Syllabus for Government 490-008

Polarization of American Politics
Spring, 2020

Fridays, 10:30-12:45
Buchanan Hall, D-003

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Office Hours: Mondays 3-4:15 PM, Wednesdays 10-Noon, or by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION: In this seminar, we will explore the polarization of American politics by class, race, religion, geography, education and lifestyle. This polarization has led to increased partisanship among voters and elected officials, gridlock and dysfunction in Washington and an erosion of political norms and social trust that poses a threat to American democracy. Through readings, class discussions and talks by experts and practitioners, we will see how polarized American society and American politics have become and why. We will explore how polarization plays out in political campaigns, in Congress and in the media. And we will talk about what might be done to reduce polarization and the damage it causes to our politics, our economy and our society. The course is open to juniors and seniors who have an interest in, and working familiarity with, recent events in American politics and government, whether they are government majors or not.

CLASS SESSIONS: This is a small seminar course, which means what you get out of it will reflect what you put into it in terms of your attendance, participation in discussions and engagement with the
material. Since the course meets only once a week, missing a class is a big deal and attendance will be reflected in participation grades. Please let me know in advance if you will be unable to attend a class session.

The first two weeks of the course will be given over to selecting groups for group projects and initial meetings of the groups that will allow you to get to know each other, plan work and make individual assignments.

In February and March, each class sessions will focus on a particular topic tied to the assigned reading/viewing of that week. The session will normally begin with a 45-minute conversation with a researcher who has written on the topic, or someone involved in politics or government who can speak to it. I will start off by asking questions of the guest, and then open it up to questions from students and a general discussion. As often as not, the speaker’s visit will be virtual, speaking to us over Internet video connection. You should come to class familiar with the speakers’ background and prepared with questions.

Following the speaker, we will have a general, hour-long discussion on the week’s topic. While the assigned readings will be the point of departure for these discussions, our challenge will be to connect the ideas from the readings into recent events and developments in Washington and in the 2020 presidential and Congressional campaigns. These class sessions are not meant to be a conversation between a professor and students. Rather, they are meant to be a moderated discussion among students who ask questions and respectfully discuss and debate with each other. There is no need to raise your hand to ask permission to speak. A quarter of your final grade—that’s a lot—will be based on the frequency and quality of your contributions to class discussions. Warning: as the moderator, I will sometimes call on students to participate in discussions even if they haven’t volunteered to speak.

In the final 30 minutes of each class session, groups will have time to work on their projects. I will come around and listen in, get a sense of how you are doing, answer questions and offer advice. In addition, the first week in April, the entire class session will be devoted to a group work sessions.

During each of three class sessions in April, one of the project groups (see below) will make an hour-long presentation, followed by a discussion and critique. Following the presentations, groups will then
have a week to incorporate the discussion and critiques into completed version of their project.

The final session will be given over to a lecture and discussion about solutions to polarization.

**READING MEMOS:** Each week for which there is a reading (or watching) assignment, you should bring to class a two-to-three page memo summarizing the major points you took away from the material or questions they raised in your mind. The point of these memos is to demonstrate that you have read, digested and thought about the material. The memos will be graded as superior, satisfactory or unsatisfactory.

**PROJECTS:** Students will work in small groups to produce a final project relating to political polarization. These are not research papers in the traditional sense, although lots of research will be involved and the final product may include written material. But they will also require you to engage in other kinds of activities that will involve critical analysis and creative thinking and other forms of expression, bringing it all together in a final multi-media presentation.

One group will create two sets of TV ads for a real or hypothetical political campaign. One set of ads should be designed to win the election by further polarizing the electorate. A second set should aim to win the election by holding out the promise of reducing polarization.

A second group will conduct videotaped focus groups of Virginia voters that they will design, conduct and analyze, including recruiting subjects. The aim of the focus groups will be to understand why and to what degree voters views about issues and institutions have become so polarized, and how this impacts their voting decisions. The analytic conclusions should be tested against recent election results or public opinion polls in Virginia.

A final group will come up with a plan to redraw congressional districts in a state chosen by the group in two ways – one that is designed to assure that one party wins the maximum number of seats and a second designed to do just the opposite. Each plan will then be analyzed in terms of its likely impact on polarization and voter participation.

Following a class presentation of the results of these projects, there will be a class discussion and critique. The groups will then have
an opportunity to incorporate insights and criticisms into their final submissions, which will be due no later than May 4, the last day of the semester.

These group projects will require considerable amount of work. They are in lieu of a final paper and any exams. Although there will be some time set aside at the end of class sessions in February and March for groups to discuss and plan their work and assess progress, most of the work will have to be done individually and collectively outside of class hours. Each group will need to develop a work plan and then assign individuals to execute portions of the plan based on their individual strengths. Groups should also meet regularly outside of class to review each member’s work and make the individual pieces fit together into a coherent and consistent final product. I am always available to assist groups or individuals when they run into problems, which they inevitably will. The biggest mistake is to let problems fester so long that there is not time to fix them.

