

First-Year Seminar Course Proposal

Patrick Miller

Assistant Professor

Department of Political Science

Seminar Title

Seeing Red and Blue: The Polarization of American Politics

Course Description

People often say that America is more politically and culturally divided than ever. Our leaders seem obsessed with scoring political points and incapable of making bipartisan compromises to address pressing issues. At worst, Americans themselves may have divided into two alien camps—one “red” and one “blue”—fundamentally opposed in their social values and political ideals and unwilling to tolerate one another at any level.

But are American society and politics really this broken? Are our political parties incapable of governing? Are there two Americas? These are critical questions for all Americans, but especially for younger citizens whose generation will eventually be charged with taking the reins of leadership and tackling issues their predecessors left unresolved.

The course will address big picture questions by examining accessible academic literature from political science on partisan polarization. Specific topics will include: elite-level polarization, how political institutions (e.g. elections, media, congressional rules, etc.) have fostered this growing partisan divide, public opinion assessing mass polarization, the role of citizens in enabling a crippled political system, the role of religion and cultural change in exacerbating party differences, and how American politics could be reformed to foster greater compromise and civility.

FYS Learning Outcomes

Critical Thinking: Students will be introduced to how social scientists think about abstract concepts such as partisan polarization. They will be encouraged to think about politics in a systematic way that can be studied empirically and critically evaluated. This will involve understanding and critiquing how polarization is studied, and developing an original argument about polarization.

Information Literacy: Students will develop a research question for the integrative assignment and do background research to inform their efforts.

Communication: The course will be writing-intensive. Students will also present the findings of their research project orally using Powerpoint.

Experiential Learning: Ideally, we can partner with the Dole Institute of Politics to sponsor an event. If that is infeasible, I will arrange relevant outside speakers to talk to the class in person or through Skype.

Integrative Assignment

The goal of this assignment is for student groups to develop a short survey or experiment about polarization. They will select an area of interest, identify a research question in that area, perform the necessary background research to construct a simple literature review, and then develop 1-3 testable hypotheses that stem logically from their research question. After the course topic and the scientific method are introduced over the first few weeks, brief writing assignments will be due regularly as students progress on the integrative assignment. Assignments might include:

- Assignment #1: 1-2 pages selecting a topic, discussing what interests a student group about that topic, and identifying possible research questions.
- Assignment #2: Once a specific question is selected with my approval, groups will complete a short annotated bibliography on published research accompanied by a short outline pulling that literature together.
- Assignment #3: 2-3 pages discussing a short set of hypotheses for the group.
- Assignment #4: 1-2 pages proposing a short set of survey questions (experimental or not) testing the hypotheses from assignment #3.
- Assignment #5: Once data are collected, each group will submit a paper discussing its findings. I will assist with data collection and analysis, keeping the empirical element as simple as possible. Ideally, groups can adapt heavily their work from assignments 2-4 such that the discussion of results is the only real new section for this assignment.
- Assignment #6: Each student group will be expected to present its paper as a Powerpoint presentation to the class.

I will provide feedback to the groups as the assignment progresses. I will also clear the survey with the KU IRB. Students will be assessed through rubrics specific to each assignment.

Additional Course Features

Connection to other seminars: Political polarization is a topic that is substantively quite disconnected from what other professors are doing for their seminars. However, my goals of teaching students to think as social scientists and to engage in critical thinking through the scientific method likely overlap with what other professors are doing. I would like to connect to other seminars, therefore, by making them part of our research effort. Specifically, I would like the students in other seminars to be the participants for our survey/experiment. Obviously, this will require soliciting participation from other professors and clearing this with the IRB.

Collaboration: As discussed, I would like to explore partnering with the Dole Institute of Politics to sponsor some event (e.g. speaker, panel, etc.) relevant to my seminar topic. Whether this can happen, though, will depend on the Institute's programming and willingness to collaborate. If feasible, however, such a collaboration would be an outstanding way to introduce students to the resources of the Dole Institute and to integrate it further into the core academic mission of KU. I would also be open to exploring partnerships with other campus entities to sponsor such events.