

**SYLLABUS**  
**HONORS SEMINAR: POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN AMERICA**

PSC 490, Spring 2015  
University at Buffalo, SUNY  
502 Park Hall  
12:30 – 1:50pm Tuesdays & Thursdays

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This course explores the political polarization of the American public and the major political parties. At the birth of the American national government at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the founding fathers wrote about how the extended republic of America dispersed and diluted factional differences, thus preventing a majority faction from gaining power and allowing governmental powers to be used in the service of the public interest. Later observers and commentators made note of the pragmatic and problem-solving bent of Americans. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, pragmatism was developed as a philosophy by notable American political philosophers (William James, Charles Pierce, John Dewey). As late as the 1950s and 1960s, prominent scholars of American politics wrote about the relative tranquility of American politics, that America was free from the ideological turmoil that embroiled many European nations, that America was born without an economic class system and thus never generated the intense ideological divides many other nations. American politics was more bounded than that of other democratic republics. The political parties overlapped to the point that they were sometimes cynically characterized as the Alice-in-Wonderland's characters of Tweedle-dee and Tweedle-dum.

If American politics were ever really as placid and tranquil as some hoped and suggested they were, and even these earlier portrayals never suggested that our politics were conflict free or that they did not occasionally blow up with respect to particular issues (most noticeably the issues surrounding race, both before and after the Civil War), they certainly are not now. For several decades now, American citizens and American political parties have been said to be deeply and intensely divided—in a word, polarized. Polarization is generally seen as a dysfunctional condition, one that creates a number of problems for both government and society.

From a theoretical perspective, this is not supposed to happen—and not from just the theory of conflict espoused by the founders in the Federalist Papers. Theories of political competition and American political culture as well as the conventional wisdom about the moderation of crucial swing voters in elections suggest that American politics ought to be pulled strongly to the political center. Yet, throughout American history there have been periods marked by substantial political division. In recent decades, it has become clear that both the American public and the political parties are deeply and widely divided, that fewer Americans and elected representatives are the middle of the road, and that polarization is not just about a specific political leader, but a seemingly constant condition of our politics. Compromise has become more difficult and gridlock more common.

This course asks the question: What is going on? How can a nation go from being non-ideologically exceptional to bitterly divided in the span of just four decades? More specifically, we will investigate polarization from a number of angles and will explore a number of questions about polarization in American politics – its existence, its measurement, its growth, its causes, its consequences, and how it might change in the future and what might cause changes in polarization.

Along the way, there are numerous puzzles and questions to contemplate and investigate. Nine questions are central to any consideration of polarization, whether within the public or between the political parties. These nine central questions are:

(1.) The Question of Definition: What precisely is polarization and how can it be measured?

(2.) The Question of the Extent of Polarization: How severely are Americans polarized?

There are always differences in the American public, but those differences are not consistently of the same degree. Sometimes differences are relatively minor and sometimes they are intense. In the middle of the nineteenth century, they boiled over into The Civil War. How polarized are Americans now and how can we gauge the level of polarization?

(3.) The Question of the Change in Polarization: Has the extent or level of polarization in the public and between the political parties changed throughout history and particularly in recent decades? If so, how great was the change?

When and why did polarization in the public and between the parties change?

Did the increase in polarization between party leaders precede the increase in polarization in the public or did the increased polarization of the public take place first? Was the increase in polarization a top-down or bottom-up process and why? What is the evidence for either?

(4.) The Question of the Reasons for Greater Party Polarization: There seems to be a general consensus that the parties have become more polarized in recent decades. They are less ideologically heterogeneous than they once were. Conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans are now rare. Why has this change taken place?

Have political leaders caused the parties to be more polarized? In the 2000s, Gary Jacobson wrote *A Divider, Not a Uniter* about the Bush presidency. Was this insightful about the impact of leaders on polarization, or a cheap shot at a president who would have been viewed by the polarized eyes of voters anyway?

Others suggest that the media is the cause of greater party polarization. Still others think that partisan gerrymandering is responsible, or the extremism of some party activists.

