

Polarization & Democratic Backsliding in America

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POSC 315
Winter 2024
Laird 007
MW 1:50-3:00, F 2:20-3:20

Course Description

For anyone even casually aware of our politics over the last few years, it is clear that something hasn't felt quite right. Our politics haven't been normal. Fear of democratic decline has emerged on the front page of newspapers across the country, as well as on the campaign trail for the upcoming 2024 election cycle. And the United States isn't alone in this regard. For the last decade, countries among the most advanced democracies in the world have experienced what Larry Diamond calls, "a democratic recession." It raises the question: What is going on? This course is designed to offer an in-depth analysis of American politics in the 21st century. While the course will include broad coverage of both American political institutions and American political behavior, it is dedicated to understanding the politics of today by looking specifically at how partisan polarization has transformed the logic that drives the entire political system. In doing so, it will demonstrate how polarization has become the chief source of our current political dysfunction, including how it has distorted the way our political institutions function, subverted the separation of powers, changed institutional behavior, and how it's altered people's preferences about what they want from government. Intertwined with this theme will be a larger normative focus exploring whether polarization has undermined democratic accountability and degraded the quality of representation in this country, or whether it has merely aggravated defects embedded in the Constitution and simply reflects the same types of political struggles that have marked all American history? Ultimately, this course will draw a bright line between our increasingly polarized politics and the erosion of our democratic institutions.

The course will be organized into two parts. Part I will focus on the three branches of our national government: Congress, the Presidency, and the Supreme Court. Particular attention will be paid to the interaction among the three branches, including the ways polarization has shaped patterns of conflict and cooperation. Part II of the course will switch gears and examine mass political behavior—that is, it will look at how everyday Americans think about politics and interact with each other in the public sphere. This portion of the course will explore the primary linkage institution that connects the people to the institutions of the American government and allows people to communicate their preferences to elected officials: Political parties. We will explore how people think about political parties, as well as how partisanship shapes people's entire political world, including their attitudes toward democracy when democratic norms threaten the electoral goals of their preferred party.

Course Objectives:

- Learn how party polarization has reshaped the logic of American politics as devised by the framers of the Constitution
- Offer students an interpretation of American politics that makes sense of our current political dysfunction
- Develop a nuanced understanding of how normatively bad behavior of lawmakers is driven by electoral incentives
- Introduce students to an overview of American politics from a social science perspective
- Teach students to learn how to execute the front half of a semester-long research project.

Course Requirements

Readings

Required course readings listed in the syllabus should be completed the day they are assigned. You will be able to find them all either on Moodle or as part of the two required books for the class.

Books

There are two required books for this class:

- 1) Mettler, Suzanne, and Robert Lieberman. 2020. *Four Threats: The Recurring Crises of American Democracy*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- 2) Lieberman, Robert, Suzanne Mettler, and Kenneth Roberts. 2022. *Democratic Resilience: Can the United States Withstand Rising Polarization?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Evaluation

The grade you earn in this class will be based largely on your engagement with the reading material, lectures, and class discussions from the course. To that end, your final grade will be calculated as follows:

1. **Short Response Papers (4 x 10%):** Throughout the semester, you will be responsible for writing two-page, critical response papers on required course readings. The intended goal is to get you to engage more deeply in the readings and to tease out the major themes and debates, as well as the real-world implications of the readings' insights. There will be an opportunity to write a paper for each unit—even multiple papers for some units—but you will be required to write only four. Failure to turn in a paper on the due dates you chose will result in a letter grade deduction for every day (including weekends) that it is late unless you coordinate with me **BEFORE** the paper's due date. I will not allow you to change your papers once you've chosen them, except on a case-by-case basis and only in the event of extraordinary circumstances. Papers need to incorporate references to all the required readings. ***At least one paper must be completed by Unit 3.***
2. **Research Project (40%):** Every student in the course will be responsible for producing a final project—that is, the first half of a research paper—by the end of the semester. The research question that your paper seeks to answer ought to be at least loosely based on course themes related to polarization and democratic decline (both big topics!). The final project will be **15-20 pages in length** and will be broken into pieces throughout the semester.
 - a. Research Question + Motivation (10%)
 - b. DV-Centered Literature Review (20%)
 - c. Theory + Testable Hypotheses (20%)
 - d. Research Design and Analysis (20%)
 - e. Final Paper (30%)
3. **Preparation and Participation (2 x 10%):** To maximize the utility of class time, it is also imperative that everyone come to class prepared to discuss material from lecture and the readings. This portion of the grade will reflect my evaluation of your classroom participation in class discussion and overall engagement during class. To encourage feedback throughout the semester, this portion of the grade will be broken in half. The first half of this portion of your grade will be assigned **after Week 5**, while the second half will be assigned at the end of the term. Also, keep in

