

POSC 269: I Did My Own Research: Information and Political Division in America¹

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Library 344, MW 12:30-1:45; F 1:10-2:10

Office Hours: 11am-12pm on Mondays in Willis, Room 414

"We have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals."

—Audre Lorde

Statement of Course Purpose

Scholars, journalists, and the American public broadly agree that political divisions in the United States today are deep and growing. The two major parties seem to have grown more cohesive and more distant from each other, and their supporters view each other with suspicion and growing hostility. An October 2021 poll by the University of Virginia Center for Politics showed that 80% of Biden voters and 84% of Trump voters believed that elected officials of the opposite party present a "clear and present danger to American democracy." Even further, 75% of Biden voters and 78% of Trump voters believed that the opposing party's supporters were a "clear and present danger to the American way of life."

Many Americans and observers of American politics sense that polarization has made governance more difficult and less effective; a growing chorus of scholars argues that deep polarization can undermine democracy itself. How do we manage issues of race, ethnicity, and immigration in a polarized political era? How can we be good citizens of the world when Americans have such mixed views and take such mixed actions in engaging with identity hierarchy? And how can we ever agree if we are so free to pursue information that only supports what we already believe?

In a climate of political polarization, it has become more difficult to gain a shared understanding not just of the values in dispute but also the relevant facts. This course addresses this concern by examining policy disputes like incarceration and policing, free speech, LGBTQ rights, health and medical care, and electoral politics, focusing on differences within and across groups and how group boundaries are made stronger or weaker by information. We consider how to reduce unproductive polarization and how we can promote a better America when we do not agree on what "better" entails. We will investigate why so many Americans embrace conspiracy theories, reject ideas with a strong scientific consensus, and accept ideas lacking scientific support. We will also examine the production and consumption of false information and how a person can navigate the Wild West of claims and counterclaims easily accessible online.

¹ NOTE: All course materials including but not limited to class notes, lectures, handouts, and presentations are the copyrighted materials of the professor. The copying and sale of any such materials will subject the involved parties to the provisions of the Federal Copyright Act. This syllabus does not constitute a binding contract and any aspect of the course, including but not limited to assignments, readings, or requirements, may be changed at the discretion of the professor for any reason and at any time.

Upon completion of **I Did My Own Research**, students should be able to:

Overall Course Objectives

- Cultivate an appreciation for the process, structure, and context of deliberative democracy
- Feel like a more informed citizen of the United States and of the world
- Develop a deeper understanding of the power of the spoken and written word

Specific Learning Objectives

- Apply readings on politics and psychology to public policy and American politics
- Assess the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to the study of information, sorting and polarization, and political communication
- Clearly apply communicate theories of political science and psychology to verbal and written assignments

Classroom expectations

Mutual respect: I highly value class discussion and interaction. Learning from you is one of the joys of my job and I regard it as an integral part of the learning experience. I look forward to hearing your thoughts about how the course material informs our understanding of current events.

Although I will spend some of our class time lecturing, we will have many dialogues, both in class and online. In these discussions, you are encouraged to use your personal experiences and perspectives as well as your understanding of the course material and current events. Let's commit ourselves to treating our colleagues— especially the ones whose ideas are very different from our own—as treasured, even beloved colleagues. Let's keep classroom discussions to ourselves and not disparage one another to others outside the class for things expressed here. Direct attacks or insults toward anyone inside or outside the class based on their identity, including (but not limited to) race, ethnicity, gender identity, age, national origin, sexual orientation, religious affiliation (or lack of one), ideology, political party affiliation, or national background is not permitted. This is not an exhaustive list. Violations of these rules will be reflected in your grade and, if they continue, may result in disciplinary action by the College.

Pronouns and Identity: My pronouns are he/him/his. I will happily call you by whatever name and gender pronouns you want me to use and will ensure everyone else does as well. If you feel more comfortable sharing that information with me privately, I am happy to speak with you in a confidential setting. In all cases, I am committed to making this class into an intellectually inclusive space where we respect the diversity of every student. Your intellectual development and your skills as a critical thinker and writer remain my pre-eminent concerns.

Attendance and Participation: Attendance and participation are essential in this course. Each class meeting will be different, with different goals, activities, and outcomes. One of the key components is the opportunity for you to demonstrate your ongoing mastery of the material. Your learning depends on your attentive involvement in class activities and including taking notes, listening carefully to the ideas of your classmates, engaging others in discussion and debate, and reading assigned materials in advance of class discussion.

One of my primary goals is to empower students to claim their own education. I emphasize discussion and limit the number (and length) of my lectures. This discussion-based format means that you, along with your classmates, bear a lot of responsibility for the success of the class. You must hold each other accountable for the claims that you make and the ideas you express. And you must make sure that you come to class prepared with some thoughts/questions so that we can have respectful and productive discussions about the material.

