

PARTISAN POLARIZATION IN AMERICAN POLITICS
Government 490 001 (CRN: 10218)
George Mason University
Tuesdays & Thursdays, 1:30pm – 2:45pm
Robinson Hall B 108
Spring 2020

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Office Hours: Tuesdays 3 – 4:30pm, or by appointment
Course Website: Available for enrolled students at <http://blackboard.gmu.edu>
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I. Course Description

Americans appear to be more divided than at any time since the Civil War. In this course, we will examine the political nature of divisions in American society and their partisan roots. We'll begin by asking whether democratic institutions can sufficiently govern, maintain peace, and protect rights, and support a decent standard of living. After identifying flaws and benefits of democracy, we'll begin to identify political and partisan polarization in the U.S., describing it with careful detail. Next, we will read the state-of-the-art literature on polarization as we seek to establish the primary causes of existing divisions. We'll spend considerable time examining the racial, economic, and alternative schisms dominant in American society and seek to understand how these get translated into politics. In addition, we will look at the role of institutions in creating, perpetuating, or alleviating stifling divisions, including political parties, campaign finance, and inbred human characteristics. We'll also examine the role that the media plays in perpetuating polarization. The course is reading and writing intensive, and is conducted similar to a graduate seminar, offering undergraduates the opportunity to hone their skills and deeply explore the subject.

II. Course Objectives

I have three broad objectives for this course. First, students will learn the theoretical and historical underpinning of partisanship and political parties in the United States. Second, students will develop their critical thinking skills through regular reading and writing exercises. Third, I aim to stimulate students' curiosity about politics and creative means of studying questions pertinent to modern problems and interests.

III. Teaching Philosophy and Teaching Style

My teaching philosophy is based on three primary principles.

- First, I believe the gap between undergraduate and graduate coursework in political science is too broad. I therefore introduce advanced theoretical concepts in undergraduate classes so that students understand the true value of studying politics as a science; moreover, should any student choose to pursue advanced or graduate work in political science, they will be well prepared.
- Second, I believe in incorporating current events into classroom lessons. Nothing in science seems concrete until one can “see it with their own eyes.” Reading a daily newspaper and following current events, then applying theoretical concepts to political happenings helps to clarify theoretical concepts and demonstrate their utility.
- Third, as this class has a heavy reading and writing load, I seek to help students develop strategies of workflow and time management that provide them with increased capacity for digesting significant quantities of dense material, while remaining active and critical of the subject. Written and oral articulation skills are in high demand in today’s economy.
- Finally, as an instructor and a leader of class discussions on everything from lawmaking to elections, I aim to remain politically neutral and non-partisan. Students should learn to collect and evaluate information on their own. I would not want students who disagree with my political views to hear all course information with a skeptical ear; nor would I want students who tend to agree with my views to accept everything I say at face value. I encourage students to express their views, be critical, and challenge information when it is appropriate.

My teaching style is consistent with my philosophy. I use a Socratic-style in the classroom in which I frequently ask questions and encourage an interactive learning experience. I do my best to learn students’ names, encourage participation, and create, what I hope is, an open learning environment where students feel free to question, comment, and explain how they view course content. Such an environment helps to foster student interaction, thinking, and analytical and creative skills. Moreover, while lectures are important because they help to distribute necessary information and facts, they are not usually the most effective way to learn information. For this reason, we will do a variety of activities in the classroom. Successful performance in this course will include classroom participation and working in and out of class with your peers.

IV. Student Responsibilities

A. *Class Attendance and Participation.* Learning is an *active*, rather than *passive*, exercise. Accordingly, every student is expected to attend class as well as be prepared to ask questions about and comment on the readings. You need to complete the daily reading assignment *prior* to the class meeting. You will be much more successful in this class if you attend regularly, take notes, pay attention, and participate.

B. *Readings.* As is the case with attendance, keeping pace with the reading is essential to succeeding in this class. It is *your* responsibility to obtain copies of the readings prior to the date we will discuss them in class. I will do everything I can to make this task easier for you. You will be much more successful in this course if you complete the assigned readings and **take notes** on them.