mind that *simply showing up to class without any additional class involvement or participation will result in no higher than 70% for this portion of your grade.*

Grading Scale

93 -100	A	77-79	C+
90-92	A-	73-76	C
87-89	B+	70-72	C-
83-86	B	60-69	D
80-82	B-	Below 60	F

Late Work

Assignments submitted after the deadline will be penalized **10 percentage points** for every day it's late unless cleared with me ahead of time, with the first penalty occurring immediately after the in-class deadline. I do not accept emailed assignments unless previously cleared by me first, and electronic submissions without a corresponding paper copy will not be graded. **You must turn in all assignments to pass this class!**

Grade Appeals

If you wish to challenge a grade earned on any work for any reason besides an obvious arithmetic error, I ask that you wait at least 48 hours and then email me with a request to meet to discuss your performance.

Classroom and University Policies

PLAGIARISM/CHEATING

Plagiarism and cheating are violations of academic integrity and thus violations of the Carleton Honor Code. For this class, plagiarism will be defined as *submitting a piece of work that in part or whole is not entirely the student's work without attributing those same portions to their correct source.*

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SERVICES - HELPDESK

The ITS helpdesk is a centralized support center for all students, staff, and faculty on campus. For students, we support their personally-owned devices including a drop-off repair service for software and some minor hardware issues. The helpdesk also supports and maintains 13 public computer labs and their associated printers across campus. To contact the ITS helpdesk, go to:

<https://apps.carleton.edu/campus/its/services/helpdesk/> or you can call, email, or contact the helpdesk directly by phone at 507-222-5999 (x5999 from on campus). The phone is best for time-sensitive requests. You can also email helpdesk@carleton.edu (any email sent here automatically opens a support ticket) or contact the Web Help Desk: <https://helpdesk.carleton.edu/>.

QUANTITATIVE SKILLS & REASONING

The Quantitative Resource Center (QRC) offers remote and in-person help for students working with numbers in their non-Math/Stats classes. Chat, drop in, or make an appointment with a trained peer tutor for help with: graphs, charts, and writing with numbers; Excel, R, and statistical analysis; and math up through Pre-Calculus.

ACCOMMODATIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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 contact 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.

ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGIES: TECHNOLOGICAL RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS

The Assistive Technologies program brings together academic and technological resources to complement student classroom and computing needs, particularly in support of students with physical or learning disabilities. Accessibility features include text-to-speech (Kurzweil), speech-to-text (Dragon) software, and audio recording Smartpens. If you would like to know more, contact aztechs@carleton.edu or visit go.carleton.edu/aztech. 18

LEARNING STRATEGIES AND TIME MANAGEMENT

Steve Schauz, Academic Skills Coach, is eager to help you develop learning strategies that work in the Carleton context. His goals are to heighten your awareness of your strengths and to offer different ways you can approach your academic work so you're more efficient and effective. For details and resources: Learning Strategies & Time Management. If you prefer to learn these skills and strategies on your own, visit "Helpful DIY Resources."

LIBRARY RESOURCES

Your librarian for this course, and political science more generally, is Sean Leahy. You may also email reference@carleton.edu. Librarians are excellent sources of assistance with your research in this class. 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 has lots of great study spaces, and we'd love for you to visit! For more information and our hours, visit the Gould Library website at carleton.edu/library.

WRITING SUPPORT

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.

