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 18th 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 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’s 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. Five questions are central to any consideration of polarization, whether within the public or between the political parties. These five central questions are:

(1.) The Question of Definition: What precisely is polarization?

(2.) The Question of Measurement: How can we best determine whether the public and/or the political parties are polarized? How can we best determine the extent of polarization?

Has polarization been underestimated in polling over political issues because of the way issue attitudes are measured? Is the movement off the neutral position on an issue a bigger leap than one from one degree of support (or opposition) than another? This might explain the empirical support for the “directional theory of issue voting,” as opposed to the conventional “proximity theory of issue voting.”

(3.) The Question of Historical Dynamics: Have the extent of polarization in the public and between the political parties changed throughout history and particularly in recent decades? If so, how great was/is the change?

Was polarization in the past masked by the heterogeneity of the political parties and has it now been accentuated by the homogeneity of realigned political parties?

Has one party moved further from the center than the other? If so, which one and why?

Is polarization the normal condition of American politics or is the relatively tranquil politics of the 1950s and early 1960s “the normal” state of American politics?

(4.) The Question of Causes: What are the root and immediate causes of polarization and any changes in the extent of polarization? What are/were we polarized about?

What are the root causes of polarization? 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?

American parties and their leaders and activists have always been more polarized than the public. Why? 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 pull the parties to the center? Parties should be more centrist than voters, but they aren’t. Why?

Have political leaders caused the public 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?

Do particular types of issues (moral versus economic) engender polarization?
Has the increased disparity in incomes caused greater polarization?

Has the increased competition between the parties caused greater polarization?

(5.) 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?

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 knows.” 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 paper. These will be weighted equally in computing your overall course grade.

Class participation in a seminar of this sort 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 have and will state and defend your views about the research examined each week.
By the fourth week of the class, you should have selected a research question for your paper. These may come from the classes, from the list of possible research questions on the syllabus, or anywhere else. You should prepare a one page paper proposal in which you clearly state the research question and how you plan to investigate it. Your paper (approximately 10 pages in length though it can be longer if necessary, double-spaced, and properly referenced) can be “a thought paper,” a research design, or a preliminary piece of original research. Your paper will be evaluated based on its organization, clarity, originality, and insightfulness.

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 four required books are:


Reading Assignments

WEEK 1. JANUARY 15 & 17
The Recent Unpleasantness: aka, The Presidential Election of 2012
Political Conflict as the Framers Envisioned and Early Observations
Publius (James Madison), Federalist #10
Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America,
“Why Democratic Nations Show More Ardent and Enduring Love of Equality than of Liberty” and
“How the Americans Combat Individualism by the Principle of Self-Interest Rightly Understood”

WEEK 2. JANUARY 22 & 24
The End or Absence of Ideology in America
Week 3. January 29 & 31

Fiorina (with Abrams and Pope). Culture War?, chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Week 4. February 5 & 7
Fiorina (with Abrams and Pope). Culture War?, chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8.


Week 5. February 12 & 14


Week 6. February 19 & 21
Abramowitz, The Disappearing Center, chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Week 7. February 26 & 28
Abramowitz, The Disappearing Center, chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8.

Week 8. March 5 & 7
Exchanges over:
Article, Comments and Rejoinders by Abramowitz, Jacobson, and Fiorina and Levendusky, pages 49-117.

Spring Break March 12 & 14

Week 9. March 19 & 21
Exchanges over:
Article, Comments and Rejoinders by Campbell, Cannon, and Brady and Han, pages 119-174.

Week 10. March 26 & 28


**WEEK 11. APRIL 2 & 4**  
McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal. 2006. *Polarized America*, chapters 1, 2, and 3.

**WEEK 12. APRIL 9 & 11**  
Brian Dettrey and James E. Campbell, 2013. “

**WEEK 13. APRIL 16 & 18**  
Mann and Ornstein. 2012. *It's Even Worse Than It Looks*, chapters 1, 2, and 3.

**WEEK 14. APRIL 23 & 25**  
Mann and Ornstein. 2012. *It's Even Worse Than It Looks*, chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7.

**Paper Due, Monday May 6th**

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**Appendix**


Paul DiMaggio, John Evans, and Bethany Bryson, “Have American Social Attitudes Become More Polarized?” *The American Journal of Sociology*, 102, no. 3 (1996): 690-755. This study was updated in