Academic Integrity: It is assumed that a student is the author of all course work (quizzes, problem sets, online contributions, tests, papers, lab work, etc.) that they submit, whether for a grade or not, and that the work has not been submitted for credit in another class without the instructor's written permission. Images, ideas, data, audio clips, or phrases borrowed from others should be fully identified by standard procedures for making such acknowledgment. All permitted collaboration with others must still be acknowledged. It is recommended that all students consult the College's [Writing Across the Curriculum website](#) for additional guidance on plagiarism and how to avoid plagiarism in their writing.

An act of academic dishonesty is a serious offense in a college community. By seeking credit for work that is not their own, a student takes unfair advantage of fellow students—who accept their limitations—and of their professors who trust their work. Dishonesty in academic work, particularly in the form of plagiarism, cheating, or prohibited collaboration, defeats the process of self-discovery that is the heart of a liberal education. Persons establish their integrity and personality as they learn to distinguish what is significantly their own from what belongs to others and as they learn to value their own work, including its limitations, in relation to the work of others. Scholars should be generous and welcoming in acknowledging the work of other scholars: their work makes ours possible too.

At Carleton College, an act of academic dishonesty is therefore regarded as conflicting with the work and purpose of the entire College and not merely as a private matter between the student and an instructor; all cases involving such dishonesty are referred for appropriate action to the Academic Standing Committee (ASC) via the Associate Dean of Students or the Associate Dean of the College. Please visit https://apps.carleton.edu/handbook/academics/?policy_id=21359 for more information.

Growth Mindset: Recognize that we ALL are learning, that we ALL make mistakes, that ALL of us say silly, uninformed, controversial, and rash things at one time or another. Engaging with your classmates who have views different from your own keeps **you** sharp. You should treat all with respect and appreciation even when you vigorously disagree with their arguments. I urge you to adopt a growth mindset for this course and all Carleton courses.

- Recognize that failure and disappointment frequently occur when we take on new intellectual challenges and develop new skills. Old skills and knowledge almost certainly won't be fully sufficient for your new endeavors.
- Feel free to seek new and stronger scholarly evidence for your arguments in the face of such disappointment
- Empower yourself to be an active facilitator of your education
 - Talk to your professors to understand their points of view and remember that we're often wrong ourselves!
 - Seek out the support of colleagues and trusted friends to read drafts of your papers. Ask questions and listen to the answers
 - Make appointments with the staff in the [Academic Support Center](#) to get help with your work.
 - Remember these steps aren't indicators of weakness; they're indicators of strength
- Develop structures for yourself so that you do not continually repeat prior writing errors so you train yourself to look for them and to self-correct
- Embrace an attitude of "progress, not perfection" rather than what writing scholars derisively call a one and done
- Treat yourself with kindness when feedback you receive doesn't turn out to be what you thought. View this kind of feedback as an opportunity to grow
- In short, **KEEP TRYING**.

Grading: More than anything, I value fairness in grading. I want you to know why you earned the grade that you did. If you don't, please ask! In an effort to be fair to those who complete assignments on time, I generally do not accept late papers/assignments will be accepted for credit without advanced approval; explicit instructions from OAR; or an emergency. Of course, I will make special arrangements to accept late assignments if you experience the death of a family member or if you are seriously ill. In the event of an emergency, please email me as soon as is practical and we'll make arrangements. As a matter of policy, please assume all assignments are due on the date listed in the syllabus without exception. You are strongly encouraged to print one copy of all papers for your own records before handing them in and to print drafts as you write and/or to make frequent backups in multiple locations. "Lost paper," "the printer didn't work" and "computer crash" claims will not be considered if you are unable to produce immediately an advanced draft of your paper.

If you believe your grade is inaccurate, please wait at least 24 hours before contesting it. Then write a brief letter explaining why you believe a mistake was made in grading your assignment.

After I have received and read the letter, we will schedule an appointment to discuss the matter; however, if you ask for a paper to be reevaluated, I reserve the right to reevaluate the entire contents of the assignment, and your grade can go up or go down as a result. Whenever possible, I encourage you to ask questions and clarifications about course assignments *before* turning them in.

Campus Resources:

Disability services: Carleton College is committed to providing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students. The Office of Accessibility Resources (Henry House, 107 Union Street) is the campus office that collaborates with students who have disabilities to provide and/or arrange reasonable accommodations. If you have, or think you may have, a disability (e.g., mental health, attentional, learning, autism spectrum disorders, chronic health, traumatic brain injury and concussions, vision, hearing, mobility, or speech impairments), please email OAR@carleton.edu or call Sam Thayer ('10), Director of the Office of Accessibility Resources (x4464), to arrange a confidential discussion regarding equitable access and reasonable accommodations.

