1, `The Age of Political Segregation'
September 20

a. The 2016 election and Trumpism

How did Trump win?

Schneider, Standoff, chapter 11.

(https://washingtonmonthly.com/2017/05/09/addressing-the-cultural-anxiety-of-the-white-working-class/)

b. The electoral college

Can it be reformed?

Andrew Prokop, ``Why the Electoral College is the Absolute Worst, Explained,'' Vox, November 10, 2016.

September 27

a. Climate change

Why can't we do much about it?

(https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/popular-opinion-on-climat/)

Yale Program on Climate Change Communication and George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication, ``Politics and Global Warming,'' October 2017, pages 1-28.

b. National debt
Should Americans be concerned?


October 4

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 11

a. Abortion

Has public opinion changed since Roe?

Schneider, Standoff, Chapter 7, pp. 140-147.


b. Affirmative action

Do white Americans support affirmative action?

Schneider, Standoff, Chapter 7, pp. 147-151.


a. **Health care**

Is Obamacare here to stay?


b. **Income inequality**

Do Americans resent the rich?


**October 25**

a. **Same-sex marriage**

How did public opinion change so quickly?


Sarah McCammon, ``Same-Sex Marriage Support at All-Time High, Even Among Groups that Opposed It,'’ National Public Radio, June 6, 2017. ([https://www.npr.org/2017/06/26/534443494/same-sex-marriage-support-at-all-time-high-even-among-groups-that-opposed-it](https://www.npr.org/2017/06/26/534443494/same-sex-marriage-support-at-all-time-high-even-among-groups-that-opposed-it))

b. Sexual harassment

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

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


November 1

a. Taxes

Why does the issue of tax reform keep coming back?

Schneider, Standoff, Chapter 5, pp. 91-97.


b. Infrastructure spending

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


November 8
a. **Foreign trade**

Are Americans protectionist?


b. **Economy and elections**

Does the state of the economy determine election outcomes?


**November 15**

a. **The press and politics**

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

Schneider, Standoff, Chapter 11.

b. **Presidential impeachment**

How did President Bill Clinton survive impeachment?

Schneider, *Standoff*, Chapter 4.


**November 29**

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 6**
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>