

## PLS 3990/5990 Polarization in American Politics

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**Dates:** August 26, 2019 – December 13, 2019

**Office:** 317 Millett Hall

**Office Hours:** T/Th: 11:00 to 12:00 and by appointment (in-person or remote)

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“Moderation in temper is always a virtue; but moderation in principle is always a vice.”

- *Thomas Paine*

**COURSE DESCRIPTION:** One of the most common themes in current discussion about American politics is polarization. The term has been loosely used to describe everything from radicalism and extremism to conflicts over norms related to culture, politics, race, and religion. In turn, political polarization has been identified as the main reason for legislative gridlock, political incivility, the rise of extremist groups, fake news, and even the results of 2016 presidential election. In this course, we will explore polarization as it relates to the increasing division between the masses and the elites on political issues. We will explore the evidence of political polarization that scholars have compiled and investigate the potential causes of polarization. We will also engage with evidence that pushes back on the polarization narrative. Is polarization as bad, or as unique, as pundits make it out to be?

**ABOUT YOUR INSTRUCTOR:** I am an associate professor in the Department of Political Science at Wright State University. I joined the department in the fall of 2015 after completing my Ph.D. at Penn State University. I grew up in Virginia and graduated from Virginia Tech with a B.A. in History and M.Ed. in Curriculum and Instruction. I have published research in two key areas: the adoption and development of marijuana policies in the states and how political issues diffuse into secondary education curricula and pedagogy.<sup>1</sup> It is in the field of education where I have studied how political polarization affects the behavior of teachers.

I developed this course in 2016 out of my own interest in the subject and my belief that it is one of the most relevant topics in American politics. On a personal level, I've witnessed how polarization has left so many people disaffected. When I tell people that I study politics, the resulting conversation is almost always turns to how terrible everything is and how nothing is being done to solve pressing issues, liberal or conservative. This frustration is understandable, but too often this frustration leads people to opt out of the political process rather than engage. Moreover, many people settle for simplistic answers and solutions that may make for effective memes, but gloss over deeper explanations for the current state of affairs. My hope is that as we dive into this topic, we develop a more nuanced understanding of American political culture and institutions, and feel equipped to do something about those parts that we don't like.

On a personal level, I live in Vandalia with my wife (Jillian), 16-month-old son (Henry), 3 cats (Amelia, Poppy, Tilly) and a dog (June). I'm a big sports fan (NFL, NBA, CFB, and tennis), love music and guitar, and (as you will soon find out in the lecture videos) I'm a big fan of comedies and sitcoms (The Office, Parks and Rec, Arrested Development, Brooklyn Nine-Nine, etc.).

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<sup>1</sup> If you're interested, you can access my publications on my [Google Scholar](#) page.

And since I've received one too many emails to "Ms./Mr./Dr. Lee," please note that my first name is "Lee" and last name is "Hannah". I prefer to be called Dr. Hannah or Professor Hannah.

**COURSE LEARNING OBJECTIVES:** By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Identify the underlying ideological and cultural perspectives that fuel political disagreement.
- Assess the various perspectives on why and how voters are polarized.
- Evaluate evidence and arguments related to political polarization.
- Develop skills to assess the current state of American politics.
- Distinguish between political punditry and political science that uses the scientific method to compare and test arguments.

**COURSE DESIGN:** It is likely that many of you selected an online course because you need the flexibility of an online course for your schedule. This course is designed to give you maximum flexibility. However, it is also important that we move through the material synchronously. I expect this course to be comparable to an on-campus course, therefore you will have assignments spread out over the fifteen-week period.

The course will be laid out with new material each week (excluding a mid-semester break and a break for Thanksgiving). The course material for the week will be posted on Mondays and will be due on the following Wednesday before midnight, so you will have nine days to complete the assignments in each particular unit.

This also means that two units will overlap for a few days. So, you should consider your own schedule and plan accordingly. *You can neither knock out the entire course during the first week of the term nor can you blow off this course until November and try to complete everything at the end.* You should reserve time in your schedule to work on this course on a weekly basis. I am on campus regularly and always happy to meet during my office hours or by appointment.