Gould Library: Library staff can help you find and evaluate articles, books, websites, statistics, data, government documents, and more. [You can make an appointment with a librarian](#), get help via chat 24/7 from any page on the library's website, [email, or call](#). The Library building has lots of great study spaces too! For more information and hours, visit the Gould Library website at carleton.edu/library.

Student Well-Being: Your health and well-being should always be your first priority. At Carleton, there are a wide-array of resources to support students. It is important to recognize stressors you may be facing, whether they are personal, emotional, physical, financial, mental, or academic. Sleep, exercise, and connecting with others can be strategies to help you flourish at Carleton. For more information, check out [Student Health and Counseling](#) (SHAC), the [Office of Health Promotion](#), or the [Office of the Chaplain](#). For information on how to support mental health, visit [this site](#) full of good resources.

The Writing Center: The Writing Center is a space with peer writing consultants who can work with you during any stage of the writing process (brainstorming to final proofreading). Hours and more information can be found on the [writing center website](#). You can reserve specific times for conferences by using their [online appointment system](#).

Speech Coaching: A speech coach can help you practice and prepare for class presentations, comps talks, participation in class discussions, and speech-related events unrelated to coursework. The speech coach can work with you on tailoring your content for a particular audience, organization, clarity, persuasive impact, body language and eye contact, and dealing with stage fright. To request a meeting, visit the [Speech Coaching website](#).

Title IX: Carleton is committed to fostering an environment free of sexual misconduct. Please be aware all Carleton faculty and staff members, except for Chaplains and SHAC staff, are “responsible employees.” Responsible employees are required to share any information they have regarding incidents of sexual misconduct with the Title IX Coordinator. Carleton’s goal is to ensure campus community members are aware of all the options available and have access to the resources they need. If you have questions, please contact Laura Riehle-Merrill, Carleton’s Title IX Coordinator, or visit the Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Response website: <https://www.carleton.edu/sexual-misconduct/>

READINGS: All readings are available on Moodle.

BOOKS²:

- Harrison, Brian F. 2020. *A Change is Gonna Come: How to Have Effective Political Conversations in a Divided America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
[**DO NOT PURCHASE! AVAILABLE FOR FREE VIA GOULD LIBRARY WEBSITE**]
- Kreitner, Richard. 2020. *Break it Up: Secession, Division, and the Secret History of America's Imperfect Union*. Little, Brown
- Levitsky, Steven and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*. New York: Broadway Books.

Assessment and Evaluation: 40% of your grade will come from individual or partnered work and 60% will come from a term project completed with a group. Additional detail will be provided for each assignment below.

Your individual/small group work includes:

- 1 short paper (10%): Construct a question/argument derived from our readings and explore it further. *Done individually.*
- Discussion leadership & discussion questions (15%): Construct specific questions and lead discussion of one class meeting. *Done with a partner.*
- Participation and engagement (15%) include short writing assignments or other in-class activities. *Done individually.*

The final project is proposal of one solution to information and political division in America. Using the course readings as a backdrop, choose a case among the structures, institutions, organizations, corporations, etc. and explain how and why it needs to be restructured or revamped to help fix the problem.

² Course Materials Assistance (statement provided by TRIO): I recognize the potential financial burden of additional course fees, supply requirements, and travel costs. If you need assistance to cover course expenses, please speak with me by the second week of the term.

The final project includes:

Paper 1 (25%): How does your choice contribute to misinformation/disinformation, polarization, or division in American democracy?

Paper 2: (25%): What is your plan to reconstitute [your choice] to address the concerns you identified in paper 1? What are the boundaries or limits of information on the ability to change hearts and minds around this problem and your proposal to address it?

Presentation (10%): You'll deliver a professional, argumentative presentation at the end of the term summarizing the two papers.

Due dates:

Individual paper: Due Friday, January 28

Group paper #1: Due Wednesday, February 16

Group paper #2: Due Monday, March 7

Group presentations: In class on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, March 7, 9, & 11

Week 1: Introduction

- Wednesday, January 5
Syllabus, introductions
READ (in class): Thompson, Stuart A. 2022. "Election Falsehoods Surged on Podcasts Before Capital Riots, Researchers Find."
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/04/technology/apple-google-spotify-podcast-election-misinformation.html>
- Friday, January 7
READ: Leonhardt, David. 2021. "Bad News Bias," *New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/24/briefing/boulder-shooting-george-segal-astrazeneca.html?smid=tw-share>

LISTEN: "Both Things Can Be True," Hidden Brain;
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/hidden-brain/id1028908750?i=1000544146174>