TERM-LONG PROGRAM FOR MULTILINGUAL WRITERS

If English is not your first language and you believe you might benefit from working regularly with a writing consultant this term, email Melanie Cashin, Multilingual Writing Coordinator, at mcashin@carleton.edu. She can arrange once- or twice-a-week meetings between you and a specific writing consultant throughout the term.

STUDENT WELL-BEING

Your health and well-being should always be your foremost priority. At Carleton, we have a wide array of health and wellness resources to support students. It is important to recognize stressors you may be facing, which can be 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) or the Office of Health Promotion.

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/>.

Schedule

Part I: Polarization & American Political Institutions

Unit 1: Roots of Polarization

Wednesday (Jan 3): Course Introduction

- Mettler and Liberman. 2020. *Four Threats: The Recurring Crises of American Democracy*. Chapters 1.
- Pierson and Schickler. 2022. “Polarization and the Durability of Madisonian Checks and Balances: A Developmental Analysis

Friday (Jan 5): Historical Roots of Polarization

- Mettler and Liberman. 2020. *Four Threats*. Chapters 2-4.

Unit 2: Congress & Congressional Elections

Monday (Jan 8): Coressional Behavior

- Rhode. 2013. “Reflections on Conditional Party Government in the 21st Century”
- Lee. 2018. *Insecure Majorities*. Chapter 3.
- Binder. 1999. “Dynamics of Legislative Gridlock.”

Wednesday (Jan 10): Congressional Elections

- Jacobson. 2015. “The Decline of Incumbency Advantage in U.S. House Elections.”
- Herron and Bafumi. 2009. “Leapfrog Representation”
- Kujala. 2020. “Donors, Primary Elections, and Polarization in the United States.”

Friday (Jan 12): Congressional Representation

- Cayton and Dawkins. 2022. “Incongruent Voting or Symbolic Representation?”
- Ahler and Broockman. 2018. “The Delegate Paradox: Why Polarized Politicians Can Represent Citizens Best.”

Unit 3: The Executive

Monday (Jan 15): Presidential Power

- Linz. 1990. “The Perils of Presidentialism”
- Mettler and Lieberman. 2020. *Four Threats*. Chapter 5-6.
- ***Final Project: Research Questions Due***

Wednesday (Jan 17): The Polarizing President

- Lee. 2008. “Presidential Leadership and Senate Partisanship.”

- Jacobs, King, and Milkis. 2019. “Building a Conservative State: Partisan Polarization and the Redeployment of Administrative Power.”

Unit 4: The Courts

Friday (Jan 19): Court Politics

- Scherer and Miller. 2009. “The Federalist Society’s Influence on the Federal Judiciary.”
- Hollis-Brusky and Parry. 2021. “‘In the Mold of Justice Scalia’: The Contours & Consequences of the Trump Judiciary.”

Monday (Jan 22): Legitimacy and the Courts

- Keck. 2022. “Court-Packing and Democratic Erosion” (DR Reader)
- Strother and Gadarian. 2022. “Public Perceptions of the Supreme Court: How Policy Disagreement Affects Legitimacy.”

Unit 5: Sub-National Politics in a Polarized Age

Wednesday (Jan 24): States as Laboratories of Democracy?

- Grumbach. 2022. *Laboratories Against Democracy*. Select Chapters.
- Grumbach and Michener. 2022. “American Federalism, Political Inequality, and Democratic Erosion”

Friday (Jan 26): Are All States Equally Bad?

- Rocco. 2022. “Laboratories of What? American Federalism and the Politics of Democratic Subversion.” (DR Reader)
- Hertel-Fernandez. 2022. “Conservative Extra-Party Coalitions and Statehouse Democracy.” (DR Reader)

Part II: Polarization in the Mass Public

Unit 6: Parties and the Sorting of the Electorate

Monday (Jan 29th): Modern Party Coalitions

- Bartels. 2018. “Partisanship in the Trump Era”
- Tesler. 2013. “Return of Old-Fashioned Racism in Obama Era.”
- Zingher. 2021. “Diploma Divide: Educational Attainment and the Realignment of the Electorate”

Wednesday (Jan 31): Ideology and Partisan Polarization

- Rogowski and Sutherland. 2016. “How Ideology Fuels Affective Polarization”
- Bougher. 2017. “The Correlates of Discord: Identity, Issue Alignment and Political Hostility in America.”

