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PSCI 420.R01: Experimental Offering - Politics of Polarization

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POLITICS OF POLARIZATION

Instructor: Professor Paul Haber
Political Science Department, course #420
Autumn 2020
Meets remotely (usually) Wednesdays 3:00 – 5:20

Paul.Haber@umontana.edu

Required texts (available at the University Bookstore and elsewhere)

Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized*. Simon & Schuster, 2020.

Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*. Doubleday, 2020.

Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Let Them Eat Tweets: How the Right Rules in an Age of Extreme Inequality*. Liveright Publishers, 2020.

This is a class on pernicious political polarization in the US in comparative perspective. My position, and that of most political scientists and others writing on the subject, is that political polarization is not inherently bad for democratic institutions and processes, social and cultural relations. In fact, it is often argued that desirable political changes often are dependent on increasing polarization enacted by social movements. Furthermore, it has been argued, with merit, that it is possible for democracies to be insufficiently polarized by party positions, such as was argued by many in the US during the 1950s. However, it is the position of many political scientists studying the issue in the US and in comparative fashion, that pernicious political polarization is bad for democracy. This class will be an investigation into the nature and consequences of PPP and proposed solutions to it. In other words, diagnosis of the disease and treatment options.

Here are some of the defining characteristics of pernicious political polarization (thanks to Wikipedia):

A single political cleavage overrides other divides and commonalities to the point it has boiled into a single divide which becomes entrenched and self-reinforcing.

Politics is seen as a zero-sum game, in which compromise with the other side is seen as anathema, attendant with severe penalties for those whose loyalty is questioned by acts of said compromise.

Lebas & Munemo (2019) have argued pernicious polarization is marked by both deeper societal penetration and segregation than other forms of political polarization, making it less amenable to resolution.

Effect on governance

Pernicious polarization makes compromise, consensus, interaction, and tolerance increasingly costly and tenuous for individuals and political actors on both sides of the divide. Pernicious polarization routinely weakens respect for democratic norms, corrodes basic legislative processes, undermines the nonpartisan nature of the judiciary and fuels public disaffection with political parties. It exacerbates intolerance and discrimination, diminishes societal trust, and increases violence throughout the society. In country-by-country instances of pernicious polarization, it is common to see the winner exclude the loser from positions of power or using means to prevent the loser from becoming a threat in the future. In these situations, the loser typically questions the legitimacy of the institutions allowing the winner to create a hegemony, which causes citizens to grow cynical towards politics. In these countries, politics is often seen as a self-referential power game that has nothing to do with people.

Effect on public trust

Perniciously polarized societies often witness public controversies over factually provable questions. During this process, facts and moral truths increasingly lose their weight, as more people conform to the messages of their own bloc. Social and political actors such as journalists, academics, and politicians either become engaged

in partisan storytelling or else incur growing social, political, and economic costs. Electorates lose confidence in public institutions. Support for norms and democracy decline. It becomes increasingly difficult for people to act in a morally principled fashion by appealing to the truth or acting in line with one's values when it conflicts with one's party interests. Once pernicious polarization takes hold, it takes on a life of its own, regardless of earlier intentions.

Students are required to come to each class having read carefully all the required reading for that day. Students should expect to answer questions from the instructor related to the reading and to bring questions and comments of your own.

Grades

There will be a default grade calculation method. There will also be opportunities for students to propose alternatives to the default grade calculation method. That is, if you want to propose another way for me to calculate your grade, you are welcome to propose it to me. I might not go along with your idea, but I can promise to give serious consideration to any serious proposal.

Default Grading Scheme: One exam and one paper. Each will count for one third of the final grade. Students can improve their grade by making contributions to class discussion. Students can also lower their grade by excessive unexplained absences/tardiness and/or not being prepared to answer direct questions from me in class.

Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of the course students will:

1. have an enhanced knowledge of political polarization today: the problem, and proposed solutions.
2. have made progress in their analytical skills, as evidenced in writing and speaking assignments.

Reading Assignments and Exam Schedule

Part I: Klein (The problem in the United States)

August 19 Introduction to the course. Introduction and chapters 1-2 [pages ix-48]

August 26 Chapters 3-5 [49-135]

September 2 Chapters Interlude – Chapter 7 [135-196]

September 9 Chapters 8-10 [197-268]

Part II: Applebaum (The problem of democratic fragility and rise of authoritarianism in comparative perspective)

September 16 Chapters 1-3

September 23 Chapters 4-6 and an interview with political scientist Cheri Berman

<https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/vox/the-ezra-klein-show/e/60122314?autoplay=true&curator=MediaREDEF>

Part III: Back to the United States

September 30 Hacker and Pierson, Introduction and chapters 1-2 (pages 1-76)

October 7 Hacker and Pierson, chapters 3-4 (pages 77-140)

October 14 Hacker and Pierson, chapters 5-6 (pages 141-214)

Suggested: Ezra Klein interview with the authors. Episode 351. And an article published on Vox shortly after he did the interview: <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/how-inequality-is-changing-the-republican-party-%E2%80%94-and-breaking-american-politics/ar-BB17DRm5>

Part IV: A proposed solution to the problem in the US

October 21 <https://ethics.harvard.edu/news/new-report-commission-practice-democratic-citizenship>
Suggested: Interview with the lead author. Ezra Klein episode 341 is with Danielle Allen and is on the radicalism of the American Revolution. <https://cast.writtn.com/episode/117691/danielle-allen-on-the-radicalism-of-the-american-revolution-and-its-lessons-for-today&p=4&pos=4>

October 28 Exam (format to be determined)

Part V: US Election

November 4 Discussion of election results
November 11 Veteran's Day. School Holiday
November 18 Papers due

Some potential additional sources to be incorporated into the course, or perhaps just to be supplemental for those with time and interest:

-- <https://www.npr.org/2020/08/27/906329303/as-nation-reckons-with-race-poll-finds-white-americans-least-engaged>

This is really excellent. Seriously consider using it.

-- <https://twitter.com/DoubleDownNews/status/1298719450615525379> Can also be accessed at <https://www.doubledown.news/watch/2020/5/june/black-lives-matter-george-floyd-the-question-of-violence-gary-young>

Excellent. Short video on violence in the Black Lives Matter protests.

--<https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/vox/the-ezra-klein-show/e/58779384>

Excellent conversation between Andrew Sullivan and Ezra Klein, wherein you get – in two hours listening time – the best articulation of liberal and conservative views on everything from identity politics to immigration (they do not go much into other areas of foreign policy). Highly recommended.

--Ezra Klein interview with Republican strategist Stuart Stevens.

--<https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/qanon-future-republican-party/>

Word document includes a Haber question to the class.

--<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/23/opinion/trump-racism-suburbs.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>
Political polarization along racial lines is worst in small towns and suburbs, where more than half of African-Americans live.