**READINGS:** The readings for the course are listed each week. You should be able to click on the embedded links in the syllabus to either go to the library webpage (where you can download a PDF of the reading) or to an external website. Click on the 'Readings' tab in Pilot to access files or links for all of the readings that are sorted by week. I have also included PDFs on Pilot for articles that come from gated sources like the *Wall Street Journal* or *New York Times*.

We will also read one book during the semester. The book costs approximately \$15 and is available at the bookstore and online. We will read every single page during weeks 7 and 8 and 15, so make provisions to have the book by the start of October.

**Required Book:**

Mason, Lilliana. (2018). *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

You will also read essays from a number of perspectives. You don't have to agree on the premise of each reading – I certainly don't. However, there are ways to constructively disagree and engage with an argument that I will look for in your application assignments. I will also include articles throughout the semester that will come to conflicting conclusions throughout the semester. Some of the scientific peer-reviewed articles can be challenging, I recommend a few resources that can help you read these articles efficiently and effectively: "[How to Read Political Science: A Guide in Four Steps](#)" by Amanda Hoover Green and "[How to Read a \(Quantitative\) Journal Article](#)" by Greta Krippner.

**VIDEO LECTURES:** Video lectures will be recorded and posted with the corresponding unit. They serve to both synthesize and reinforce the readings and to introduce some new concepts that are not directly covered in the reading. **Students are expected to watch each video lecture before completing the application assignments.**

**INTEGRATED WRITING COURSE:** PLS 3390 is designated as an "Integrated Writing" (IW) course, designed to meet WSU guidelines for developing effective writing skills. Students will be expected to produce writing that:

- Demonstrates their understanding of course content,
- Is appropriate for the audience and purpose of a particular writing task,
- Demonstrates degree of mastery of disciplinary writing conventions appropriate to the course (including documentation conventions), and
- Shows competency in standard American English.

Effective writing counts toward the final course grade. Students will meet IW requirements through application assignments and discussion forums. Students should pay careful attention to grammar, mechanics, and clarity of prose in responding to the course assignments.<sup>2</sup>

**MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES:** Wright State University is committed to advancing the mental health and wellbeing of its students. We acknowledge that a variety of issues, such as strained relationships, increased anxiety and stress, substance abuse problems, and depression, directly impacts students' academic performance. If you or someone you know is feeling overwhelmed, depressed, and/or in need of support, services are available. For help, contact the Counseling and Wellness Services at Wright State located in Student Union 053: <https://www.wright.edu/student-affairs/health-and-wellness/counseling-and-wellness>

**ACADEMIC HONESTY:** All of the work you do in this course is expected to be your own. Absolutely no cheating or plagiarism (using someone else's words or ideas without proper citation) will be tolerated. Please consult the Code of Student Conduct for questions about academic integrity.

**DISABILITY:** Students with disabilities that have been certified by the Office of Disability Services will be appropriately accommodated. It is your responsibility to notify me during the first week of the semester if such accommodations are needed. If you have questions about this, contact the Office of Disability Services at 937-775-5680 or [disability\\_services@wright.edu](mailto:disability_services@wright.edu).

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.wright.edu/academic-affairs/programs/writing-across-the-curriculum/requirements>

**ASSIGNMENTS:** You will have three types of assignments (Discussion Forums, Reading Quizzes, and Application Assignments) to complete for each unit and one final paper that gives you an opportunity to synthesize the course material. The assignments for each category are weighted equally.

Every student will complete the following assignments:

- **Discussion Forums (20%)** – You will be asked to participate in a discussion forum five times over the course of the semester. Directions will be provided in the prompt. In order to get the most out of discussion, forum assignments are due earlier than the reading quizzes and application assignments and will be listed with the corresponding discussion.
  - **Reading Quizzes (40%)** – A corresponding quiz (multiple choice and matching) will accompany the readings each week. I will break them up for each reading and then take the average of your scores for each week (i.e. Week 1 reading quizzes carry same weight as Week 2 and so forth and so on). Quizzes are open-notes and not time-limited, but you *only* get one attempt.
  - **Application Assignments (40%)** – The application assignments involve short answer and essay questions related to the readings and lectures.
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- **Final Paper (30%<sup>3</sup>) [Graduates only<sup>4</sup>]** – Graduate students will be expected to write a final paper that includes a literature review and theory section connecting political polarization to their research topic of interest.