Week 2: The Importance of Disagreement and Why We're Bad at It

- Monday, January 10
READ: Harrison, Chapters 1-3
- Wednesday, January 12
READ: Harrison, Chapters 4 & 5

- Friday, January 14

READ: Harrison, Chapters 6 & 7

LISTEN: "How to Find Common Ground With Your Most Problematic Family Members," *The Argument*; <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-argument/id1438024613?i=1000542933802>

Week 3: Identity Groups and Effects

- Monday, January 17

READ: Tajfel, Henri. 1981, Human Groups & Social Categories: Studies in Social Psychology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 3 (pp. 41-53) and Chapter 11 (223-243)

- Wednesday, January 19

READ: Walsh, Katherine Cramer. 2012. "Putting Inequality in its Place: Rural Consciousness and the Power of Perspective." *American Political Science Review* 106(3): 517-532.

- Friday, January 21

Visit from Sean Leahy, Reference and Instruction librarian

READ: Kane, John V, Lilliana Mason, and Julie Wronski. 2021. "Who's at the Party? Group Sentiments, Knowledge, and Partisan Identity." *The Journal of Politics* 83.4: 1783–1799

Week 4: Partisanship

- Monday, January 24

READ: Iyengar, Shanto, Yphtach Lelkes, Matthew Levendusky, Neil Malhotra, Sean J. Westwood. 2019. "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States." *Annual Review of Political Science* 2019 22:1, 129-146

- Wednesday, January 26

READ: Mason, Lilliana, Julie Wronski, and John V. Kane. 2021. "Activating Animus: The Uniquely Social Roots of Trump Support." *American Political Science Review*, 115: 1508-1516.

LISTEN: "Why Jan. 6th Was Not a Turning Point," *FiveThirtyEight Politics*; <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/fivethirtyeight-politics/id1077418457?i=100054695506>

- Friday, January 28

Individual paper due

READ: Mason, L. (2015). "I disrespectfully agree": The differential effects of partisan sorting on social and issue polarization. *American Journal of Political Science*, 59(1), 128-145.

LISTEN: "The Age of 'Mega-Identity Politics,'" *Vox Conversations*;
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-age-of-mega-identity-politics/id1081584611?i=1000410268072>

Week 5: Information & Information Processing

- Monday, January 31

READ: Taber, Charles S. and Milton Lodge. 2006. "Motivated skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs." *American Journal of Political Science*, 50(3): 755-769.

- Wednesday, February 2

READ: Druckman JN, Ognyanova K, Baum MA, et al. The role of race, religion, and partisanship in misperceptions about COVID-19. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*. 2021;24(4):638-657.
 doi:[10.1177/1368430220985912](https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430220985912)

- Friday, February 4

- **READ:** Dwoskin, Elizabeth. 2021. "Misinformation on Facebook got Six Times More Clicks than Factual News during the 2020 Election, Study Says." *Washington Post*,
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/09/03/facebook-misinformation-nyu-study/>
- **LISTEN:** "When You Need It To Be True," *Hidden Brain*;
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/hidden-brain/id1028908750?i=1000537540516>

Week 6: Media Effects

- Monday, February 7:

NO CLASS

- Wednesday, February 9

READ: Nelson, Thomas E., Rosalee A. Clawson, & Zoe M. Oxley. 1997. "Media Framing of a Civil Liberties conflict and its Effect on Tolerance." *American Political Science Review*, 91(3): 567-583.

- Friday, February 11

READ: Harrison, Brian F. & Melissa R. Michelson. 2016. "More Than a Game: Football Fans and Marriage Equality. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 49: 782-787.

LISTEN: "What Does It Take to Combat Misinformation?," *The NPR Politics Podcast*; <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-npr-politics-podcast/id1057255460?i=1000546450245>

Week 7: The Secret History of America's Imperfect Union

- Monday, February 14

READ: Kreitner, Chapters 1-3

- Wednesday, February 16

READ: Kreitner, Chapters 4 & 5

Group Paper #1 due

- Friday, February 18

READ: Kreitner, Chapters 6 & 7

Week 8:

- Monday, February 21

READ: Kreitner, Chapters 8 & 9

- Wednesday, February 23

READ: Kreitner, Chapters 10 & 11

- Friday, February 25

READ: Kreitner, Chapters 12 & 13

Week 9: Destruction of Democratic Norms

- Monday, February 28

READ: Levitsky, Chapters 1-3

- Wednesday, March 2

READ: Levitsky, Chapters 4-6

- Friday, March 4

READ: Levitsky, Chapters 7-9

Week 10: FINAL WEEK!

Monday, March 7

Group Paper #2 due; group presentations begin!

Wednesday, March 9

Group presentations

Friday, March 11

Group presentations; final discussion, wrap up

March 12-13: Reading Days

March 21 (8:30am): Grades Due
