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PSCI 420.01: Politics of Polarization

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POLITICS OF POLARIZATION

Instructor: Professor Paul Haber
Political Science Department, course #420
Autumn 2021
Meets Wednesdays 1:00 – 3:20 in LA 305

Paul.Haber@umontana.edu

Required texts (available at the University Bookstore and elsewhere)

Robert D. Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again*. Simon & Schuster, 2020 (Unfortunately only hardcover available, but FYI if you use Amazon, it is on sale there for less than 19 dollars and may well be available elsewhere at discounted prices since the softcover is coming out in early September)

Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized*. Simon & Schuster, 2021. (Hardcover came out in 2020, paperback edition has an afterword)

Christopher Caldwell, *The Age of Entitlement: America Since the Sixties*. Simon & Schuster, paperback, 2021. (Hardcover came out in 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 – understood to be fierce differences) 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 fueled by social movements. Furthermore, it has been argued, with merit, that it is possible for democracies to be weakened by insufficient differences between the political parties so that voters do not have a clear choice; such a situation was said to exist in the United States during the 1950s. However, it is certainly my position and clearly the position of most seriously studying the question that the pernicious political polarization that exists in many countries, including the United States, 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, we will both diagnosis the disease and offer treatment options.

Here are some of the defining characteristics of pernicious political polarization:

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. In such a situation, elected officials no longer seriously deliberate the merits of bills; their positions are a priori based on which party is proposing the legislation. Loser” the public good. In such situations, legislatures are no longer deliberative bodies and the deliberative faculties of the citizenry atrophy as well.

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 negotiation and compromise and thus 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. In other words, it is possible to create a dynamic in which the incentive structure for elected officials running in lockstep with party leaders that is

advantageous to their short-term political power status but distained by the electorate despite the fact that the electorate continues to reward said polarized behavior by their elected officials. It exacerbates intolerance and discrimination, diminishes societal trust, and increases violence (Portland, Oregon). 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 (Trump), further fueling political cynicism. In these countries, politics is often seen as a self-referential power game that has nothing to do with the political process of balancing interests and indeed transcending narrow short-term political gain in service of the public good.

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. This has led many observers to have a set of ideas about how to reform the system but without much hope that these reforms can be passed in the context of pernicious polarization.

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 me related to the reading and to bring questions and comments of your own. You should expect a seminar not a lecture class in which I do most of the talking.

Grades

There will be a default grade calculation method. Students will have the option to propose another way for me to calculate your grade. I might not go along with your idea, but I promise to give serious consideration to any serious proposal.

Default Grading Scheme: Essay due at end of the semester (half of total grade) and day to day classroom contributions and prepared presentations (the other half). Note on day to day class participation: 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.

Class Schedule and Assignments

Introduction to the class: Critical Race Theory and Covid

September 1 We start the class with a discussion of two of the most highly perniciously polarized and polarizing issues: CRT and the Covid Vaccine. Assignment: Come to class with your thoughts and questions regarding the big polarization picture, as well as the more specific issues of CRT and vaccines.

There are no specific required readings, but I offer these as points of departure for the two subjects:

Trip Gabriel and Dana Goldstein, Disputing Racism’s Reach, Republicans Rattle American Schools. Word document. Included as attachment to email sent out before start of semester.

Articles on CRT. Word document (sent out by email prior to class, along with this syllabus). There is a lot of stuff here. One I would single out for consideration is a podcast: Fresh Air, episode 4,998. The Battle Over Teaching Critical Race Theory. Interview with NBC reporter Tyler Kingkade, who has done extensive investigative work on the subject. Highly recommended.

<https://www.npr.org/2021/06/24/1009882751/the-battle-over-teaching-critical-race-theory>

<https://samharris.org/podcasts/256-contagion-bad-ideas/>

Covid and Vaccines. Not behind a paywall.

Part I: Putnam and Romney Garrett

September 8 Chapters 1-2 [pages 1-68]
 September 15 Chapters 3-4 [69-162]
 September 22 Chapters 5-6 [163-244]
 September 29 Chapters 7-9 [245-342]

Part II: Klein

October 6 Introduction and chapters 1-2 [pages ix-48]
 October 13 Chapters 3-5 [49-135]
 October 20 Chapters Interlude – Chapter 7 [135-196]
 October 27 Chapters 8-afterword [197-279]

Part III: Caldwell

November 3 Part I The Revolution of the 1960s. Chapters 1-4 [3-92]
 November 10 Part II The New Constitution. Chapters 5-6 [93-172]
 November 17 Part II The New Constitution. Chapters 7-8 [173-280]
 November 24 Thanksgiving Travel Day (no class)

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

December 1 <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>

December 8 Course evaluations, a return to Critical Race Theory discussion, and progress reports on essays. Essays can be turned in today. Those who do will receive written comments from me and be able to submit a second draft for grading. If you choose this option, you must hand in a strong first draft in order to receive in-depth feedback from me. If you do not submit your draft today, that’s ok, you can submit your paper for grading on December 15th. All final drafts will be due December 15th. Extensions will only be granted under very special circumstances, so please plan in advance for this due date.