(5.) The Question of Asymmetric Party Polarization: Some have claimed that the Republican Party has veered far to the right while the Democratic Party has remained a left-of-center party. Is this the case? Has the increased polarization between the political parties been caused by both parties equally or by one party more than the other? Why? What is the evidence?

(6.) The Question of the Median Voter: Why are the political parties polarized at all?

Why doesn't the Downsian logic (Anthony Downs wrote the classic and highly influential *An Economic Theory of Democracy* in 1957) of the pull to the median centrist voter caused the parties to converge together at the center of the electorate? The claim is that the motivation of the parties to compete for the votes of a majority of voters should drive the parties to the center, but study after study indicates that they do not converge. Instead, they are highly polarized. Why?

(7.) The Question of Ultimate Causes: What are the root and immediate causes of polarization and any changes in the extent of polarization? What are/were we polarized about? Is polarization based on divergent economic interests or is there a more cultural or philosophic basis for polarization in values? If values are at the root, what value structures undergird polarization in modern American politics? Is it a tension of equality versus liberty?

(8.) The Question of Consequences: How does polarization in the public or between the parties affect other aspects of our politics (turnout, representation, efficiency in governing)?

Does polarization increase voter turnout? Does polarization increase partisanship?  
Does polarization cause government gridlock and reduce the passage of major legislation?

(9.) The Question of Cures: What, if anything, can or should be done to mitigate any pathologies or dysfunctional consequences of highly polarized politics?

There are also several related questions that may involve both the question of measurement and the question of consequences of polarization:

The self-description of voters indicates that many more call themselves "conservative" than "liberal" and nearly as many adopt the conservative label as those who declare themselves "moderates" or "don't know." Since the parties are more clearly aligned now, with most conservatives identifying with the Republicans and most liberals with the Democrats, why don't conservative Republicans dominate in elections?

Why are there routinely more conservatives defecting to vote for Democrats than liberals defecting to vote for Republicans?

Why do self-declared moderates tend to vote for the Democratic Party's presidential candidate?

With respect to the three questions above, does the left-wing tilt of the mass media skew perceptions of what position is truly centrist in the nation, causing some liberals who are less leftist than the media to think of themselves as moderates and causing some moderates to call themselves conservatives (because they are more conservative than a left-wing media, though not conservative compared to those in the center of the public's perspectives).

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Course grades will be based on two considerations: class participation (including your leadership of a class discussion) and your research or critical review paper. These will be weighted equally in computing your overall course grade. Each student will be assigned two weeks to be a discussion leader or a co-leader with another student. This will begin in Week 2.

Class participation in a seminar is not optional. After the first week of class, the professor should not talk any more than any member of the class. Do not just sit back and wait to be asked a question. Ask questions and offer criticisms and observations. It is expected that you will state and defend your views about the research examined each week.

The critical review paper can be one of two sorts. You can either write a critical review essay on a book about polarization or write an essay on an aspect of polarization in American politics. I will prepare a list of possible books for critical essay papers and distribute it in the second week of the class. You should select a book or identify a research question for your essay by the beginning of the fourth week of the course. You must have my approval for your book selection or research paper topic. Whichever type of paper you choose to write, it should be approximately 10 pages in length though it can be longer if necessary, double-spaced, and properly referenced. Your paper will be evaluated based on its organization, clarity, originality, and analytical insightfulness—not just a statement of opinions or restatements or summaries of the books.

### EXPECTATIONS

You are expected to be prepared for each class meeting and to participate actively and constructively in class discussions. You are also expected to turn in class assignments when due. The major class assignment is the term paper, but short participation assignments (e.g., a question from the reading, a reaction to the reading, etc.) may also be assigned on occasion.

You should inform me of any absence from a seminar meeting. My contact information is at the top of the first page of this syllabus. Also, please let me know of any other concerns you might have about the course. You should also familiarize yourself with UB's policy regarding incomplete grades.

