

Syllabus

Polarization in US Politics

Welcome to Polarization in US Politics. I have designed this syllabus to help you understand which topic and important questions we will be seeking to answer in each week's class. I suggest you refer to this document each week prior to undertaking the readings.

Information

Class: Polarization in US Politics
Seminar: Mondays 12:00-14:00 Room 203
Office Hours: Tuesdays 10:00-11:45 Room 209
Me: Michael Cowburn, he/him/his, Mike is fine
Email: m.cowburn@fu-berlin.de

You: Who you are isn't defined by records or bureaucracies, so if you prefer a name or a pronoun other than the one listed, please let me know.

Communication

For short questions email is the best way to contact me. I endeavour to respond to all emails within 24 hours Monday-Friday, I will respond to most emails considerably quicker than this. If I haven't responded within 24 hours, please feel free to email again.

For everything else please come to office hours. Office hours are a chance for you to get help on term papers, go over material covered in class, talk about connections between class material and other ideas, and so on. They are generally student-led but I can help you formulate questions and point you in the direction of additional material for your term papers based on my sense of your strengths and interests. I really encourage you to take advantage of this time.

I also encourage students to take advantage of my office hours in order to ask questions or discuss issues related to the course or political science more generally. If you have any comments about or problems with the course itself, I encourage you to share them in my office hours. You are not required to schedule an appointment to come to my regularly scheduled office hours – feel free to just drop by!

Course Description

This course provides an introduction into the phenomenon of polarization in the context of the politics of the United States. This course functions as one half of the Political Science Orientation Module within the BA programme. The course has no prerequisites, but a general interest in American politics is expected. If you don't like politics, this class probably isn't for you.

This course engages in the topic of polarization in the context of politics in the United States. In examining polarization in US politics this course seeks to understand changes in the behaviour and characteristics of individuals, institutions and organisations in American politics. We will focus on factors that shape attitudes of actors in the political system as well as the American public. These actors include voters, the media, political activists and donors, candidates, members of Congress, and the President. There is specific focus on the causes and consequences of polarization. This course engages with competing academic literature on the topic and encourages critical reflection and consideration of contested understandings of its manifestation in American politics. Through the readings, we will look at the kinds

of questions political scientists ask about polarization in the American political system and consider how they attempt to answer those questions.

Course Objectives and Learning Goals

This course will provide you with a strong foundation in the phenomenon of polarization in the context of the US political system. You will develop a solid understanding of what polarization is, how polarization has changed since the mid-20th century, the forces that have caused it to come about and the consequences for America's political system and public. We will focus on a set of academic works that frequently speak to each other, meaning that by the end of this course you will understand the divergent positions of notable authors on this topic. Throughout the semester, we will engage in the study and analysis of causes and consequences of polarization in American politics, with some time dedicated to discussing the broader implications of what we learn. This course strives to spark interest and curiosity in the topic of polarization to consider how this relates to events we observe both historically and in the news today. The course has been designed to deeply engage students in the topic of polarization within political science but considering implications beyond the discipline.

Following successful completion of this course, you will be able to:

- Define political polarization
- Understand the underlying causes of a polarized politics
- Consider how mass polarization influences, and is influenced by, competition among political elites
- Frame polarization within the positive and negative consequences it may have on American politics and society
- Conceptualise solutions to polarization

Course Requirements

Attendance, participation and preparedness are important to your success in this course (and, I find, in life more generally). Therefore, it is expected that you will come to each class prepared, having read and thought about the course material, and ready to engage in discussion. You should be prepared to discuss the topic and make thoughtful arguments from multiple points of view, including at least the authors' and your own.

If you know beforehand that you won't make a class, it's great to let me know via email.

Active Participation

Each student will upload a set of **three questions to Blackboard (one question per text) about the texts 24 hours prior to class for 10 of our sessions**. When you submit the 10th set of questions I will email you to notify you that this course requirement has been completed. You should also have read your fellow students' questions about the readings prior to each session.

I will read all the questions submitted as these will form the basis of our in-class discussions. You may be required to further elaborate, clarify or expand on a submitted question during a class. These questions give me an understanding of any problems that you have with the readings which we can then address together. If something in a reading doesn't make sense to you then I encourage you to ask a question about this as we can then investigate this together. If you don't understand something, there are likely many other students who are also struggling! Alternatively, you may wish to disagree with or challenge something in a reading, either methodologically, theoretically or empirically. Again, this is exactly the sort of behaviour I encourage, and I look forward to receiving challenging and well thought questions to consider during our weekly discussions. Many of the texts we read will be directly challenging each other and I encourage you to enter and participate in these academic debates.