Essay assignment: A 10 – 15 pages, double spaced essay that answers two questions. Please address the first question first and then the second question. Please demarcate this by having two subheadings, clearly marked. You may, if you wish, have an intro and/or a concluding section. But, they are not required.

1. Diagnosis. Drawing from the assigned materials in this class, and other materials you wish to incorporate, how have you come to understand pernicious polarization as a problem to be solved? Its causes, contours, and the nature of the threat it poses?

2. Remedies. Drawing from the assigned materials in this class, and other materials you wish to incorporate, how have you come to understand, and evaluate the merits of the remedies on offer? Which, if any, do you find the most persuasive? Why?

I will evaluate your essay based on the quality of the analysis and writing. I will expect you to engage a cross section of the material presented, meaning that I expect you to draw at least some from material that does not neatly support your conclusions, but rather you show me that you understand views other than your own and can respond to them intelligently. I am happy to discuss the assignment in or out of class.

Additional materials

I may well draw from this list to add to readings above as we proceed in the class. Please feel free to send me materials that you find that you think would be good to add to this list. I am particularly interested in thoughtful pieces that contribute to our thinking about what can be done to mitigate pernicious polarization.

--<https://www.allsides.com/blog/simple-way-reduce-polarization-learn-what-other-side-thinks-about-you>

Some ideas on what we can do to mitigate pernicious polarization. This article includes live links to recent research.

--Ezra Klein with Bryan Stevenson on July 20, 2020. How America Can Heal.

<https://www.vox.com/21327742/bryan-stevenson-the-ezra-klein-show-america-slavery-healing-racism-george-floyd-protests>

--<https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/52/economic-dignity/>

Fairly long article, later made into a book, on the importance of economic dignity. I would add that many things can contribute to political polarization, but one of the important ones is lack of widespread economic dignity. Hypothesis: More economic dignity for more people = polarization medicine.

--Trip Gabriel and Dana Goldstein, Disputing Racism's Reach, Republicans Rattle American Schools

In a culture-war brawl that has spilled into the country's educational system, Republicans at the local, state and national levels are trying to block curriculums that emphasize systemic racism.

https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/01/us/politics/critical-race-theory.html?campaign_id=9&emc=edit_nn_20210602&instance_id=32039&nl=the-morning®i_id=91585686&segment_id=59601&te=1&user_id=5b3e478f7d394d11d5785eb3fcab20b7

Word document containing the article sent out prior to our first class meeting.

--I collected a few articles on CRT and put them into a word document that was sent out prior to first class.

--Sam Harris interview with Dr. Steven Topol on the covid vaccines. <https://samharris.org/podcasts/256-contagion-bad-ideas/> Sent out prior to first class.

--Ezra Klein interview with Ari Berman, Republicans Are Setting Off a 'Doom Loop' for Democracy Voting rights, minority rule and the G.O.P.'s assault on elections. June 25th, 2021 This is a podcast but is so nerdy and detailed that I highly recommend the transcript. I have a word copy and happy to send out on request.

--Ezra Klein interview with Lilliana Mason <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/13/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-lilliana-mason.html?searchResultPosition=1> Highly recommended. I may end up assigning this when we read Klein. If I don't assign it, you may well want to listen to it or read the transcript. Very dense and informative.

--<https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/up-from-polarization-ezra-klein-review>
Interesting review of Klein's book. I would be interested to hear your response to it.

--Best of Enemies. Fictional account based on true story of how a Klansman and a black civil rights activist came to see eye to eye over time in a southern town during the civil rights movement. Netflix. Highly recommended. It has the power to lift your spirit.

