POS4033 – Controversial Political Issues
Professor Sean Freeder (sean.freeder@unf.edu)
University of North Florida, Spring 2021

Class Meetings: T/Th, 6:00–7:15: https://unf.zoom.us/j/94573239265
Office Hours: T/Th, 1:30–3:00 & 4:30–6:00, or by appointment. Email for appt./zoom link

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Over the past several decades, political conflict in the United States has intensified, resulting in historically high levels of partisan distrust and animosity. Americans disagree sharply across racial, religious, geographical, and generational lines on a variety of issues of economic, cultural and social significance – abortion, gun control, immigration, inequality, health care, the environment, and so on. This class is designed not only to enhance students' familiarity with these longstanding debates, but also to develop personal skills in discussing and analyzing these matters in a productive manner. In Unit 1, we will borrow from psychology, sociology and philosophy to lay a foundational understanding of attitude formation, issue politicization and interpersonal conflict. In Unit 2, each week, we will examine a different major controversial issue, learning about the history of the conflict and providing a forum to consider various aspects of the arguments that underlie each controversy.

LEARNING OUTCOMES
Content
- Understanding how people form attitudes about political matters generally, and how this contributes to political and cultural conflict.
- Understanding how people communicate with one another on controversial subjects, and the degree to which meaningful persuasion and/or understanding is possible.
- Learning about various aspects of specific key policy debates in the United States over the past several decades.

Critical Thinking
- Developing one's ability to avoid logical and inductive fallacies in abstract reasoning.
- Distinguishing between strong and weak arguments for one's attitudes.
- Sharpening one's understanding of why people may think differently from oneself.

Writing
- Developing writing skills for communicating clearly and effectively.
- Learning how to write persuasively for various audiences, especially hostile audiences.

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

Midterm Exam	20%
Discussion Project	20%
Issues Journal	20%
Debates	20%
Issue Responses	10%
Participation	10%

The **Midterm Exam** will cover all material from Unit 1, and will consist of a combination of multiple choice, fill in the blank, and short answer questions. This exam may or may not contain one longer essay question. After this, you may be given the opportunity to earn back a percentage of points missed by later completing corrections on your missed exam questions.

Discussion Project: You will be paired with one other student in the class based on your joint responses to a preliminary survey. Students will likely be paired with someone with whom they likely share some interests, but also disagree with on important political issues. Each week, you will be expected to have a short Zoom meeting with your partner to discuss a) the controversial issue we are covering that week, if applicable, and b) any recent current events either of you may have paid attention to over the week. At the end of the semester, you will turn in a 4-6 page paper summarizing the experience.

Issues Journal: Over the course of Unit 2, you will maintain a journal of your thoughts about each issue we discuss. For each issue, you will identify the two arguments from each side of the issue that you find most and least persuasive, and consider other aspects of persuasion and deliberation. At the end of the semester, along with this journal, you will turn in a 3-4 page reflection on the issues we have covered and on your experiences over the semester in general.

Debate: Every student will be responsible for presenting a debate to the class. You will indicate your preferences at the beginning of the semester using this form, and will be assigned to one based on your preferences. Along with a partner, you will research your assigned topic, and argue for or against a given position on a controversial issue. On the assigned day of your debate, you will present your argument and answer questions from the professor and students. Afterwards, you will use [this form](#) to evaluate the quality of your partner's participation.

Issue Responses: Beginning in Unit 2, on each Thursday, you will receive a prompt regarding the controversial issue we will be covering the following week, asking you to offer an argument for a chosen side. You will have until Monday at 5pm to respond to the prompt through a Canvas submission. Then, on Tuesday, you will receive a link to an anonymous summary of the arguments made by the class, and be asked to evaluate these arguments for persuasiveness. This will be due by Wednesday at 5pm.

Participation will be graded by two components – attendance and interaction. Your attendance will be taken automatically by grabbing from the Zoom roster – if it shows you as having attended 90% of the class minutes of a given day (allowing the possibility of minor technical difficulties), you will receive full credit for attendance that day. The other portion of the grade is determined by your level of involvement in class. This will primarily be determined by your level of activity in class discussions on Zoom, but I also consider meaningful interaction to include attendance of office hours with me, asking me questions via email, etc. You will also be required to respond to a survey at the beginning and end of the semester for participation credit.