Full Credit

10 sets of questions (as above) plus an **end-term paper** (roughly 5,000 words). You can decide whether to take the class for full credit later in the semester, but **each student who is taking the class for credit must submit a one-page**

synopsis by June 30th. These will be reviewed, with feedback including comments and suggestions provided prior to the last session of class. I will assume you are taking this class for active participation only if a synopsis is not handed in by this date. **Final papers are due on September 8th** and late papers will not be accepted without agreement prior to this date. Papers will be graded, and feedback provided, before the beginning of the winter semester. Discussion of ideas for papers during my office hours prior to the submission of the synopsis is further encouraged as I will not be in Berlin between the end of class sessions and the deadline date. **Both the synopsis and end-term paper should be sent to me via email in Microsoft Word format**, this will enable me to annotate both documents and result in you receiving detailed feedback about your work.

End-term papers should be submitted using Chicago or MLA citations, though Chicago is preferred. I recommend using a citation management software tool such as Zotero (free) to make this easier and ensuring consistency. You must cite all sources of information, quotations or ideas which are not your own. Do not copy and paste text from the internet into your papers and attempt to pass it off as your own writing. You may not turn in a paper that someone else has written or that you have bought or downloaded.

Technology Policy

You may use laptops or tablets to consult readings during class though I discourage their use for note taking and would prefer they were not open throughout sessions. Please put phones away and out of sight rather than on your desk.

This policy is motivated by the growing body of research which finds that the use of laptops [hinders learning](#) not just for the people who use them but the students around them as well. Multitasking is unfortunately [distracting and cognitively taxing](#). In addition, research suggests that students take notes [more effectively](#) in longhand than when they write on laptops. Further studies have shown that even [having a mobile phone in your line of sight](#) is distracting when undertaking complex tasks.

Civility Policy

In accordance with the philosophy of an institution for higher learning, the classroom should be a place where diverse ideas can be explored with respect in order to promote learning and growth. We each come from a variety of backgrounds and bring with us different experiences to the classroom. Regardless of whether we share similar opinions and beliefs, I expect us to remain respectful of each other as we explore ideas. I encourage you to express yourself with reason, clarity, courtesy, and compassion. This ensures that we may be comfortable learning and growing without fear of judgment, ridicule, or intimidation. I welcome each of you as worthy contributors in the classroom. Student conduct that disrupts the learning process will not be tolerated.

Course Structure

This is our overall schedule for the semester, depending on our progress through the course we may choose to expand or reduce certain sections. In such a scenario I will inform you sufficiently in advance.

Each week we have a 90-minute session, whilst I will bring some content and a framework within which to discuss ideas, these sessions are seminars rather than lectures so the ideas we will be discussing will be yours rather than mine. I am keen to hear your thoughts on the texts we will read with my role being to facilitate these discussions.

All texts have been provided on both blackboard and on USB drives during the first session. For students who are relatively new to studying American Politics I have included the free online textbook [American Government](#) in the course reader (in the folder for the first session) which provides an overview of institutions, actors and concepts in US politics which will frequently be discussed in class. If something remains unclear you are welcome to communicate with me as specified above.

Each week has three mandatory readings from academic sources, I recommend you read the texts for a class in the order they are listed in this syllabus as later texts are frequently responses to the earlier ones so reading in this order will make your life a bit easier. In addition, I have added media content where appropriate, these are usually podcasts, newspaper articles, opinion pieces or YouTube videos and aim to either clarify points in the academic articles or

provide real-world context to the topic. The media content is optional but may make the topic more accessible and fun to learn. If you have alternative ways that you enjoy learning I am eager to integrating further media sources into our class. I may also email you further media in the week prior to a session, again this will be optional, but I am keen to ensure there is as much depth of content for those who want it. When a short media clip has been assigned, I will endeavour to be in class at 12:00 and show the clip prior to the class beginning at 12:15.

For each of three academic sources I would like you to think about the following when reading:

- Why has this text been written/ what problem is it addressing?
- **What is the central argument? (This is the most important point!)**
- Does the argument work? Can you identify any problems with it? Has the author missed something?

The course is broken down into three sub-sections of unequal length: Fundamental Questions, Causes of Polarization, and Consequences, Solutions and the Future.

Part 1: Polarization? Fundamental Questions

Monday 8th April – Introduction: What will we do in this class?