C. *Technology* **The use of laptop computers, tablets (such as iPads), and smart phones is strongly discouraged in class**, except when instructed to do so. The costs associated with electronic distractions, to you and those around you, typically outweigh the benefits of immediate supplementary classroom information. If these restrictions pose a challenge for you, please discuss it with me. For more information on the benefits of taking notes by hand, see [this](#).

D. *Cheating, Plagiarism, and Academic Integrity.* Students in this course will be expected to comply with the George Mason University Honor Code (see <http://honorcode.gmu.edu/>). There are three simple guidelines to follow with respect to academic integrity: (1) all work you submit must be your own; (2) when using the work or ideas of others, including fellow students, give full credit through accurate citations; and (3) if you are uncertain about the expectations for any assignment, ask for clarification. Any student engaged in any academic misconduct *will receive an F on the offending exam or assignment*. Egregious violations will result in an F grade for the course and will be reported to the appropriate Dean's office. These violations include cheating on an exam, using someone else's work as your own, and plagiarizing the written word. Plagiarism (using someone else's words or ideas without providing credit or citation) is a serious offense. *If you have any questions at all about what constitutes cheating, plagiarism, or academic misconduct, please ask the instructor.*

E. *Students with Disabilities.* If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, please let me (the instructor) know and contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS) at (703) 993-2474 or <http://ods.gmu.edu>. All discussions with me regarding disabilities are confidential.

V. Course Requirements and Graded Evaluation

There are four graded requirements for this course, described below. Grades will be calculated on a non-curved typical A-F scale where,

93-100	A	87-89	B+	77-79	C+	67-69	D+	< 60	F
90-92	A-	83-86	B	73-76	C	63-66	D		
		80-82	B-	70-72	C-	60-62	D-		

Daily Writing Assignments (20%) Each class period will begin with a writing activity. All students will be expected to write, by hand, a response to a provided prompt in a limited time format. The prompts will relate to readings, current events, and topics of class discussion. The activities are designed to hone students' writing skills through regular writing activity. Students who have not completed the assigned readings for the day will have difficulty with these activities. The

activity will also include a peer-review component so students gain experience with providing and receiving constructive reviews. The lowest two scores for these assignments will be dropped from each student's overall course grade.

Blog Posts (30%) Each student will write three 1000-word blog posts during the semester. The goal of the post is to apply political science insights, data, theories, or historical context to a current event. Due dates for blog posts will be determined on the first day of class, where each student will sign up for three dates throughout the semester on which to submit their posts. Each class period can have no more than 4 students submitting posts.

Midterm Exam (20%) There will be an in-class, midterm examination in essay format. The exam will be open-book and open-note. The exam is on **Tuesday, March 3.**

Research Paper (30%). All students will write a research paper on a topic of their choosing (minimum 18 pages, excluding titles, bibliography, tables, graphs, notes). Papers will not exceed 30 total pages, inclusive. Papers will explore an important question of American partisanship or politics and draw upon the latest literature in the field. Students are encouraged to undertake original analysis in their projects, although the course will not cover analytical techniques (students should draw on analytical strategies learned in other courses). Papers will be scaffolded in the following way.

- Step 1: State a research question (**DUE: Feb. 20**) 10%
- Step 2: Annotated bibliography (**DUE: Mar. 17**) 10%
- Step 3: Partial draft, 5-10pp (**DUE: Mar. 31**) 15%
- Step 4: Complete Rough Draft/Submit for Peer-Review (**DUE: April 23 in-class**) 15%
- Step 5: Return Peer-Review (**DUE: April 30 in-class**) 5%
- Step 6: Final Draft (**DUE: May. 12**). 45%

VI. Policies on late work, make-ups and extra credit

- A. *Can I submit an assignment late?* Students may submit an assignment after its due date for a 5% (off the total possible score) penalty per-24-hour period that the assignment is late.
- B. *What if I miss an exam?* Make-up exams are only given in the case of verified illness or family emergency, such as a death in the family. Documentation is necessary to receive a qualified make-up examination. Students who arrive late to an in-class exam may still sit for the exam if no other student has already submitted their exam; once a single student hands-in their exam, no others may begin the exam.
- C. *Do you offer extra credit?* No.
- D. *What can I do if I perform poorly on an assignment?* Students who receive a 72% or less on a homework assignment or essay (not exam) may re-do the assignment for a replacement grade. Re-do assignments are subject to a 5% per day penalty starting

from the day graded assignments were returned to students in class (regardless of attendance). Assignments that were originally submitted past the due date are NOT eligible for re-do.