**COURSE SCHEDULE:** The following pages include information about each week of material. Each week's worth of material will become available on Mondays by 12:00 PM. These units will be organized in modules on Pilot which will include the readings for the week, reading quizzes, and an application assignment. When applicable, due dates are set up on Pilot. However, it is your responsibility to know the due dates for each week and to submit the work on time. *Late assignments will be penalized 5 points per day.* I have made every effort to make the expectations for each unit clear. The reading quiz and application assignments are due on Wednesdays, nine days after the unit was posted. Please contact me if you still have questions.

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<sup>3</sup> For graduate students, final paper is worth 30% and 10% weight are subtracted from each of the other categories.

<sup>4</sup> If an undergraduate student is interested in completing this assignment as a part of an honors paper, please see me.

# Unit I - Defining Polarization and Political Ideology

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## Week 1 - Defining Polarization

Materials for Week 1 will be available on Monday, August 26.

### Readings

- 1) McCarty, Nolan. (2019). "What is Political Polarization?" Ch. 2 in *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- 2) McCarty, Nolan. (2019). "How Do We Measure Polarization of the Public?" Appendix B in *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- 3) Taub, Amanda and Max Fisher (2018 February 18). "Russian Meddling Was a Drop in an Ocean of American-Made Discord." *New York Times*. [\[LINK\]](#)

Assignments (All due on Wednesday, September 4 at 11:59 PM EST)

- Discussion (1), Syllabus Quiz<sup>5</sup> (1), Reading Quiz (1), Application Assignment (1)

## Week 2 - Political Ideologies

Materials for Week 2 will be available on Monday, September 2.

### Readings

- 1) Marietta, Morgan. (2012). *A Citizen's Guide to American Ideology: Conservatism and Liberalism in Contemporary Politics*. Introduction, Chapters 1, 4, 5, 8, and 9.
- 2) Chang, Alvin. (20 November 2018). "Your politics aren't just passed down from your parents. This cartoon explains what actually happens." *Vox*. [\[LINK\]](#)
  - a. Suggested: Ojeda, Christopher and Peter K. Hatemi. (2015). "Accounting for the Child in the Transmission of Party Identification." *American Sociological Review* 80(6): 1150-1174. [\[LINK\]](#)
- 3) Bacon, Jr., Perry. (2018 September 11). "Americans Are Shifting the Rest of Their Identity to Match Their Politics." *FiveThirtyEight*. [\[LINK\]](#)

Assignments (All due on Wednesday, September 11 at 11:59 PM EST)

- Reading Quiz (2), Application Assignment (2)

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<sup>5</sup> Will be averaged in with Reading Quizzes for the week.

## Unit II - How Are We Polarized?

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### Week 3 – Elite Polarization: Elected Officials

Materials for Week 3 will be available on Monday, September 9.

#### Readings

- 1) Binder, Sarah. (2015). "The Dysfunctional Congress." *Annual Review of Political Science* 18: 85-101.
- 2) Lee, Frances. (2015). "How Party Polarization Affects Governance." *Annual Review of Political Science* 18: 261-282.
- 3) Wasserman, David. (2018, January 25). "Hating Gerrymandering is Easy. Fixing it is Harder." *FiveThirtyEight*. [[LINK](#)]
- 4) Alberta, Tim. (16 July 2019). "Inside Trump's Feud with Paul Ryan." *Politico*. [[LINK](#)]

Assignments (All due on Wednesday, September 18 at 11:59 PM EST)

- Reading Quiz (3), Application Assignment (3)

### Week 4 – Elite Polarization: Activists

Materials for Week 4 will be available on Monday, September 16.