In our first session together, we will discuss the plan for this class. I will set out how I envisage the structure of the class to proceed by talking through the syllabus. If students have additional ideas about content they would like to cover during the semester, the first session will offer an opportunity to discuss this. I also understand that this initial class represents an opportunity for students to decide whether they would like to take this course and so will be structured accordingly with no reading.

Reading/ Additional Media:

None

Monday 15th April – Definitions: What is polarization?

In our first content session we will seek to establish what is meant by polarization. We will further look to establish how we identify and measure polarization and consider an overview of causes and consequences of the phenomenon.

Reading:

William A. Galston and Pietro S. Nivola – Delineating the Problem

Pew Research Center – Political Polarization in the American Public

Michael Barber and Nolan McCarty – Causes and Consequences of Polarization

Additional Media:

The Good Stuff, 'Is America More Divided Than Ever?' www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRa5l_LQ32s&t (10 minutes)

Nolan McCarty – What we know and don't know about our polarized politics
www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/01/08/what-we-know-and-dont-know-about-our-polarized-politics/?utm_term=.b5b31b6a83d7

Monday 22nd April – No Class, Holiday

Monday 29th April – Theoretical and Historical Context: How did we get here?

In this class we will investigate the theoretical background of polarization as well as taking a historical perspective to understand how this division looked in previous eras. We will consider both the current era of polarization as well as the pre-polarised era as well as the theoretical implications for a polarized politics.

Reading:

American Political Science Association – Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System (*understand the main argument and purpose of this document: you do not need to read all 109 pages!*)

James E. Campbell – Polarized: Making Sense of a Divided America (ch.2 ‘History and Theories’)
David W. Brady and Hahrie C. Han – Polarization Then and Now: A Historical Perspective

Additional Media:

Alan Abramowitz – How America Got Polarized <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KS8Bd9zsfWw> (7 minutes)

Julian Zelizer – How America Got Polarized <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/08/03/opinions/zelizer-buckley-vidal-debates-polarized/>

The Ezra Klein Show (Podcast): The Surprising Story of How American Politics Polarized w/Sam Rosenfeld (1h 7min)
<https://art19.com/shows/the-ezra-klein-show/episodes/451c4c17-41bf-47b7-8eaf-bf8cfed6c45f>

Part 2: Causes of Polarization

In this section, which forms the bulk of this class, we will analyse a different argument each week that has been suggested as a cause of polarization in the US. We will critically assess the relative strengths and explanatory power of each argument using academic sources and media commentary.

Monday 6th May – The Public

In this week’s class we examine the argument of whether polarization has taken place because of the American public, looking to answer the question of whether division in Washington reflects divisions in America. We will seek to understand the academic debate that exists on this subject by reading work from competing scholars on the topic.

Reading:

Morris P. Fiorina – Has the American Public Polarized?

Alan I. Abramowitz and Kyle L. Saunders – Is Polarization a Myth?

Morris P. Fiorina and Matthew Levendusky – Disconnected: The Political Class versus the People

Additional Media:

PBS <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/pew-study-finds-polarized-americans-increasingly-resistant-political-compromise> (7 minutes)

Nolan McCarty, Polarization is Real (and Asymmetric) <http://themonkeycage.org/2012/05/polarization-is-real-and-asymmetric/>

Monday 13th May – Partisan Sorting and Asymmetric Polarization

In this week’s class we investigate the process of ideological sorting, looking to understand the role that ideological cues from parties and elites have played in the process of polarization as well as considering the idea of asymmetric polarization.

Reading:

Matthew Levendusky – The Partisan Sort (ch.3 ‘Have Voters Sorted?’)

Morris P. Fiorina – The Political Parties Have Sorted

Matt Grossman & David A. Hopkins – Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats: The Asymmetry of American Party Politics

Required viewing:

Vox, Admit it. Republicans have broken politics <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mICxKmCjF-4> (10minute video)

Additional Media:

Matthew Dickinson, Sorted, Not Polarized: Why The Distinction Matters

<https://sites.middlebury.edu/presidentialpower/2014/07/11/sorted-not-polarized-why-the-distinction-matters/>

Thomas E Mann, “Asymmetrical Polarization Undermined: Thoughts on the New Pew Research Center’s Report on Polarization,” June 13, 2014. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2014/06/13/asymmetrical-polarizationundermined-thoughts-on-the-new-pew-research-centers-report-on-politicalpolarization/>

Yes, Polarization is Asymmetric – and Conservatives are Worse,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/06/yes-polarization-is-asymmetric-and-conservatives-are-worse/373044/>

The Ezra Klein Show, 'The Core Contradiction of American Politics' <https://megaphone.link/VMP5363455172> (1 hour 8 minutes)

Hans Noel, Polarization is about more than just sorting, but sorting is polarization anyway

<http://www.mischiefsoffaction.com/2014/06/polarization-is-about-more-than-just.html>

Monday 20th May – Identity, Race and Religion

In this session we explore the role of identity, race and religion as forces of polarization. We will consider the question of how identity shapes our politics and looking at politics as having become part of our identity.

