“Topics in Civic Engagement: Partisanship and Polarization in American Politics: Origins and Remedies”
Winter Quarter 2018

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Description

American politics and voters are currently at the highest stage of polarization since the Civil War. As a result of the heightened state of the partisan divide, conflict between -- as well as within -- the branches of our government, including within the political parties themselves, has resulted in near gridlock on all but the most urgent of legislative issues. Meanwhile, the resolution of many policies on which there is broad public consensus -- from gun policy to entitlement reform to campaign finance reform to comprehensive immigration policy -- remains seemingly gridlocked. Not surprisingly, public confidence in our political leaders and our political institutions remains at historically low levels.

What is the origin of this bitter and seemingly irreconcilable divide? What are the historical antecedents for the emergence of deep partisan disagreements? What issues, developments or actions fueled the growth in polarization and all importantly, what can we as a nation do to find the common ground necessary to address longstanding challenges? The class will explore a multiplicity of explanations behind the emergence of our current divided society: the ramifications of civil rights movement and resulting changes in Southern politics; the rise of a newly competitive, conservative movement of the 1970s and 1980s; changes in the press, media and other forms of mass communications, including social media; the inadvertent results of efforts to reform political system including campaign finance, among other issues. And the class will explore credible steps we might take to restore a greater sense of comity, community and collaboration to our national politics.

Goals and Objectives

This class will explore the historical origins of contemporary polarization and partisanship, reaching back over 200 years to the concept and design of the United States government, and following through decades of political, cultural, technological and legal changes that have resulted in our current combative political environment. Readings will provide class participants with essential background for the discussions.
Class Meetings and Assignments

Class will meet weekly for 90 minutes. Students will be required to complete weekly readings and will be assigned the responsibility of leading a portion of each class’ discussion on the weekly topic. There will be two essays (3-4 pages) in which students will be called upon to summarize and synthesize key reading and discussion topics, and a final essay in which they will be required to identify and explain the most promising ways we can restore civility and bipartisanship to the political system.

Grading

Grading will focus on the three written assignments, the quality of the student’s leadership of class discussions, overall participation in discussions, and attendance.

Two Essays (50%)
Summary Essay (20%)
Class Attendance and Participation (30%)

Week 1. “Polarization in American Politics”
Reading:

Week 2 Is Polarization Exaggerated?
Reading:
- James M. Curry and Frances Lee “Congress Is Far More Bipartisan Than Headlines Suggest,” Washington Post (December 20, 2016)
Week 3. Race and Nationality as Drivers of Polarization
Reading:

Week 4. Causes: The Unintended Consequences of Reform
Reading:
- David C.W. Parker and Matthew, “The Weaponization of Congressional Oversight,” in Frisch and Kelly, Congress to the Extreme.
- David Rohde, Parties and Leaders in the Post-Reform House, Chapter 2, “Reform and Its Consequences.”
- Michael Lind, “This is What the Future of American Politics Looks Like,” Politico Magazine (May 22, 2016)

Week 5. Causes: The New Conservatism
Reading:
  https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixedgov/2014/06/13/asymmetrical-polarization-undermined-thoughts-on-the-new-pew-research-centers-report-on-political-polarization/
- Geoffrey Kabaservice, Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party from Eisenhower to the Tea Party [excerpt]
• Mike Lofgren, “Goodbye to All That” http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/3079:goodbye-to-all-that-reflections-of-a-gop-operative-who-left-the-cult

Week 6. Causes: Changes in Media and Messaging
Reading:
• Matthew Levendusky, How Partisan Media Polarize America [excerpt]
• Douglas Harris, “Let’s Play Hardball: Congressional Partisanship in the Television Age” in Frisch and Kelly, Politics to the Extreme, 94-115.
• Dan Kahan, “Partisan Media Are Not Destroying America,” http://www.culturalcognition.net/blog/2013/8/8/partisan-media-are-not-destroying-america.html

Week 7. Causes: Competition for Political Power
• Frances E. Lee, Insecure Majorities: Congress and the Perpetual Campaign (University of Chicago, 2016) [excerpt]

Week 8. Causes: Economics
Reading:
• Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches [excerpt]
• Arlie Hochschild, Strangers in their own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right {excerpt}

Week 9. Polarization and Congress
Reading:
• John Sides, “Gerrymandering Is Not What’s Wrong With American Politics,” Washington Post (February 3, 2013)

**Week: 10. Remedies: Collaboration of Conflict?**

**Reading**

• Peter Levine and Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, “The Republic is (Still) at Risk—and Civics is Part of the Solution” (Tufts University, 2017)