Friday (Feb 2): Racialization of Party Politics

- Zhirkov and Valentino. 2022. “The Origins and Consequences of Racialized Schemas about U.S. Parties.”
- Westwood and Peterson. 2020. “The Inseparability of Race and Partisanship.”
- ***Final Project: DV-Centered Literature Review***

Monday (Feb 5): ***NO CLASS!*******

Wednesday (Feb 7): The Rural-Urban Divide

- Katherine Cramer-Walsh. 2012. “Putting Inequality in its Place.”

- Dawkins et al. 2023. “Place, Race, and the Geographic Politics of White Grievance.”
- Mettler and Brown. 2022. “The Growing Rural-Urban Political Divide and Democratic Vulnerability.”

Friday (Feb 9): Other Forms of Social Sorting

- Dawkins and Hanson. 2022. “American is in the Eyes of the Beholder: American Identity, Racial Sorting, and Affective Polarization.”
- Margolis. 2022. “The Religious Sort: The Causes of Consequences of the Religiosity Gap in America”

Unit 7: Affective Polarization and Dem Decline

Monday (Feb 12): Consequences of Affective Polarization

- Iyengar and Westwood. 2015. “Fear and Loathing across Party Lines.”
- Jerit and Barabas. 2012. Partisan Perceptual Bias and the Information Environment

Wednesday (Feb 14): Non-Political Effects of Polarization

- McConnell et al. 2018. “The Economic Consequences of Partisanship in a Polarized Era.”
- Nicholson et al. 2016. “The Politics of Beauty: The Effect of Partisan Bias on Physical Attractiveness.”

Unit 8: The Spector of Democratic Decline

Friday (Feb 16): Polarization and Democratic Decline I

- Levitsky and Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*. Chapter 1
- Schlozman and Rosenfeld. 2024. *The Hollow Parties*. Chapter 1
<https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691248554/the-hollow-parties#preview>
- ***Final Project: Theory & Hypotheses***

Monday (Feb 19): Polarization and Democratic Decline II

- Graham and Svobik. 2020. “Partisanship, Polarization, and Support for Democracy.”
- Haggard and Kaufman. 2021. “The Anatomy of Democratic Decline”
- Clayton et al. 2021. “Elite Rhetoric Can Undermine Democratic Norms.”

Wednesday (Feb 21): Other Drivers of Anti-Democratic Attitudes

- Krishnarajan. 2022. “Rationalizing Democracy: The Perceptual Bias and (Un)Democratic Behavior.”
- Uscinski et al. 2021. “American Politics in Two-Dimensions: Partisan and Ideological Identities vs. Anti-Establishment Orientations”
- Armaly, Buckley, and Enders. 2022. “Christian Nationalism and Political Violence”

Friday (Feb 23): Peer Feedback

Unit 9: Democratic Resilience?

Monday (Feb 26)

- Stewart, Plotkin, and McCarty. 2021. “Inequality, Identity, and Partisanship: How Redistribution Can Stem the Tide of Mass Polarization.”
- Bateman. 2022. “Elections, Polarization, and Democratic Resilience.” (DR Reader)

Wednesday (Feb 28)

- Skocpol, Tervo, and Walters. “Citizen Organizing and Partisan Polarization from the Tea Party to the Anti-Trump Resistance.” (DR Reader)

- Broockman, Kalla, and Westwood. 2022. “Does Affective Polarization Undermine Democratic Norms and Accountability? Maybe Not.”

Friday (Mar 1): Managing Polarization

- Klein. 2018. “Managing Polarization—and Ourselves” in *Why We’re Polarized*.
- **Research Design and Analysis Due**

Unit 10: Class Presentations

Monday (Mar 4): Class Presentations

Wednesday (Mar 6): Class Presentations

Friday (Mar 8): Class Presentations

Final Projects Due – Monday, March 11th @ 10 pm