Reading:

John Sides, Michael Tesler and Lynn Vavreck – Donald Trump and the Rise of White Identity Politics

Lilliana Mason – The Rise of Uncivil Agreement

Alan I. Abramowitz – How Race and Religion Have Polarized American Voters

Additional Media:

Ezra Klein, How Identity Politics Elected Donald Trump <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/11/5/18052390/trump-2018-2016-identity-politics-democrats-immigration-race>

New Books Network Podcast: Uncivil Agreement <https://newbooksnetwork.com/lilliana-mason-uncivil-agreement-how-politics-became-our-identity-university-of-chicago-press-2018/> (20 minutes)

New Books Network Podcast: Identity Crisis <https://newbooksnetwork.com/john-sides-michael-tesler-lynn-vavreck-identity-crisis-the-2016-presidential-campaign-and-the-battle-for-the-meaning-of-america-princeton-up-2018/> (45 minutes)

Ta-Nehisi Coates, My President Was Black, The Atlantic (January-February, 2017) <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/01/my-presidentwas-black/508793/>

Bradley Jones, "Americans' Views of Immigrants Marked By Widening Partisan, Generational Divides," Pew Research Center (April 15, 2016) <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/15/americans-views-ofimmigrants-marked-by-widening-partisan-generational-divides/>

David Graham, Really, would you let your daughter marry a Democrat? <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/09/really-would-you-let-your-daughter-marry-a-democrat/262959/>

Monday 27th May – Redistricting, Gerrymandering and Geographic Sorting

In this class we turn our attention towards elections, focusing on the role that redistricting, gerrymandering and the process of geographical sorting have influenced polarization.

Reading:

Micah Altman and Michael McDonald – Redistricting and Polarization

Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal – Does Gerrymandering Cause Polarization?

Bill Bishop – The Big Sort ('Introduction')

Additional Media:

John Sides, "Gerrymandering Is Not What's Wrong With American Politics," Washington Post (February 3, 2013) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2013/02/03/gerrymandering-is-not-whats-wrong-with-american-politics/>

The Big Sort (video) <http://www.politicalpostcards.org/minnesota-the-big-sort/> (10 minutes)

Galen Drake, Why Can't We Just Burn Gerrymandering to the ground?, FiveThirtyEight Podcast, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-cant-we-just-burn-gerrymandering-to-the-ground/> (30 minutes)

Monday 3rd June – Primaries

This week we discuss the role of the nomination process in polarization, considering evidence that primary electorates are a driving force of polarization as well as counter-evidence to this idea.

Reading:

Barry C. Burden – The Polarizing Effects of Congressional Primaries

Alan I. Abramowitz – Don't Blame Primary Voters for Polarization

Shigeo Hirano, James M. Snyder, Stephen D. Ansolabehere and John M. Hansen – Primary Elections and Partisan Polarization in the U.S. Congress

Additional Media:

Elaine Kamarck, Alexander Podjul and Nicholas Zeppos, "Political Polarization and the 2016 Congressional Primaries," Brookings (Jan 18, 2017) <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/primaries-paper-i2.pdf>

"Is The Primary System To Blame For Partisanship?" NPR 12/18/13. <https://www.npr.org/2013/12/18/255185863/is-the-primary-system-to-blame-forpartisanship> (5 minutes)

Monday 10th June – (No Class, Holiday) Elections: Competitive & Nationalised

There is no class this week but due to us missing two sessions due to holidays I ask that you do the following reading and upload questions and we will also cover this topic in the following session.

Reading:

Morris P. Fiorina – An Era of Tenuous Majorities

Daniel J. Hopkins – The Increasingly United States ('Introduction')

Frances E. Lee – Insecure Majorities (ch.2 'A Protracted Era of Partisan Parity')

Additional Media:

Vanderbilt University, "New model of polarization sheds light on today's politics"

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/10/181003134513.htm>

Yascha Mounk, "The Rise of McPolitics", The New Yorker <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/07/02/the-rise-of-mcpolitics>

Monday 17th June – Economic Inequality

We will spend the first part of this session reviewing the subject of last week's readings, focusing on changing dynamics of national elections in terms of competitiveness, as well as considering how congressional elections now operate in a national polity.

