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:


Anthony Salvanto, *Where Did You Get This Number?* (Simon & Schuster 2018)

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

1. Two short papers presented in class (each approximately 1,200 words)
   Both papers will assess how public opinion has evolved on an issue or topic covered in class. Has public opinion changed on the topic or has it remained fairly constant?
   One paper will be assigned (by random choice) from the list of topics on the next page. The second paper will be chosen by the student from the same list. Each paper is due on the day that topic is scheduled for class discussion. Students will give oral reports in class (20-30 minutes) on their papers. A computer will be available in class for those who wish to use PowerPoint in their presentations, or who wish to show charts or video clips.

2. A final examination essay (approximately 2,000 words) answering this question:

   ```
   `There is not a liberal America and a conservative America -- there is the United States of America.'
   (Barack Obama, 2004 Democratic National Convention Keynote Address)
   From our discussion in class, do you think Obama has been proved wrong?
   ```
Weekly topics:

January 24       Has America Became Ungovernable?
January 31       America the Unusual
February 7       How reliable are public opinion polls?
February 14      a. Populism
                 b. Polarization
February 21      a. Climate change
                 b. National debt
February 28      a. Gun policy
                 b. Immigration
March 7          a. Abortion
                 b. Affirmative action
March 14         No class (University Spring Break)
March 21         a. Health care
                 b. Inequality
March 28         a. Same-sex marriage
                 b. Sexual harassment
April 4          a. Tax reform
                 b. Infrastructure spending
April 11         a. Foreign trade
                 b. Economy and elections
April 18         a. The press and politics
                 b. Presidential impeachment
April 25         a. Terrorism
                 b. Government surveillance
May 2            a. Russia policy
                 b. Military intervention
COURSE SCHEDULE

January 24

How the U.S. Became Ungovernable

January 31

America the Unusual

Questions for discussion of the John Kingdon book will be distributed at the first class. The book is out of print and has become very expensive, but inexpensive second-hand copies are usually available on Amazon. The Library should have one or two copies on reserve.

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

February 7

Public opinion and polling

Anthony Salvanto, Where Did You Get This Number? (Simon & Schuster, 2018), chapters 1-7, 14 and Epilogue.

February 14

a. Populism

Is it liberal or conservative -- or both?

Schneider, Standoff, chapter 2.

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"

**February 21**

a. **Climate change**

Why can't we do much about it?


b. **National debt**

Is it really a crisis?


February 28

a. Gun policy

Why is it so difficult to pass gun laws?

Schneider, Standoff, Chapter 6, pp. 117-127.


b. Immigration

Why is it so difficult to pass immigration reform?

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

Claire Felter and Danielle Renwick, Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder, July 2, 2018.
(https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-immigration-debate-0)

March 7

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.


March 14

Spring Break
March 21

a. Health care

Is Obamacare here to stay?

Schneider, Standoff, Chapter 5, pp. 97-116.


b. Income inequality

Do Americans resent the rich?


March 28

a. Same-sex marriage

How did public opinion change so quickly?

Schneider, Standoff, Chapter 7, pp. 151-154.


b. Sexual harassment

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

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


April 4

a. Tax reform

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?


**April 11**

a. **Foreign trade**

Are Americans protectionist?


Dean Baker, "`Why Trump's Tariffs are Nearly as Unpopular With His Voters as Obama's Trade Policy Was,'" NBC News Think, July 26, 2018. ([https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/why-trump-s-tariffs-are-nearly-unpopular-his-voters-obama-ncna89494](https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/why-trump-s-tariffs-are-nearly-unpopular-his-voters-obama-ncna89494))
b. Economy and elections

Does the state of the economy determine election outcomes?


April 18

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.


April 25

a. Terrorism

Why do terrorists target the U.S.?

Schneider, Standoff, Chapter 8.


b. **Government surveillance**

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


May 2

a. **Russia**

Are we in a new Cold War?


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>