In more general terms, you are expected at all times to conduct yourself in accord with the university's policy regarding **Academic Integrity**. If you are not already familiar with UB's standards of academic responsibility and integrity, you should familiarize yourself with them at <http://academicintegrity.buffalo.edu/> You should also familiarize yourself with UB's policy regarding "Obstruction or Disruption in the Classroom" at <http://www.student-affairs.buffalo.edu/judicial/classroom.php>

### ACCESSIBILITY RESOURCES

UB's website indicates: "the University at Buffalo is committed to providing students with disabilities access to all the university's resources and programs. While this goal is shared across the campus community, AR coordinates requests for reasonable accommodations to help ensure that your needs are met in a timely and effective way. Accommodations are various modifications or adjustments that are made to provide people with disabilities equal opportunity to access information, programs, services. If you need to request an accommodation please contact us to arrange a meeting with AR staff." For more information see: <http://www.buffalo.edu/accessibility/students.php>

## CLASS READING

There are four books ordered for this class. The rest of the reading will be from journal articles, book chapters, and unpublished manuscripts. The required readings are:

Morris P. Fiorina with Jeremy C. Pope, Samuel J. Abrams. 2010. *Culture War? Myth of Polarized America*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Pearson.

Alan I. Abramowitz. 2011. *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy*. Yale University Press.

Christopher Ellis and James A. Stimson. 2012. *Ideology in America*. Cambridge University Press.

John R. Hibbing, Kevin B. Smith, and John R. Alford. 2014. *Predisposed: Liberals, Conservatives, and the Biology of Political Differences*. New York: Routledge.

James E. Campbell. Portions of the manuscript: *Polarized: The Reality of American Politics*.

About a dozen or so articles as indicated in the weekly assignment lists.

## READING ASSIGNMENTS

### WEEK 1. JANUARY 27 & 29

What is Political Polarization and Why is it Important?

Two Levels of Polarization:

Polarization in the Public & Polarization Between the Political Parties

What Do We Know and What Do We Not Know about Polarization?

Is Polarization a Myth? (Week1)

**Reading:**

Morris P. Fiorina (with Abrams and Pope), *Culture Wars?*, chapters 1, 2, and 3.

### WEEK 2. FEBRUARY 3 & 5

Is Polarization a Myth? (Week 2)

**Reading:**

Morris P. Fiorina (with Abrams and Pope), *Culture Wars?*, chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7.

### WEEK 3. FEBRUARY 10 & 12

Is Polarization a Myth? (Week 3)

Background: Mid-Twentieth Century American Politics

**Readings:**

Morris P. Fiorina (with Abrams and Pope), *Culture Wars?*, chapters 8, 9, 10 and Epilogue.

Morris P. Fiorina and Samuel J. Adams. 2008. "Political Polarization in the American Public," *Annual Review of Political Science*, v.11: 563-588.

Bernard R. Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and William N. McPhee. 1954. *Voting*. Chicago: University Press of Chicago. Chapter 14 (pp.305-23).

**WEEK 4. FEBRUARY 17 & 19**

Issue Attitudes and Polarization (Week1)

**Readings:**

Paul DiMaggio, John Evans, and Bethany Bryson. 1996. "Have Americans' Social Attitudes Become More Polarized?" *American Journal of Sociology*, v.102, n.3 (November) pp.690-755.

John H. Evans. 2003. "Have American's Attitudes Become More Polarized? – An Update," *Social Science Quarterly*, 84, no.1: 71-90.

**WEEK 5. FEBRUARY 24 & 26**

Issue Attitudes and Polarization (Week 2)

**Readings:**

Campbell manuscript *Polarized*, chapter 4: "Issues and Polarization."

Marc Hetherington. 2009. "Review Article: Putting Polarization in Perspective," *British Journal of Political Science*, v.39, n.2 (April): 413-48.

**WEEK 6. MARCH 3 & 5**

Polarization is Real. (Week1)

**Readings:**

Alan Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center*, chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4.

**WEEK 7. MARCH 10 & 12**

Polarization is Real. (Week 2)

**Readings:**

Alan Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center*, chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8.