For most of the session we will consider the role that economic inequality has played, tracing this relationship over time and understand if and how a more unequal society has contributed to a more polarised politics.

Reading:

Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal – Political Polarization and Income Inequality

Bryan J. Dettrey and James E. Campbell – Has Growing Income Inequality Polarized the American Electorate?

Andrew Gelman, Lane Kenworthy and Yu-Sung Su – Income Inequality and Partisan Voting in the United States

Additional Media:

Anna Swanson, "These Political Scientists May Have Just Discovered Why U.S. Politics Are A Disaster" Washington Post (October 7, 2015) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/10/07/these-politicalscientists-may-have-discovered-the-real-reason-u-s-politics-are-a-disaster>

Paul Krugman interview w/Rachel Maddow <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TeduUP64wx8> (9 minutes)

Monday 24th June – The Media

(This session will need to move as I am away at a conference, sorry!)

In this session we will consider how the changing media ecology has impacted the views of the public and asking whether both media landscape and content have shifted candidate and policy preferences.

Reading:

Diana Mutz – How the Mass Media Divide Us
Matthew Levendusky – Why Do Partisan Media Polarize Viewers?
Markus Prior – Media and Political Polarization

Additional Media:

A Polarized America https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hhx4B9_9Hul (11 minutes)
Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, Hal Roberts, and Ethan Zuckerman, “Breitbart-led Right-Wing Media Ecosystem Altered Broader Media Agenda” Columbia Journalism Review, March 3, 2017 <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/breitbart-media-trump-harvardstudy.php>
Bail et al, Exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization, <https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/early/2018/08/27/1804840115.full.pdf>
John Sides, A Balanced News Diet After All? <http://themonkeycage.org/2012/04/a-balanced-news-diet-after-all/>

Sunday 30th June – Term Paper Synopsis Due

Please submit your synopsis to me via email 24 hours prior to Monday’s class.

Part 3: Consequences, Solutions and the Future

In the final part of our course we will look at outcomes of polarization, considering what these changes mean, whether they pose a problem, and finally whether polarization is something that requires ‘solving’.

Monday 1st July – Consequences of Polarization

In this session I will read a list of all the students whose synopses I have received, you will not be permitted to submit a term paper if you have not submitted a synopsis by this class.

I will update you about the number of sets of questions that have been posed by each student during the semester to ensure that everyone is able to complete this requirement.

In our penultimate session we will look at the outcomes of the process of polarization, seeking to understand how it impacts legislative productivity, political interest among the public, policy outcomes, public approval of institutions and individuals in Washington and how it affects Americans’ abilities to find common ground. We will assess both positive and negative consequences of polarization.

Reading:

Barbara Sinclair – Spoiling the Sausages? How a Polarized Congress Deliberates and Legislates
Diana Epstein and John Graham – Consequences of Polarization
Marc J. Hetherington – Turn Off or Turned On? How Polarization Affects Political Engagement

Additional Media:

SSRC, The Dark and Bright Sides of Party Polarization, <https://items.ssrc.org/the-dark-and-bright-sides-of-party-polarization/>
Sarah Binder, How political polarization creates stalemate and undermines lawmaking, The Washington Post, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/01/13/how-political-polarization-creates-stalemate-and-undermines-lawmaking/?utm_term=.0bae0bf16a3f

Monday 8th July – Potential Solutions?

In our final session we shall critically assess potential solutions that have been presented to solve polarization by political scientists as well as considering if polarization is something that requires solution.

I will return all the term paper synopses with feedback via email before this date.

Reading:

William A. Galston and Pietro S. Nivola – Toward Depolarization

Diana Epstein and John Graham – Potential Remedies & Future Directions

Elaine C. Kamarck – Solutions to Polarization

Additional Media:

Ariana Figoroa, Can Teaching Civics Save Democracy? http://www.npr.org/2017/09/22/552665068/can-teaching-civics-savedemocracy?utm_source=npr_newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=20171001&utm_campaign&utm_term

Sunday 8th September – End-Term Paper Due

Please submit your final term paper via email by this date, late submissions will not be accepted. Your paper will be graded before the start of the winter semester.