Polarization in American Politics
PSC 82601

Spring 2018, Thurs. 6:30-8:30pm
Course location: room TKTK

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Course Description
Has the American public become more polarized? What about political elites running in elections and serving in government? Is there any connection between mass and elite polarization? Why does polarization seem to be taking place, and what are its consequences? This class will delve deeply into all of these questions. We will begin by taking a historical perspective and asking whether current levels of polarization within the U.S. government are unusually high, or whether the seemingly low levels from a half century ago were the real aberration. We will explore several different possible causes for why the parties in government have become more divided from each other over the past 50 years or so, including institutional, electoral, and activist-based explanations. After that, we will shift our attention to the mass public. We will examine evidence both for and against the notion that the American public is currently polarized, and try to document the specific ways in which the American public has—and has not—become more polarized over time (e.g., culturally, economically, geographically). To the extent that the public has polarized, we will explore possible causes including the influence of polarized elites and of polarized news media. Finally, we will analyze the consequences of elite and mass polarization—for public policy, for representation, and for public’s attitudes towards politics and government. Many of the readings in the class will be drawn from the American politics reading list – integrating both American institutions and processes.

Course Requirements
You must have a functioning Blackboard and GC email account that you regularly access.

You are expected to regularly, actively participate in class discussions. Everyone must critically read each assigned reading before class. You should be prepared to make informed and thoughtful comments regarding each author’s research question(s), the questions’ theoretical or empirical relevance, and the research design.

To facilitate your class preparation each week, beginning in week 2, I ask that you submit no later than NOON on the day of the class (electronically, via the link at the bottom of that week’s folder on Blackboard) a short “thought paper” on an issue raised by that week’s readings. These thought papers should not be treated as summaries of the readings. Instead, they should take one of the following forms:
1. Develop a counter-argument to a theoretical claim made in the week’s readings.
2. Discuss interesting connections between one of the week’s readings and other readings from that week or from a previous week.
3. Discuss an interesting question raised (by not answered) by the readings. How would you answer it?
4. Are there key dependent or independent variables that the authors neglected to address? Why is this failure important?
In addition, feel free to conclude (after your thoughts) with any questions you have about the readings that you would like me to address/clarify in class. These thought papers should have a maximum length of two double-spaced pages. They should be concisely written and have a clear point or argument. Because situations may arise making certain weeks particularly hectic for you, I will allow you to skip 3 out of the 12 weekly papers of your choosing without penalty (you must still attend those classes). However, any additional week you miss counts as a zero—no excuses. These weekly assignments, along with your weekly class participation, count as 50% of your course grade.

The other 50% of your grade will be based on a research proposal you will write. The proposal should lay out an empirical research question. You don’t have to answer it, but it needs to be answerable. Your question will ask how some independent variable(s) affect a dependent variable relevant to the class. You will also need to specify a theory that connects them, and discuss the kinds of evidence you would collect to answer your question. Think of the paper this way: you are writing the equivalent of the first half of the articles that we’ll read during the term: stating a question, outlining a theory, and stating you’ll how support that theory, without actually generating the evidence to test it. The essay should be no more than 10-12 double-spaced pages. We will discuss it extensively during class. The essay will be due at the assigned final exam time.

Readings
The course requires a wide array of readings, all of which I will post on our Blackboard site, either as links to electronic copies through the library or in pdf format. (*Readings marked by an asterisk denote a comparative politics perspective.)

Class Schedule (Readings subject to change. Changes will be announced on Blackboard)

Part 1: Background and Overview

1. Introduction to the Course & a (Brief) Primer on the Logic of Social Scientific Inquiry
   Required:
   Recommended:
   - Madison, Federalist 10

Part 2: Party Polarization in Government (Elite Polarization)

2. Are Party Elites More Ideologically Polarized than Usual? How Do We Measure?
   Required:
3. Is Party Conflict Truly Ideological, or Merely a Function of Institutional Context?

Required:

Recommended:
- Lee, Frances. 2009. *Beyond Ideology*, chs. 3 & 4 (pp. 47-102) Insecure Majorities

4. Did Electoral Institutions Cause It? (Gerrymandering and Primaries)

Required:

Recommended:

5. Did Strategic Choices of Vote-Seeking Elites Cause It? If So, Which Choices Were Key?

Required:
Part 3: Party Polarization in the Electorate (Mass Polarization)

7. Are Citizens More Polarized than Usual? How Do We Measure?

   Required:

   Recommended:

Part 3: Party Polarization in the Electorate (Mass Polarization)

7. Are Citizens More Polarized than Usual? How Do We Measure?

   Required:

   Recommended:
• http://www.people-press.org/2017/10/05/the-partisan-divide-on-political-values-grows-even-wider/
• https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/what-the-yankees-red-sox-rivalry-can-teach-us-about-political-polarization/

8. Geographic Polarization: Are Citizens Sorting Themselves into Red and Blue Regions?
   Required:

   Recommended:

   Required:

**Recommended:**

10. Does the Media Cause Mass Polarization?

**Required:**
• *Barberá, Pablo. 2015. "How social media reduces mass political polarization. Evidence from Germany, Spain, and the US." Paper prepared for APSA meeting.

**Recommended:**

http://www.journalism.org/2014/10/21/political-polarization-media-habits/

11. Are Citizens Divided by Social Issues or by Economic Issues?

Required:


Recommended:


Part 4: Consequences

12. What are the Consequences for Governing?

Required:


Recommended:


13. What are the Consequences for Public Opinion and Elections?

Recommended:

Part 5: New Research Ideas

14. Class Presentations