VII. Resources for Students

College can be a stressful experience. It is normal to sometimes feel overwhelmed, out of place, or, insecure. Self-care strategies are important for maintaining your physical, emotional, and academic health. Developing self-awareness about stress, anxiety, or health issues is an important part of your development and success as a student. The following campus resources are available to you to help you learn to manage the complexities of your college:

[Center for Academic Advising, Retention, and Transitions](#)

[Compliance, Diversity, and Ethics \(including sexual misconduct and harassment; Title IX\)](#)

[Counseling and Psychological Services](#)

[Disability Services](#)

[Financial Aid](#)

[International Programs and Services](#)

[Learning Services](#)

[Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning Resources](#)

[Mathematics Tutoring Center](#)

[Military Alliance Program](#)

[Office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Multicultural Education](#)

[Student Conduct](#)

[Student Health Services](#)

[University Career Services](#)

[University Life](#)

[University Writing Center](#)

VIII. Texts

The reading assignments are chosen to buttress and expand on the analytic foundation laid in class. **Please notify the instructor about problems obtaining the readings as soon as possible.** The following materials are required and can be found at the campus bookstore.

[Required Readings](#)

Acharya, Avidit, Matthew Blackwell, and Maya Sen. 2018. *Deep Roots: How Slavery Still Shapes Southern Politics*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Achen, Christopher H., and Larry M. Bartels. 2016. *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Cramer, Katherine J. 2016. *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*. Chicago ; London: University Of Chicago Press.

Desmond, Matthew. 2017. *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. 1 edition. New York: Broadway Books.

- La Raja, Raymond J., and Brian F. Schaffner. 2015. *Campaign Finance and Political Polarization: When Purists Prevail*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*. New York: Penguin Random House.
- Mason, Lilliana. 2018. *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. 1st edition. Chicago, Illinois; London: University of Chicago Press.
- McCarty, Nolan. *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know*[®]. Oxford University Press, 2019.
- Young, Donnagal Goldthwaite. 2019. *Irony and Outrage: The Polarized Landscape of Rage, Fear, and Laughter in the United States*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

*Items are on reserve at the Gateway Library at the Johnson Center

Recommended Reading

- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. 2015. *Between the World and Me*. 1 edition. New York: Spiegel & Grau.
- Gest, Justin. 2016. *The New Minority: White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality*. 1 edition. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Grossmann, Matt, and David A. Hopkins. 2016. *Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats*. 1 edition. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Hetherington, Marc J., and Jonathan D. Weiler. 2018. *Prius or Pickup?: How the Answers to Four Simple Questions Explain America's Great Divide*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Jardina, Ashley. 2019. *White Identity Politics*. 1st edition. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Kendi, Ibram X. 2019. *How to Be an Antiracist*. First Edition edition. New York: One World.
- Lee, Frances E. 2016. *Insecure Majorities: Congress and the Perpetual Campaign*. Chicago ; London: University Of Chicago Press.
- McConaughy, Corrine M. 2015. *The Woman Suffrage Movement in America: A Reassessment*. Reprint edition. Cambridge University Press.
- Schickler, Eric. 2016. *Racial Realignment: The Transformation of American Liberalism, 1932–1965*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Settle, Jaime E. 2018. *Frenemies: How Social Media Polarizes America*. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Sides, John, and Daniel J. Hopkins, eds. 2015. *Political Polarization in American Politics*. Edition Unstated edition. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Sides, John, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck. 2019. *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America*. 2 edition. Princeton University Press.