**COURSE EVALUATION:**

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<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Reading Memos</td>
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<td>Project – Team Performance</td>
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<td>Project – Individual Performance</td>
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<td>Class Participation</td>
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**READINGS**

The required reading and viewing for this course is substantial, and is in addition to the substantial research you will need to do for your group project. The assigned readings are:


*Jonathan Haidt, “The moral roots of liberals and conservatives, TED talk, March 2008 (available online)


*Marc Hetherington and Jonathan Weiler, *Prius or Pickup, How the Answers to Four Timple Questions Explains America’s Great Divide*, Houghton Miflin

*Justin Gest, The New Minority, White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality, Oxford (chapter available on Blackboard)


*Pew Research Center, *Political Polarization and Media Habits, From Fox News to Facebook, How Liberals and Conservatives Keep Up With the Politics*, October, 2014 (available online)

* Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris and Hal Roberts, *Network Propaganda, Manipulation, Disinformation and the Radicalization of American Politics* (available online at oxford scholarship.com)


**CLASS SCHEDULE:**

**Jan. 24**  Preview/Group Selections

**Jan. 27**  Book Talk by Ezra Klein, Vox columnist, author of *Why We’re Polarized*
Sixth and Eye, Washington DC
7:00 PM / Complimentary tickets

**Jan. 31**  Overview Lecture:
Realignment and Evolution of Polarization

Reading     Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment*

**Feb. 7**  Identity and Polarization

Reading     Sides, Tesler and Vavreck, *Identity Crisis*, Chapters 1,2,5,8,9

Guest     Tom Edsall, New York Times Columnist*

**Feb. 14**  Political Tribalism

Reading     Mason, *Uncivil Agreement*, Ch. 1-4 (skim 5-6)
Haidt, TED talk

Guest     John Sides, Professor of Political Science at Vanderbilt, founder of The Monkey Cage blog*
Feb. 21  Race, Gender and Religion

Reading  Tesler, *Post Racial or Most Racial*, Intro, Chapters 3, 5-9

Guest  TBA

Feb. 28  Economics, Geography, Culture

Reading  Murray, *Coming Apart*  
Hetherington and Weiler, * Prius or Pickup*, Ch. 1-4  
Gest, Ch. 4 (on Blackboard)

Guest  Mason Prof. Justin Gest, author of *The New Minority* *

March 6  Campaigns and Elections

Reading  Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*, Ch. 1, 8-11  
Hawkins, Yudkin et al., *Hidden Tribes*, Ch. 1-3, 5,6

Guest  TBA

March 13  Winter Break

March 20  Government Dysfunction

Reading  Mann and Ornstein, *It’s Even Worse Than It Looks*, Preface, Intro, Ch. 1-3, Afterword  
Grossmann and Hopkins, *Asymmetric Politics*, Ch. 1, 2, 3 (skim), 6, 7

Guest  William Galston, Brookings Institution*
March 27  Media, Information and Truth

Readings  Pew, *Political Polarization and Media Habits*
Benkler, Faris, Roberts, *Network Propaganda*
Ch. 1 (first half), 2,3

Guest  Hal Robert, co-author of Network Propaganda,
Harvard’s Berkman Klein Center for
Internet & Society

April 3  Group Meetings

April 10-
April 24  Group Presentations

May 1  Concluding Discussion: Possible Solutions
Course Evaluation

May 4  Final Projects Due

**ELECTRONIC DEVICES:** All cell phones and computers should generally be shut off during class. You may open your computers to class to take notes during lectures or look things up as we are discussing them. If you are caught checking emails or texts, however, you will be called out and asked to put your device away.

**COMMUNICATION:** All students should check university e-mail accounts for class updates. I will access e-mail through Blackboard. If you cannot attend a class session, please let me know in advance.
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodation, please see me and contact the Disability Resource Center at 703-993-2474.

ENROLLMENT: Students are responsible for verifying their enrollment in the class. Last day to add or drop classes without penalty is Wed., Feb. 5. Please let me know if you drop the class before or after that date.

HONOR CODE:

No help may be given or received by students when taking quizzes, tests or examinations, whatever the type or wherever taken, unless the instructor specifically permits deviation from this standard.

All work submitted to fulfill course requirements is to be solely the product of the individual(s) whose name(s) appear on it. Except with permission of the instructor, no recourse is to be had to projects, papers, lab reports or any other written work previously prepared by another student, and except with permission of the instructor, no paper or work of any type submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of another course may be used a second time to satisfy a requirement of any course. No assistance is to be obtained from commercial organizations that sell or lease research help or written papers. With respect to all written work, proper footnotes and attribution are required.