

GOVT-4238-20 Political Polarization

Professor Daniel Brumberg, Department of Government
dbrumberg@gmail.com

Class Overview:

In recent years, political, social and ideological polarization has undermined both emerging and well established democracies. It has been fostered not only by local or national forces, but also by the globalization of media and communication, as well as the accelerated pace of global economic change. In the case of the US, polarization is certainly not new. The late sixties and seventies was a time of massive social, political and ideological division. This course provides a comprehensive overview of the social, institutional, political, and technological forces that are driving polarization, as well as some of the strategies, tools and approaches that have been proposed to address, mitigate or reduce its effects? Our particular concern is the impact of polarization on the stability and effectiveness of liberal democratic institutions and practices in the United States. This fundamental was of course prompted by the election of Donald Trump and the ensuing four years of escalating division and conflict in the US. His “populist” brand of politics—and indeed the wider phenomenon of populism itself—was both a consequence and an accelerator of polarization. Thus one of the underlining questions in this course is not only how polarization disrupts democracy, but how and why in the US—and in many other Western democracies—it has also fed the emergence of populist nationalist movements and leaders.

To even to begin address these difficult questions this course is divided into the following sections:

Part One asks what democracy is and what polarization is and how (and why) the two are linked.

Part Two highlights a wide range of social science theories and approaches to the study of polarization, with at the forcing driving polarization and populism US politics. Some of these factors are rooted in social science theory, and thus draw from the study of comparative politics, economics, sociology and even psychology. In addition, we will review several articles drawn from the field of media studies. In short, our approach will be eclectic and inter-disciplinary.

Part Three looks the impact of polarization and populism on the functioning of liberal democracy in the US. We are especially interested in evolution of electoral politics, the rise of populist ideologies animated by racism and nativism, the role of conspiracy theories, and the wider assault on elites and the notion of fact or science based truths.

Part Four draws from several of these various fields to focus on conflict resolution approaches and strategies—both micro and macro—that scholars, political activists, religious leaders and innovators in the arts, theater and media have proposed to address polarization.]

Class Requirements:

The success of this class will depend in no small on your active participation in it. Coming to class well prepared requires not only a careful reading of all the assigned readings for each class, but also a readiness to engage in constructive dialogue, which requires not only intelligent articulation of ideas, but also close listening. Indeed, as you will soon see, while the readings can be challenging, they are not onerous in terms of length. Their role is to help us be better analysts, and beyond this, to spur on class conversation and real world events that are affecting the nature of the society and democracy we live in.

Thus everyone in this class will be required to do a least one in class presentation of a reading or set of readings. The purpose of these presentation is to allow you to in effect be the class leader and **teacher** by highlighting key points that can be the basis for a vigorous class conversation. In addition to one class presentation, you will write a take-home midterm and final, each about 12 double spaced pages –max. Class participation will represent 15 percent of the grade, the midterm 40 percent and the final 50 percent of the grade. (Yes, this does add to more than 100!).

Readings: All readings on Canvas.

PART ONE: DEMOCRACY AND POLARIZATION

Class 1: What is Polarization and Why does it Matter?

Read: "[How Facebook Incubated the Insurrection](#)," *NYT*, January 17, 2021

Questions:

- 1) How does this article help explain division, polarization and conflict?
- 2) What is the difference between these three things?
- 3) In short, what specifically do we mean by "polarization?"
- 4) Why is "Facebook" a "structural force" and why is *not* a structural force?

Read: Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue, "Introduction," in their edited volume, [Democracies Divided, The Global Challenge of Political Polarization](#), (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press) pp.1-13. (Available online at GU Library: See this link!).

Class 2: What is Liberal Democracy and Why Does Polarization Undermine it?

Philippe Schmitter and Kary Lynn Terry, "[What Democracy is and Is Not](#)," *Journal of Democracy*, Summer 1991.

Imer Flores, "[The Problem of Democracy](#) in Contexts of Polarization" Georgetown Law Center, Washington DC 2013.

Anna Grzymala-Busse, [Global Populisms and Their Challenges](#), Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Stanford University, March 2020.

Questions:

- 1) What do Schmitter and Karl mean by “bounded uncertainty” and “contingent consent,” and how are these two related? Hint: democratic rules and the power that shapes them make some political outcomes more likely than others. Democracy requires some measure of uncertainty in outcomes since no one would vote if they knew that their interests or parties would be defeated each and every time. But democracy also involves a measure of certainty, as some outcomes are more likely than others.
- 2) How does Flores describe the relationship between democracy and polarization?
- 3) Flores argues that polarization involves both inclusion and exclusion. What does he mean? Why is the fear of exclusion such a driver of polarization?
- 4) What is populism? Why and in what ways do populist concepts of politics clash with the assumptions, institutions and values of liberal democratic governance?

