

Contemporary Challenges of American Government in the Trump Era

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Class Description:

This course is intended to provide students with the essential tools to understand how American politics under the Trump administration fits with, and deviates from, “politics as usual” in the United States. The course begins by laying the groundwork for understanding the peculiar political ideologies at play in American politics, the key institutions of American government – particularly the Constitution and the structure of checks and balances that characterize American politics – and electoral processes that determine who is seated in the federal government.

We then address some of the most visible issues in American politics today. The level of polarization of the American electorate – in ideological, cultural and racial terms – is both obvious *and* deeply misunderstood, but nonetheless has proven a useful tool for political elites, partisan media and advertisers selling everything from guns to breakfast cereal. The unusual church/state dynamic in the United States is also on clear display today and has powerful effects on voting behavior and public policy. By delving into comparisons with other notions of church/state separation – such as *laïcité* – we can begin to see the contradictions in the American approach to this issue, and how those contradictions encourage deeply religious Evangelical voters to elect a candidate like Donald Trump. Finally, the appeal of populism, and the appearance of increased incivility and authoritarianism in American politics under the Trump administration bears examination. Comparisons to other populist and authoritarian-leaning governments in other states will provide us with some grounds for understanding the Trump era as part of a wider populist wave in developed democracies, while reading explanations of the utility/value of civil and uncivil discourse will provide us with a deeper understanding of how uncivil discourse functions as a tool in American politics.

Required Texts: There are no required textbooks for this course. Assigned readings are either available online (web addresses included in the modules below) or will be made available to students on Moodle.

Course lecture material will be based on W. Phillips Shively's *Power and Choice: An Introduction to Political Science*. While students are not required to purchase the book, if you wish to have it as a reference it is available for purchase on Amazon at: https://www.amazon.fr/Power-Choice-Introduction-Political-Science-ebook/dp/B00I51KO6Q/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1509994476&sr=8-1&keywords=shively+power+and+choice

A number of the course readings will come from Alan Abramowitz's (2013) *The Polarized Public? Why American Government is so Dysfunctional*. If you are interested in reading the entire text, it is available at https://www.amazon.fr/Polarized-Public-Alan-I-Abramowitz-ebook/dp/B007O115RK/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1527271767&sr=8-1&keywords=abramowitz+the+polarized+public

Course Requirements: The grade for the course will be based on a final exam, to be delivered in class on the final day of the class. The exam will consist of a series of multiple choice questions and an in-class essay.

Course Modules:

Session one: American political ideologies – American “conservatism” and American “liberalism” and theories regarding today’s political polarization – elite vs. mass polarization

Reading: Abramowitz, Alan (2013), “The Polarized Public” from Abramowitz (2013) *The Polarized Public: Why American Government is so Dysfunctional* (Moodle)

Session two: Constitutional design and the American Constitution; powers of and checks on the American President

Readings: United States Constitution, available at: <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution>

Linz, Juan, “The Perils of Presidentialism” from Diamond and Plattner, eds. (1996) *The Global Resurgence of Democracy* (Moodle)

Session three: The American electoral system and American political parties and voters (Democrats, Republicans, “Tea Partiers” and others)

Readings: Abramowitz (2013), “The Cultural Divide” (Moodle)

Abramowitz (2013), “The Racial Divide” (Moodle)

Session four: Separation of church and state?

Reading: Gingrich, Newt and Allen, Brooke (2012), “Church-State Relations: Was the U.S. Founded as a Christian Nation?” from Miroff, Seidleman and Swanstrom, eds. (2012) *Debating Democracy: A Reader in American Politics* (Moodle)

Session five: Incivility in American politics – uncivil discourse, freedom of speech, or political tool?

Reading: Shea, Daniel, “Our Tribal Nature and the Rise of Nasty Politics” from Shea and Fiorina, eds. (2013) *Can We Talk? The Rise of Rude, Nasty, Stubborn Politics* (Moodle)

Session six: Regime type, legitimacy and citizenship in the U.S. and the authoritarian turn

Reading: Taub, “The Rise of American Authoritarianism”
<https://www.vox.com/2016/3/1/11127424/trump-authoritarianism>

Session seven: Modern states and signs of “fragility” in the American state and others

Readings: Fragile States Index 2018 Reports on the United States

“A Nation Divided Against Itself”

<http://fundforpeace.org/fsi/2018/04/23/a-nation-divided-against-itself-internal-divisions-fuel-u-s-worsening/>

“It’s Not the Economy, Stupid”

<http://fundforpeace.org/fsi/2018/04/30/its-not-the-economy-stupid/>

Session eight: Final Exam, in class