**Political Polarization and American Democracy**

**POSC 404, Spring 2023**

**Mon 1:20pm-4:00pm, Case Geyer 438**

**Instructor: Sam Rosenfeld**

**Office Hours: Mon 10:00am-11:00am, Wed 12:00-2:00pm, & by appointment**

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The embittered state of contemporary American politics has occasioned widespread popular and scholarly consternation. In recent years, moreover, such worries have moved beyond a concern about popular rancor and dysfunctional governance to encompass serious contemplation of the prospect of “democratic backsliding” or even outright system collapse in the United States. This seminar is designed to familiarize students with leading scholarly work on political polarization in the United States—its historical origins and contemporary drivers, its workings at both the mass and elite level of political activity, and its impact on both political culture and governance. We will put that literature in dialogue with research in both American and comparative politics on democratic “backsliding” and constitutional stability. And, through a service-learning component of the course involving voluntary work at local civic and political organizations of each student’s choosing, we will consider the connection between community-level civic life and national political dynamics.

READINGS:

The following required texts are available at the bookstore for rental or purchase. All readings not included in the volumes below will be posted on Moodle.

* James M. Curry and Frances E. Lee, *The Limits of Party: Congress and Lawmaking in a Polarized Era* (University of Chicago Press, 2020)
* Jacob M. Grumbach, *Laboratories Against Democracy: How National Parties Transformed State Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2022)
* Eitan Hersh, *Politics is for Power: How to Move Beyond Political Hobbyism, Take Action, and Make Real Change* (Simon & Schuster, 2020)
* Daniel J. Hopkins, *The Increasingly United States: How and Why American Political Behavior Nationalized* (University of Chicago Press, 2018)
* Ezra Klein, *Why* *We’re Polarized* (Simon & Schuster, 2020)
* Robert C. Lieberman, Suzanne Mettler, and Kenneth M. Roberts, eds., *Democratic Resilience: Can the United States Withstand Rising Polarization?* (Cambridge University Press, 2022) **[referred to as LMR below]**
* Josh Pacewicz, *Partisans and Partners: The Politics of the Post-Keynesian Society* (University of Chicago Press, 2017)
* Sam Rosenfeld, *The Polarizers: Postwar Architects of Our Partisan Era* (University of Chicago Press, 2018)

PARTICIPATION, ASSIGNMENTS, AND GRADING:

*Class meetings:*

This is a seminar, and in-class discussion as well as group work and occasional writing response exercises will be regular components of the meetings. Completed reading assignments, regular attendance, and active participation are all, thus, mandatory requirements. Active participation involves asking questions, answering questions, offering your opinions, and engaging in small-group work. To discuss American politics unavoidably means discussing contentious and controversial subjects. That makes it all the more important for us to model thoughtful citizenship and deliberation by stating our opinions constructively and respectfully and listening carefully when fellow classmates are speaking.

Beginning a few weeks into class, each of you will be responsible for formally leading class discussion of the material for a particular meeting. You (and your discussion-leading partner for that week) will meet with me the Friday prior to the class to go over your plans for the discussion. More details on this assignment will be forthcoming.

*Volunteering:*

This course also features an “experiential learning” component, developed in consultation with—and with the support of—the Max Shacknai Center for Outreach, Volunteerism, and Education (COVE). As we will discover in course readings, scholars agree that political “nationalization” as well as long-term transformations in American civic life are important parts of the story of contemporary polarization—even as they disagree about what the nature of those roles are. As a component of the class, you will volunteer at a local or regional organizations engaged in civic or political work, broadly construed. This includes both formal party organizations as well as nonprofit (and formally nonpartisan) issue-based and community groups. From your work in such an organization, you will generate information that can speak to scholarly debates about polarization’s democratic virtues and dangers as well as the place of local politics in the story of intensifying national political conflict.

In the first weeks of class, you will each choose area organizations to work with, based on a list that I will distribute. In matching students with organizations, I seek to achieve coverage across partisan and nonpartisan groups, but will otherwise encourage you to volunteer for groups about which you feel political affinity and shared substantive commitment as citizens. This component of the course, as on-the-ground field work, should involve at least 15 hours of volunteer labor across the semester. Students will keep a journal record of their experiences at the organizations, and will periodically report to the group on those experiences.

*Writing:*

The most effective route to clear and rigorous understanding of complex problems can be found in the challenge of analytical writing. You will write three papers intended to compel you to engage course material and scholarship beyond it, reflect on your service work, and articulate clear and persuasive analytical arguments. For the first paper, 5 pages in length and due February 24, you will engage assigned readings in the service of offering a distinct argument about polarization as a historical process. The second, 5-7 pages long and due April 7, will ask you to incorporate your experience as a volunteer in a local organization into an analytical argument concerning the relationship between local civic life and national politics. The final paper, 15 pages long, will ask you to bring outside research to bear on a particular theme or debate within the scholarship on political polarization. At our final class meeting on May 1, each student will present their work to their colleagues and answer questions from them, prior to submitting final drafts by May 11. Details on all of these assignments will be forthcoming.