Class Three: Polarization: An Overview

Jennifer McCoy et. al, "[Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy](#): Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities," *American Behavioral Scientist* 2018, Vol. 62(1) 16 –42

Questions:

- 1) The authors argue that polarization has a “common pattern and set of dynamics.” What are these? Why are they global?
- 2) The authors argue that polarization has two features, relational (or what might otherwise be called “structural” and “instrumental,” meaning how it is used and abused by political leaders. What do they mean? Why is it important to focus on both structural forces and the actions of leaders (i.e agency)?

PART TWO: THE DRIVERS OF POLARIZATION IN THE US AND BEYOND

Class Four: The US—an Overview (What are we trying to explain?)

Carothers, “The Long Path of Polarization in the United States,” in Carothers and O’Donohue, *Democracies Divided* (link above), pp. 65-92.

“McKay Coppins, [The Man](#) (Newt G). who Broke Politics,” *The Atlantic*, November 2018

Questions:

- 1) What are the leading drivers of polarization in the US? How have they reinforced one another?

Class Five: Cross Cutting and Overlapping Social Cleavages: Bowling Alone?

Thomas Sander and Robert Putnam, “[Democracy's Past](#) and Future: Still Bowling Alone? - The Post-9/11 Split,” *Journal of Democracy*, [Volume 21, Number 1, January 2010](#), pp. 9-16. (If you have not read the original Bowling Alone article go to ([Journal of Democracy](#), Summer 1995.).

Recommended:

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J.P. Maier, trans. George Lawrence (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1969), Chapter 5, “Townships and Municipalities,” and Chapter 10, “Political Associations in the United States.” Available [online](#) at GU Library.

Question:

- 1) What does the term “social cleavages” mean? What does the term “social capital” mean?
- 2) Why is it important for social cleavages to overlap? What happens when they coincide?
- 3) What was Putnam concerned about people “Bowling Alone” in the US?
- 4) Why did AdT argue that political associations were important?

Class Six: Economic Globalization, Polarization and Populism

Anna Grzymala-Busse, [Global Populisms and Their Challenges](#), Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Stanford University, March 2020.

Questions:

- 1) What is populism and what is its possible relationship to polarization.
- 2) What role do economic and social factors play in the rise of populism?
- 3) What role do leaders play in fomenting populism?

Dani Dodri, “[Populism and](#) the economics of globalization,” *Journal of International Business Policy* (2018).

David Autor, David Dorn, Gordon Hanson, and Kaveh Majles, “[Importing Political](#) Polarization? The Electoral Consequences of Rising Trade Exposure,” *American Economic Review* 2020, 110(10): 3139–3183

Questions:

- 1) What is the relationship between economic globalization, polarization and populism?
- 2) Why does rising “trade exposure” foster polarization and populism?
- 3) How does the US fit into these dynamics?

Class Seven: Inequality and the Psychology of Populism

Onni Hirvonen, “[Populism as](#) a pathological form of politics of recognition,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 2019, Vol. 22(1) 27–44.

Questions:

- 1) What does the author mean by the “politics of recognition?”
- 2) What does it mean to say that populism is a “pathological” form of the politics of recognition?
- 3) How does the US context fit into these dynamics?

Class Eight, Geography, Sectional Voting, Pillars and Bubbles

Seth C McKee and Jeremy M Teigen, “Probing the reds and blues: Sectionalism and voter location in the 2000 and 2004 U. S. presidential elections,” *Political Geography* Volume 28, Issue 8, November 2009, Pages 484-495.

Greg Martin, “[The Real Culprit](#) Behind Geographic Polarization” *The Atlantic*, November 26, 2018.

Questions:

- 1) How did “voter location” play a role in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections?
- 2) What, according to Martin, is the “real culprit” or the key force in the context of geographic polarization in the US?

Class Nine: Class Eight: Misinformation, Bubbles, “Alternative Facts”

Stephan Lewandowsky, “[Beyond Misinformation](#): Understanding and Coping with the “Post-Truth” Era” *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* 6 (2017)353–369.

[Lee de-Wit](#), [Sander van der Linden](#), [Cameron Brick](#) “[Are Social Media](#) Driving Political Polarization?”, *Greater Good Magazine*, January 16, 2019

Class Ten: Media Bubbles and Polarization

Kevin Arceneaux, "Does Media Fragmentation Produce Mass Polarization? Selective Exposure and a New Era of Minimal Effects?" Manuscript (PDF).