--While the required readings for this class focus primarily on the United States, pernicious polarization exists in a number of countries. Some of those that are most often cited in Latin America include Brazil, Bolivia, and Peru. Here are a couple of recent articles on the situation in Peru and Bolivia, two high profile Latin American cases, however, deep divisions threaten democratic institutions and processes in a number of other Latin American countries as well, including Latin America's largest country, Brazil. The situation in Nicaragua and Venezuela is so bad that even a weak or teetering democracy can be said to be still functioning. If you come across additional materials, please send them my way.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/28/peru-swears-in-new-president-pedro-castillo>

Steve Ellner, Pedro Castillo's victory raises hopes beyond Peru, Latin American Perspectives blog, 2021. I have word copy available on request.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/13/bolivia-ex-president-anez-arrested-in-coup-probe-minister>

--<https://harpers.org/archive/2021/08/home-country-latino-latinx-hispanic-hispano-united-states/> This is an interesting article, in the tradition of investigative journalism/ethnography about Latinos in the US. It is based on the author's travels to many locations in the United States and the conversations he had with a wide variety of Latino people from a variety of Latin American countries with a variety of political views, including many supporters of Donald Trump. The article is in a word document in the Mexico 2021 folder. Maybe, but more likely, just put in the immigration section of possible topics to pursue if I insert that into the syllabus again this time around.

--'Reality Rebellion' by Mark Danner

By doubling down on Trump's Big Lie that the election was stolen, Republicans are making their base angrier, more radical, and more likely to turn to violence. New York Review of Books July 1, 2021 issue I have a copy, happy to send out on request.

--Greg Jackson, "Prayer for a Just War: Finding meaning in the climate fight." Harper's Magazine, June 2021. I have a Pdf copy in folder for 230 fall 2021. Happy to send out on request. 16 pages long, including photographs. The notion is that if we were able to come together to slow down climate change might that create a spirit de corps.

--Last year, I assigned for this class Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*. Doubleday, 2020. It got squeezed out by other readings this semester, but is an interesting read on pernicious polarization in Great Britain and Eastern Europe written by a well-known neoliberal.

--"Ex-Friends" by David Kilon – a critical book review of Applebaum's *Twilight of Democracy*.

<https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/anne-applebaum-twilight-democracy/>

--https://www.amazon.com/Suburban-Warriors-Origins-American-Politics/dp/0691165734/ref=sr_1_2?crid=30YGGZ3HXIHS3&dchild=1&keywords=suburban+warriors&qid=1607351971&s=books&sprefix=Suburban+Warriors%2Caps%2C232&sr=1-2
Suburban Warriors by Lisa McGirr. Rise of the New Right history.

--The 2020 census data is out and it has significant implications for the polarization situation in the United States. I have a short article from the New York Times that briefly points to some highlights. Available on request.

--<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/27/opinion/pope-francis-catholic-church.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>

This erudite article by a well-known conservative author and commentator may be of more interest to Catholic and recovering Catholic readers than to others but even for those of us not deeply influenced by The Church may appreciate some of the resonances with our class, including but not limited to what happened during the 1960s and what has followed since.

--McCoy, Jennifer, and Somer, Murat. "Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies: Comparative Evidence and Possible Remedies." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681.1 (2018): 234-71.

--Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste*. Random House, 2020.

--Roderick P. Hart, *Trump and Us: What He Says and Why People Listen*. Cambridge University Press, 2020.

--Stacey Abrams, *Our Time Is Now: Power, Purpose, and the Fight for a Fair America*. Henry Holt and Co, June 2020. 300 pages. Also, she was interviewed by Ezra Klein, episode 377, November 2020 (right before the election). Great interview, with a lot of her book ideas expressed. She also mentioned a book in the interview that would be worth checking out: William Dobson, *The Dictator's Learning Curve*. Perhaps also check out an article by Klein, *The fight is for democracy*. Vox.

--Dan Kemmis, *Citizens Uniting to Restore Our Democracy*. University of Oklahoma Press, 2020.

Dan is a long-time resident of Missoula and former mayor of Missoula and Speaker of the Montana House of Representatives. Furthermore, he is happy to talk with students, so let me know if you would like help in reaching out to him. We could also invite him to class.

--<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2018/01/11/raj-chetty-in-14-charts-big-findings-on-opportunity-and-mobility-we-should-know/>

--The podcast *To See Each Other*. A podcast by Progressives about rural America and who argue against, in their terms, "writing it off to Trump territory." The focus is on getting to know rural progressives and their local efforts.

--Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart*, Mariner Books, 2009. A bit dated by now but important reference book.

--<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qewckuxa9hw> by Michael Sandel. Short, clear.

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

-- <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> Short video on violence in the Black Lives Matter protests. A bit dated at this point.

--<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.