Course grades are broken down as follows:

* 20% participation
* 15% paper 1 (Feb 24)
* 20% paper 2 (April 7)
* 25% paper 3 (May 11)
* 10% discussion leading
* 5% presentation
* 5% service journal

CLASSROOM POLICIES:

* Students are expected to attend class. Three class absences lacking documented excuses will reduce your course grade by 1/3 of a letter. Needless to say, legitimate excuses, medical or otherwise, are certainly conceivable in times like these! Just be in touch with me should anything come up that compromises your participation in the class.
* Late submission of the paper assignments will result in a 1/3-letter-grade reduction in that paper’s grade for every 24 hours it is late. (The same caveat about legitimate excuses applies here as well.)
* Cell phones, tablets, and laptops are prohibited in class. We will be making this a laptop-free class not merely because the internet presents temptations for distraction, but also because [research has indicated](http://www.vox.com/2014/6/4/5776804/note-taking-by-hand-versus-laptop) that we absorb and retain information more effectively when taking notes by hand instead of by computer. If this policy presents a hardship for you, please discuss it with me during my office hours or by appointment and we will work out an accommodation.
* I expect you to abide by the [Colgate Academic Honor Code.](https://www.colgate.edu/student-handbook2/academic-dishonesty-and-the-academic-honor-code#code) Violations will be reported to the Honor Court.
* If you feel you may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability, meet with me to discuss your specific needs. Please also contact Evelyn Lester, Director of Academic Support and Disability Services (315-228-7375, [elester@colgate.edu](mailto:elester@colgate.edu)), who reviews documentation to determine and help coordinate reasonable and appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities.

CALENDAR OUTLINE:

1/23 Half-day course overview

1/30 Polarization: The State of the Scholarly Literature (As Told by a Journalist)

* Klein, *Why We’re Polarized*

2/6 Concepts: Parties, Ideology, Polarization, Democracy

* Kathleen Bawn et al, “A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands, and Nominations in American Politics,” *Perspectives on Politics* (2012)
* LMR Ch 1: Lieberman, Mettler, and Roberts, “How Democracies Endure”
* Rosenfeld, *The Polarizers*, Intro and Ch 1

2/13 Historical Origins: Who Polarized America and Why?

* Rosenfeld, *The Polarizers*, Chs 2-Concluson

2/20 CLASS CANCELLED

--PAPER 1 DUE FRIDAY, 2/24, 5PM--

2/27 Polarization in the Mass Public

* LMR Chs 7-9:
  + Mason and Kalmoe, “The Social Roots, Risks, and Rewards of Mass Polarization”
  + Parker and Barreto, “The Great White Hope: Threat and Racial Resilience in Trump’s America”
  + Margolis, “The Religious Sort: The Causes and Consequences of the Religiosity Gap in America”
* Matt Grossmann and David Hopkins, “Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats: The Asymmetry of American Party Politics,” *Perspectives on Politics* (2015)
* Fowler et al, “Moderates,” *American Political Science Review* (2022)

3/6 Polarization and Nationalization I: Electoral Behavior

* Hopkins, *The Increasingly United States*

--SPRING BREAK--

3/20 The Transformation of Civic Life

* Pacewicz, *Partisans and Partners*

3/27 Civic Engagement: Antidote to or Driver of Polarization?

* Hersh, *Politics is for Power*
* LMR Ch 15: Skocpol, Tervo, and Walters, “Citizen Organizing and Party Polarization from the Tea Party to the Anti-Trump Resistance”

4/3 Polarization and Nationalization II: State-level Politics and Policy

* Grumbach, *Laboratories Against Democracy*
* LMR Chs 12 and 13:
  + Rocco, “Laboratories of What? American Federalism and the Politics of Democratic Subversion”
  + Hertel-Fernandez, “Conservative Extra-Party Coalitions and Statehouse Democracy”

--PAPER 2 DUE FRIDAY, 4/7, 5PM--

4/10 The Polarization of National Government

* Mann and Ornstein, *It’s Even Worse than it Looks* (2016), Ch 2
* Curry and Lee, *The Limits of Party*

4/17 Polarization and Democratic Backsliding

* LMR Chs 2, 3, 5, 6, 14
  + Pierson and Schickler, “Polarization and the Durability of Madisonian Checks and Balances”
  + McCoy and Somer, “Pernicious Polarization and Democratic Resilience”
  + Kriner, “Unilateralism Unleashed?”
  + Keck, “Court-Packing and Democratic Erosion”
  + Bateman, “Elections, Polarization, and Democratic Resilience”

4/24 Reform and Renewal

* Nathaniel Persily, “Stronger Parties as a Solution to Polarization” (2015)
* Alan Abramowitz, “Beyond Confrontation and Gridlock: Making Democracy Work for the American People” (2015)
* Daniel Schlozman and Sam Rosenfeld, *The Hollow Parties* (forthcoming), Chs 1 and 8
* Lee Drutman, “Let a Thousand Parties Bloom,” *Foreign Policy*, October 19, 2019

5/1 Presentations

--PAPER 3 DUE THURSDAY, 5/11, 9AM