#### Readings

- 1) Azari, Julia. (2017 December 12). "How could Roy Moore win? Because parties are weak and partisanship is strong." *Vox*. [[LINK](#)]
- 2) Broockman, David E. and Timothy J. Ryan (2016). "Preaching to the Choir: Americans Prefer Communicating to Copartisan Elected Officials." *American Journal of Political Science* 60(4): 1093-1107. [[LINK](#)]
- 3) Cohn, Nate and Kevin Quealy. (9 April 2019). "The Democratic Electorate on Twitter is Not the Actual Democratic Electorate." *New York Times*. [[LINK](#)]
- 4) Nyhan, Brendan. (2017 February 15). "Why More Democrats Are Now Embracing Conspiracy Theories." *New York Times*. [[LINK](#)]

Assignments (All due on Wednesday, September 25 at 11:59 PM EST)

- Reading Quiz (4), Application Assignment (4)

## Week 5 – Elite Polarization: The Courts

Materials for Week 5 will be available on Monday, September 23.

\*\*We will take a break from reading this week and listen to a podcast series on the rise of activism in court appointments.

### Podcasts

NPR's Embedded Season 8: The Judges

Ep. 1 – A Downward Death Spiral [[LINK](#)]

Ep. 2 – Worse than Willie Horton [[LINK](#)]

**Assignments** (All due on Wednesday, October 2 at 11:59 PM EST)

- Discussion (2), Application Assignment (5)

## Week 6 – Mass Polarization and the Culture Wars

Materials for Week 6 will be available on Monday, September 30.

### Readings

- 1) Hunter, James Davison. (1991). "Cultural Conflict in America." Ch. 1 in *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.
- 2) Willick, Jason. (2018 May 25). "The Man Who Discovered 'Culture Wars.'" *Wall Street Journal*. [[LINK](#)]
- 3) Fiorina, Morris, Samuel J. Abrams, and Jeremy C. Pope. (2006). "Culture War?" Ch. 1 in *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., New York: Pearson.
- 4) Nichols, Tom. (2014 January 17). "The Death of Expertise." *The Federalist*. [[LINK](#)]
- 5) Gross, Neal. (2016 May 31). "Why Are the Highly Educated So Liberal?" *New York Times*. [[LINK](#)]
- 6) Cohn, Nate. (2018 February 27). "Trump Losing College-Educated Whites? He Never Won Them in the First Place." *The New York Times*. [[LINK](#)]

**Assignments** (All due on Wednesday, October 9 at 11:59 PM EST)

- Reading Quiz (5), Application Assignment (6)

## **Week 7 – Identity-based Democracy and Affective Polarization**

Materials for Week 7 will be available on Monday, October 7.

### **Readings**

- 1) Mason, Lilliana. (2018). *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chapters 1-3.
- 2) Coren, Michael J. (2018 October 5). "The Great Partisan Divide in the US is Now Deciding Who Americans Marry." *Quartz*. [[LINK](#)]

**Assignments** (All due on Wednesday, October 16 at 11:59 PM EST)

- Reading Quiz (6), Application Assignment (7)

## **Week 8 – Negative Partisanship**

Materials for Week 8 will be available on Monday, October 14.

### **Readings**

- 1) Mason, Lilliana. (2018). *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chapters 4-7.
  - a. Iyengar, Shanto, Yphtach Lelkes, Matthew Levendusky, Neil Malhotra, and Sean J. Westwood. (2019). "The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States." *Annual Review of Political Science* 22: 129-146.

**Assignments** (All due on Wednesday, October 23 at 11:59 PM EST)

- Reading Quiz (7), Application Assignment (8), Complete anonymous mid-semester course evaluation

## **Week 9 – Mid Semester Break – October 21**

## Unit III – Why Are We Polarized?

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### Week 10 - Geography and Polarization

Materials for Week 10 will be available on Monday, October 28.

#### Readings

- 1) Hopkins, David A. (2017). "The Geographic Roots of Party Strength and Cohesion." Ch. 3 in *Red Fighting Blue: How Geography and Electoral Rules Polarize American Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 64-98.
- 2) Monnat, Shannon M., and David L. Brown. (2017). "More than a Rural Revolt: Landscapes of Despair and the 2016 Presidential Election." *Journal of Rural Studies* 55 (2017): 227-236. [[LINK](#)]
- 3) Luckerson, Victor. (30 November 2018). "The Cities that Amazon HQ2 Left Behind." *The Ringer*. [[LINK](#)]
- 4) Enten, Harry and Nate Silver. (2014 August 29). "Migration isn't turning red states blue." *FiveThirtyEight*. [[LINK](#)]

Assignments (All due on Wednesday, November 6 at 11:59 PM EST)

- Discussion (3), Reading Quiz (8), Application Assignment (9)

### Week 11 – Race and Polarization

Materials for Week 11 will be available on Monday, November 4.