--Ezra Klein interview with historian of the Republican Party Nicole Hemmer. Excellent piece highly critical of the party and what changes in the party since the 1990s implies for democracy.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/18/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-nicole-hemmer.html>

--Sam Harris interview with Jack Goldstone. Making Sense #232. Inequality and Revolution. This is an excellent interview and Goldstone is a particularly excellent communicator of complex concepts to the general public. You may have difficulty accessing this interview due to the pay wall.

--Elliot Ackerman, “Civil Warning: Are we living through another antebellum era?” in Harper’s April 2021, pp. 25-33.

--<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.

--Sam Harris has been and continues to become a more controversial figure within the debate over racial justice, critical race theory, and BLM. He has several podcasts that have become one of the focal points within the millions of people who listen to the podcast of Harris and even more so those who listen to both Harris and Ezra Klein. Here are some of the key ones:

Harris with Charles Murray in 2017 (pretty sure this link is not behind a paywall):
<https://samharris.org/podcasts/forbidden-knowledge/>

Article that Klein wrote in response to the interview above: <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/3/27/15695060/sam-harris-charles-murray-race-iq-forbidden-knowledge-podcast-bell-curve>

Harris and Klein debate on the air: <https://www.vox.com/2018/4/9/17210248/sam-harris-ezra-klein-charles-murray-transcript-podcast>

Episode of Harris entitled “Can We Pull Back from the Brink” (I think this may be behind a paywall, but if one does not feel they have the resources to pay the subscription, you simply write to his outfit and they give you free access, no questions asked.): <https://wakingup.libsyn.com/207-can-we-pull-back-from-the-brink>
Also available on Youtube, for free of course: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmgxtcbc4iU>
And, here I believe, is a series of excerpts from the original 207 episode directly above:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8w8daOAobjw>

Sam Harris's podcast 216, September 3, 2020, is a conversation with Graeme Wood. I have not tracked down to see if it can be accessed free outside the Harris show.

Episode 400 of the Ezra Klein show is a conversation between Ezra Klein and Leah Wright Riger (a historian and public policy scholar at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and the author of *The Loneliness of the Black Republican*).

Episode 217 of Sam Harris podcast is *The New Religion of Anti-Racism: A Conversation with John McWhorter*. The perspective on this is particularly relevant to this class, as it features a strong pushback against a number of progressive anti-racist strategies, such as BLM, and puts forward an alternative progressive perspective. Professor McWhorter is a black intellectual working at Columbia University. Highly recommended because it broadens the debate between self-identified anti-racists within the self-identified progressive camp. Unfortunately, it is I think behind a pay wall.

In what might be seen as a push back to the Harris/McWhorter position, but that makes no direct reference to it, is Episode 362 of the Ezra Klein Show, an interview with Philip Atiba Goff, who is the co-founder and CEO of Center for Policing Equity, as well as professor of African-American Studies and psychology at Yale.

--https://www.ted.com/talks/yael_eisenstat_how_facebook_profits_from_polarization

Excellent talk by former CIA and Facebook employee about the pernicious role of Facebook in pernicious polarization. **An even better indictment of social media more generally is *The Social Dilemma*. Available on Netflix. A searing and in my view persuasive indictment of social media and the business model that continues to propel it, with enormous negative costs to the collective good. Among them is the way in which social media is fueling pernicious polarization.

David Brooks, *How Racist Is America?* <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/22/opinion/how-racist-is-america.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage> I also have a copy of this as word document if you would like it sent to you in that format.

--Michael Lind, *The New Class War: Saving Democracy from the Managerial Elite*. Atlantic Books, 2020 (2021 paperback edition). If I had room for another book I would add this one. You can read quite a bit of it for free on Amazon. Also, there is an interview with him in the *New Yorker* that I have a word document cut and paste that I would be happy to send out to anyone interested. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/michael-lind-on-populism-racism-and-restoring-democracy>

--2019 interview of Lind by Ezra Klein: <https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/vox/the-ezra-klein-show/e/65118227>

--*The Politics of Losing : Trump, the Klan, and the Mainstreaming of Resentment*

Rory McVeigh and Kevin Estep. Columbia University Press, paperback edition, 2020 (hardback 2019). <https://cup.columbia.edu/book/the-politics-of-losing/9780231190077>

--John McWhorter. Interview with Sam Harris #217 September 2020. McWhorter is a black conservative scholar at Columbia University

--<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/03/opinion/electoral-college-racism-white-supremacy.html?searchResultPosition=1>

--<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2020/03/26/democratic-party-cannot-hold/>

Article on polarization ripping apart the Democratic Party. Available online at Mansfield Library.