IX. Course Schedule and Reading Assignments

Tues., Jan. 21 COURSE INTRODUCTION, WORKFLOW, AND PLAN

PART I: DEMOCRACY AND POLARIZATION

- Thurs., Jan. 23** DEMOCRACY
Achen & Bartels, Chapters 1-2
- Tues., Jan. 28** DEMOCRACY
Achen & Bartels, Chapters 3-4
Levitsky and Ziblatt, Chapters 1-2
- Thurs., Jan. 30** DEMOCRACY AND POLARIZATION
Levitsky and Ziblatt, Chapters 3-4
- Tues., Feb. 4** DEMOCRACY AND POLARIZATION
McCarty, Chapters 1-2
Levitsky and Ziblatt, Chapters 5-6
- Thurs., Feb. 6** DEMOCRACY AND POLARIZATION
McCarty, Chapters 3-4
- Tues., Feb. 11** DEMOCRACY AND POLARIZATION
Achen & Bartels, Chapters 5-6
- Thurs., Feb. 13** POLARIZATION
Achen & Bartels, Chapter 7
McCarty, Chapter 5

PART II: IDENTITIES: POLITICAL, RACIAL, CLASS, SPACE

- Tues., Feb. 18** POLITICAL IDENTITY
Achen & Bartels, Chapter 8
Mason, Chapters 1-3
- Thurs., Feb. 20** POLITICAL IDENTITY
Achen & Bartels, Chapter 9
Mason, Chapters 4-6
****State your research question, due on BB by midnight****
- Tues., Feb. 25** REGIONALISM AND RURAL AMERICA, PART I
Cramer, Chapters 1-4
- Thurs., Feb. 27** REGIONALISM AND RURAL AMERICA, PART II
Cramer, Chapters 5-8
- Tues., Mar. 3** **Midterm Exam** (In-class essay exam, open note)

- Thurs., Mar. 5** REGIONALISM AND URBAN AMERICA, PART I
Desmond, Prologue - Chapter 8
- Tues., Mar. 10 –** SPRING BREAK
Thurs., Mar. 12
- Tues., Mar. 17** REGIONALISM AND URBAN AMERICA, PART III
Desmond, Chapters 9 – 16
****Annotated Bibliography due on BB by midnight****
- Thurs., Mar. 19** REGIONALISM AND URBAN AMERICA, PART IV
Desmond, Chapters 17-24
- Tues., Mar. 24** POLARIZATION AND RACE IN AMERICA
Avidit, Blackwell, and Sen, Chapters 1-4
- Thurs., Mar. 26** **NO CLASS TODAY**
(Professor will be the Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association)
- Tues., Mar. 31** POLARIZATION AND RACE IN AMERICA
Avidit, Blackwell, and Sen, Chapters 5-9
****Partial draft, 5-10pp, due on BB by midnight****

PART III: CAMPAIGNS AND MEDIA

- Thurs., April 2** POLARIZATION AND CAMPAIGN FINANCE
La Raja & Schaffner, Chapters 1 – 2
McCarty, Chapter 6
- Tues., April 7** POLARIZATION AND CAMPAIGN FINANCE
La Raja & Schaffner, Chapters 3-6
- Thurs., April 9** POLARIZATION AND MEDIA
Young, Chapters 1-2
- Tues., April 14** POLARIZATION AND MEDIA
Young, Chapters 3-5
- Thurs., April 16** POLARIZATION AND MEDIA
Young, Chapters 6-8
- Tues., April 21** POLARIZATION AND MEDIA
Young, Chapters 9-11

PART IV: DEMOCRATIC PERIL

- Thurs., April 23.** POLARIZATION CONSEQUENCES
McCarty, Chapters 7-8
****Complete rough draft due IN-CLASS****
- Tues., April 28** DEMOCRATIC DECLINE
Levitsky and Zigblatt, Chapters 7-9
- Thurs., April 30** POLARIZATION SOLUTIONS, PART I
Achen & Bartels, Chapters 10 – 11
Mason, Chapters 7-8
****PEER REVIEW DUE IN-CLASS****
- Tues., May 12** FINAL PAPERS DUE BY 5PM