#### Readings

- 1) Carmines, Edward G. and James A. Stimson. (1989). "The Politics of Race: From Roosevelt to Reagan." Ch. 2 in *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- 2) Mutz, Diana C. (2018). "Status Threat, Not Economic Hardship, Explains the 2016 Presidential Vote." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 115(19): E4430-E4439. [[LINK](#)]
- 3) Coates, Ta-Nehisi. (2012 February). "Why Do So Few Blacks Study the Civil War?" *The Atlantic*. [[LINK](#)]

Assignments (All due on Wednesday, November 13 at 11:59 PM EST)

- Discussion (4), Reading Quiz (9), Application Assignment (10)

## Week 12 – The Media

Materials for Week 12 will be available on Monday, November 11.

### Readings

- 1) Druckman, James N., Matthew S. Levendusky, and Audrey McLain. (2018). No Need to Watch: How the Effects of Partisan Media Can Spread via Inter-Personal Discussions. *American Journal of Political Science* 62(1): 99-112.
- 2) Darr, Joshua P., Johanna Dunaway, and Matthew P. Hitt. (2019 February 11). “When newspapers close, voters become more partisan.” *The Conversation*. [[LINK](#)]
- 3) Silver, Nate. “There really was a liberal media bubble.” March 10, 2017, *FiveThirtyEight*. [[LINK](#)]
- 4) Douthat, Ross. (2016 May 21). “Facebook’s Subtle Empire.” *The New York Times*. [[LINK](#)]

**Assignments** (All due on Wednesday, November 20 at 11:59 PM EST)

- Reading Quiz (10), Application Assignment (11)

## Week 13 – Social Media (Isolation)

Materials for Week 13 will be available on Monday, November 18.

### Readings

- 1) Pennycook, Gordon., & David G. Rand. (2019). “Fighting misinformation on social media using crowdsourced judgments of news source quality.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 116(7), 2521-2526. [[LINK](#)]
  - a. Suggested: Tucker, Joshua A., Andrew Guess, Pablo Barbera, Cristian Vaccari, Alexandra Siegel, Sergey Sanovich, Denis Stukal, and Brendan Nyhan. (2018). “Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature.” Report prepared for the *Hewlett Foundation*. [[LINK](#)]
- 2) Zeitz, Joshua. (2017 March 12). “Lessons from the Fake News Pandemic of 1942.” *Politico*. [[LINK](#)]
- 3) Miller, Claire Cain. (2014 November 20). “Social Media Deepens Partisan Divides. But Not Always.” *The New York Times*. [[LINK](#)]

**Assignments** (All due on Wednesday, December 4 at 11:59 PM EST)<sup>6</sup>

- Reading Quiz (11), Application Assignment (12)

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<sup>6</sup> NOTE: Due to the Thanksgiving holiday, you have a full 2 weeks to complete this week’s assignment.

## **Week 14 - Thanksgiving Break**

### **Week 15 - Fixing Polarization**

Materials for Week 15 will be available on Monday, December 2.

#### **Readings**

- 1) McCoy, Jennifer Lynn. (2018 October 31). "Extreme Political Polarization Weakens Democracy - Can the US Avoid that Fate?" *The Conversation*. [\[LINK\]](#)
- 2) Mason, Lilliana. 2018. "Can We Fix It?" Ch. 8 in *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 3) John, Sarah and Andrew Douglas. 2017. "Candidate Civility and Voter Engagement in Seven Cities with Ranked Choice Voting." *National Civic Review* (106)1: 25-29. [\[LINK\]](#)

**Assignments** (All due on Wednesday, December 11 at 11:59 PM EST)

- Discussion (5), Reading Quiz (12), Application Assignment (13)

**Exam Week - December 9**

**Commencement - December 14**