**SPRING BREAK MARCH 17 & 19**

**WEEK 8. MARCH 24 & 26**

The Debate Continues

**Readings:**

Alan Abramowitz and Kyle L. Saunders. 2008. "Is Polarization a Myth?" *Journal of Politics*, v.70, n.2, (April) pp.542-55.

Morris P. Fiorina, Samuel A. Abrams, and Jeremy C. Pope. 2008. "Polarization in the American Public: Misconceptions and Misreadings," *Journal of Politics*, v.70, n.2 (April): 556-60.

Pew Research Center. 2014. *Political Polarization in the American Public*.

[www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org)

William G. Jacoby. 2014. "Is There a Culture War? Conflicting Value Structures in American Public Opinion," *American Political Science Review*, v.108, n.4 (November): 754-71.

**WEEK 9. MARCH 31 & APRIL 2**

An Examination of Political Ideologies (Week 1)

**Readings:**

Christopher Ellis and James A. Stimson. *Ideology in America*. Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4 .

**WEEK 10. APRIL 7 & 9**

An Examination of Political Ideologies (Week 2)

**Readings:**

Christopher Ellis and James A. Stimson. *Ideology in America*. Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8.

**WEEK 11. APRIL 14 & 16**

A Deep Source of Polarization? (Week 1)

**Readings:**

John R. Hibbing, Kevin B. Smith, and John R. Alford, *Predisposed*. Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4.

**WEEK 12. APRIL 21 & 23**

A Deep Source of Polarization? (Week 1)

**Readings:**

John R. Hibbing, Kevin B. Smith, and John R. Alford, *Predisposed*. Chapters 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9.

**WEEK 13. APRIL 28 & 30**

Why are the Parties Polarized at All?

**Readings:**

Anthony Downs. 1957. "The Statics and Dynamics of Party Ideologies" *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, chapter 8, pp.114-141.

Morris P. Fiorina. 1999. "Whatever Happened to the Median Voter?" Presented at the MIT Conference on Parties and Congress, Cambridge, MA, October 2, 1999.

Campbell manuscript Polarized, chapter 8: "Why are the Parties Polarized at All?"

**WEEK 14. MAY 5 & 7**

Consequences and Cures?

**Readings:**

Larry Summers. 2013. "When Gridlock is Good," *The Washington Post*, (August 14)

Norman J. Ornstein and Thomas E. Mann. 2013. "Gridlock is No Way to Govern," *The Washington Post*, (August 18).

Thomas E. Mann. 2014. "Admit It, Political Scientists: Politics Really Is More Broken Than Ever," *The Atlantic*, (May 26).

Sarah A. Binder. 2014. "Polarized We Govern?" *Center for Effective Public Management at Brookings*. (May).

**PAPER DUE, TUESDAY MAY 12TH**



### ***Student Learning Outcomes***

My hope is that this course will teach you to think more rigorously in general and particularly about political polarization and conflict. Beyond that, I hope is that the course will provide you with important information and theories regarding public opinion, representative democracy, and American political history. If successful, these learning outcomes will be useful to you in many capacities of everyday life, in your roles as active citizens, and in your occupations, should your careers move you toward an engagement in the political process and government. More specifically, students are expected by the end of the semester to have achieved the following learning outcomes:

1. Be familiar with different explanations of political polarization in American politics,
2. Understand the history and fundamental characteristics of American political differences,
3. Improve your ability to apply social scientific reasoning,
4. Improve your ability to express clearly their reasoning in both written and verbal forms,
5. Be able to interpret statistics applied to social scientific questions, and
6. Understand the consequences and responses to political polarization in modern American politics.

**Grades:** Grades on the two components of your overall course grade are based on 100 point scale. Numerical grades are rounded. The numerical and letter grades are associated as follows:

Letter Grade	Numerical Grade
A	91.5 to 100
A-	89.5 to 91.4
B+	87.5 to 89.4
B	81.5 to 87.4
B-	79.5 to 81.4
C+	77.5 to 79.4
C	71.5 to 77.4
C-	69.5 to 71.4
D+	67.5 to 69.4
D	59.5 to 67.4
F	59.4 and below