Alessandro Bessi et. al, "[Science vs Conspiracy](#): Collective Narratives in the Age of Misinformation," *PLOS ONE* February 23, 2015

Class Eleven: The Social Psychology of Polarization

Samantha Moore- Berg [The prime psychological](#) suspects of toxic political polarization," *CurrentOpinioninBehavioralSciences*2020,34:1–6

Alan Abramowitz, "[The Ideological Foundations](#) of Affective Polarization in the U.S. Electorate," *American Politics Research* 2017, Vol. 45(4) 621 –647

PART THREE: OUTCOMES: POLARIZATION IN THE US: A PERFECT STORM?

Start By Reading Carothers Above on US Politics , and then:

Class Twelve: Party Alignment and the Missing Middle in the US

Larry Bartels, "[Failure to Converge](#): Presidential Candidates, Core Partisans, and the Missing Middle in American Electoral Politics," *ANNALS, AAPSS*, 667, September 2016, ppl 143-165.

Class Thirteen: Voting Ideologies, Less Defections=Polarization and Voting Alone

Scott Harris, "[Not swinging Together](#): Partisan defection in the age of political polarization," *The Social Science Journal*, (April, 2020) pp.1-20.

James Fallows, "[First Bowling Alone](#), Now Vaulting Together," *The Atlantic*, September 28, 2014.

Yoni Appelbaum, "[Why Donald](#) Trump Supporters Are Voting Alone" *The Atlantic*, April 7, 2016

PART THREE: MITIGATING POLARIZATION: DETERRENTS, STRATEGIES AND HOPES

Class Fourteen: Big Strategies

Jennifer McCoy, "[Overcoming Polarization](#)," *Journal of Democracy*, [Volume 32, Number 1, January 2021](#) pp.6-21.

Class Fifteen: Political Reforms/Electoral Reforms

https://www.fairvote.org/why_reform

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x6YN7gf3Jzg>

<https://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/2018/08/01/two-voting-reforms-counter-americas-hyperpolarization/ideas/essay/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/10/us/politics/ranked-choice-voting.html>

Class Sixteen: Mirco Strategies

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6kZpN5T3IU&t=4s>

<https://livingroomconversations.org/about-us/>

<https://www.inyourshoesproject.org/>

Addendum: Title IX Syllabus Statement

Georgetown University and its faculty are committed to supporting survivors and those impacted by sexual misconduct, which includes sexual assault, sexual harassment, relationship violence, and stalking. Georgetown requires faculty members, unless otherwise designated as confidential, to report all disclosures of sexual misconduct to the University Title IX Coordinator or a Deputy Title IX Coordinator. If you disclose an incident of sexual misconduct to a professor in or outside of the classroom (with the exception of disclosures in papers), that faculty member must report the incident to the Title IX Coordinator, or Deputy Title IX Coordinator. The coordinator will, in turn, reach out to the student to provide support, resources, and the option to meet. [Please note that the student is not required to meet with the Title IX coordinator.]. More information about reporting options and resources can be found on the Sexual Misconduct Website: <https://sexualassault.georgetown.edu/resourcecenter>.

If you would prefer to speak to someone confidentially, Georgetown has a number of fully confidential professional resources that can provide support and assistance. These resources include:

Health Education Services for Sexual Assault Response and Prevention: confidential email sarp@georgetown.edu

Counseling and Psychiatric Services (CAPS): 202.687.6985 or after hours, call (833) 960-3006 to reach Fonemed, a telehealth service; individuals may ask for the on-call CAPS clinician

More information about reporting options and resources can be found on the [Sexual Misconduct Website](#).

(Above statement and TIX faculty resources found at: <https://sexualassault.georgetown.edu/get-help/guidance-for-faculty-and-staff-on-how-to-support-students/>)

Title IX Pregnancy Modifications and Adjustments

Georgetown University is committed to creating an accessible and inclusive environment for pregnant students. At any point throughout their pregnancy students may request adjustments/modifications based on general pregnancy needs or accommodations based on a pregnancy-related complication or medical need. Students may also request accommodations following labor and delivery based on a complication or medical need.

SCS students must complete the [Pregnancy Adjustment Request Form](https://titleix.georgetown.edu/title-ix-pregnancy/student-pregnancy/) (<https://titleix.georgetown.edu/title-ix-pregnancy/student-pregnancy/>) and submit it to the SCS Deputy Title IX Coordinator at titleixscs@georgetown.edu. Upon receiving the completed form, the Deputy Title IX Coordinator will schedule a meeting with the student to discuss the requested adjustments and implementation process. More information about pregnancy modifications can be found on the [Title IX at Georgetown University Website](#).