

Draft Syllabus

A final version of the syllabus will be available on the first day of class.

Toxic Rhetoric
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The valorization of the down-to-earth simplicity of the everyman is a mainstay of American politics; even Ivy League educated public servants affect the pose of being "just like us" as a means to discredit their critics and win political support for their ideas. To label someone as "elite" ("a latte-drinking, Volvo-driving, egg-headed, French loving, sushi-eater") whether a politician, a reporter or an expert is to discredit the authenticity of his or her ideas. Elites are not to be trusted, and expertise is dangerous; intellectuals twist the facts and "hold average people in contempt." Conversely, the masses are considered by "educated" elites as ignorant, backward, rural, chauvinistic and bigoted. In this class we will explore both the roots of anti-intellectualism and its contemporary manifestations in the toxic rhetoric that currently dominates American political culture. To do this, we will immerse ourselves in some of the divergent media environments and eco-systems which feed the culture of American politics, including film, television, radio, blogs, print media, memes, posts, comments, tweets, etc., as well as academic literature. The syllabus, as it stands, can and will be altered according to current events, and these current events will be used to supplement our weekly discussions and analysis.

Requirements:

Attend and participate in class 10% (**Please note Attendance is mandatory, 3 classes may be missed without consequence, thereafter your final grade will be lowered by 1/3 of a letter grade for each unexcused absence**); oral report: 20%; short paper (7-8pp): 30% and final paper (10-12pp): **40%**.

January 9: Introduction.

January 16: From Main Stream to the Extremes

Readings:

—S. Appelrouth, "The Paranoid Style Revisited: Pseudo-Conservatism in the 21st Century," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 30 (2017): 342–368.

—Jeffrey M. Berry, Sarah Sobieraj, *The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the New Incivility* (2013).

—Short selections from the writings and appearances of pundits and commentators such as Ann Coulter, Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity, Michael Moore, Bill Maher, etc.

January 23: The Jefferson-Adams Race

Readings:

—Edward Larson, *A Magnificent Catastrophe: The Tumultuous Election of 1800, America's First Presidential Campaign* (2008), Selections.

January 30: An American Tradition.

Readings:

—Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (1963). Selections.

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February 6: Warring Speech

Readings:

- Documentary: *The Best of Enemies*
- M. Grynbaum, “Buckley vs. Vidal: When Debate Became Bloodsport,” NYT (July 24, 2015).
- Excerpts from the Clinton-Trump Debates

February 13: Racializing Toxicity:

Readings:

- I. H. López, *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class*.

February 20: Making Extremes in the Middle of It All:

Readings:

- Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas* (2009). Selections.

February 27: Tales from the Right 1:

Readings:

- Joe Bageant, *Deer Hunting With Jesus* (2007). Selections.

March 6: Tales from the Right II:

Readings:

- A. R. Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land* (2016). Selections.

March 13: Resentment

Readings:

- S. Palin, *Going Rogue: An American Life* (2009). Selections.
- Film: *Game Change* (2012)
- Gary Wills, *Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self-made Man* (2002), 55-71.
- James Warren, “The Deep-Seated Roots of Donald Trump’s Resentment,” *Vanity Fair* (2017).

March 20: Cyber Worlds: Toxic Trolls

Readings:

- Adam Klein. *Fanaticism, Racism, and Rage Online Corrupting the Digital Sphere* (2017). Selections.
- Bryan T. Gervais, “Following the News? Reception of Uncivil Partisan Media and the Use of Incivility in Political Expression,” *Political Communication* 31: 4 (2014).
- Jay D. Hmielowski, Myiah J. Hutchens & Vincent J. Cicchirillo, “Living in an age of online incivility: examining the conditional indirect effects of online discussion on political flaming,” *Information, Communication & Society* 17:10 (2014).

March 27: SPRING BREAK – no class

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April 3: Twitter Toxic

Readings:

—COMPROP DATA MEMO, “Junk News and Bots during the U.S. Election: What Were Michigan Voters Sharing Over Twitter?” (2017).

—L. West, “I’ve left Twitter. It is unusable for anyone but trolls, robots and dictators” *The Guardian* (3 January 2017).

April 10: Post-Truth

Readings:

—Kurt Anderson, “How America Lost its Mind,” *The Atlantic* (September, 2017).

—B. Latour, “Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30:2 (2004): 225–248.

—N. Oreskes and E. M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (2011). Selections TBA.

April 17: Operationalized Knowledge and the “Ethics” of Politics

Readings:

—Herbert Marcuse, *The One-Dimensional Man* (1964).

—Max Weber—“Politics as a Vocation” (1919).

—René Gerard, *The Scapegoat* (1986), chapters 1-3.