Grading Scale: 93 – 100 = A   83 – 86.99 = B   73 – 76.99 = C   Below 60 = F
                           90 – 92.99 = A-   80 – 82.99 = B-   70 – 72.99 = C-
                           87 – 89.99 = B+   77 – 79.99 = C+   60 – 69.99 = D

Readings: On the schedule below, readings are listed based on the day by which they are expected to be completed. There are no required books for this class. Instead, I have included several supplementary readings, consisting of short journal articles and opinion pieces. While most readings will be provided on Canvas, **some required readings are online only.** Be sure to consult the schedule below to keep up with your readings, rather than relying on Canvas.

Course Policies:
- Academic dishonesty will automatically result in a zero on the relevant assignment, and may result in an F in the course and/or further academic punishment. Academic dishonesty is defined as cheating, plagiarism, and/or unauthorized collaboration. Plagiarism is defined as passing off someone else's words as your own – parenthetical citations are your best friend in avoiding the accidental appearance of plagiarism. Academic dishonesty also includes, but is not limited to, providing false or misleading information to receive an extension on a test or assignment, or the submission of the same written assignment for two different courses. Assignments will be checked against existing online plagiarism databases before grading begins – if you plagiarize, you WILL be caught. If you have questions about proper citation, please feel free to ask, or consult the [Purdue Owl APA Style Guide](). You may also read about the university's policy on academic integrity [here](), and about the university's misconduct policy [here]().
- Maintain civility in discussions with other students. Harassment will not be tolerated, including discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, color, religion, age, sex, gender identity/expression, sexual orientation, disability, marital status, national origin or veteran status. Passionate discussions are great and highly welcomed, but personal attacks and efforts to needlessly inflame discussions will not be permitted.
- Absences and tardiness may be excused only in the case of a medical or personal emergency, or an unavoidable scheduling conflict. In the case of the former, the absence will be excused only if accompanied by some form of documented evidence. In the case of the latter, please contact me as far in advance of the conflict as possible.
- Late work will be penalized by 5% for each day it is late. I am usually very willing to consider reasonable extension requests, but please contact me in advance if possible!
- I will consider re-grading requests, but only after 24 hours from the date the grade has been returned. Please note your grade could go higher *or* lower.
- In the case of substantial disruptions to our schedule due to COVID, hurricanes, etc., the format of the schedule may be subject to change, and we may attempt to find ways to make up the lost time. Though it will likely stay as is, the schedule on the syllabus may change slightly in terms of substance throughout the semester.

UNIT 1: ATTITUDES, CONFLICT AND RESOLUTION

January 7: _Introduction_ (course themes; plan of the course)
- Issenberg, Sasha. 2018. "Divided we stand." New York Magazine.
- **Complete entrance survey, debate sign-up, and partner sign-up (Jan 11, by 5pm).**

January 12: _The Origin of Attitudes 1_ (the limits of rationality; moral values and moral rationalization; socialization versus genetics)
- Haidt, Jonathan. 2012. "The Righteous Mind." Chapters 1, 2 and 7.
- Moral Foundations Questionnaire. Register on website, then complete survey.

January 14: _The Origin of Attitudes 2_ (socialization continued; partisanship and exposure to elite attitudes)
- Matthews, Dylan. "A massive new study reviews the evidence on whether campaigning works. The answer's bleak." Vox.
- Jacewicz, Natalie. 2017. "What shapes your political beliefs at 18, 35, and 50." The Cut.

January 19: _Public Opinion_ (stability and intensity of public attitudes; degree of public engagement; polling and methodology)
- Roberts, David. "Tech nerds are smart. But they can't seem to get their heads around politics." Vox.
- Alwin, Duane and Tufis, Paula. 2016. "How the culture wars are driving political polarization." London School of Economics.

January 21: _Polarization_ (types of polarization; elite versus mass polarization; asymmetries; causes and effects of polarization)
- Bacon Jr., Perry. 2019. "What Unites Republicans May Be Changing. Same With Democrats." Five Thirty Eight.
- Murray, Charles. 2012. "The New American Divide." Wall Street Journal.

January 26: _Policy-making and Problem-solving_ (challenges in addressing political conflicts through policy; intense policy demanders; when problems get solved)
- Cassidy, John. 2014. "Is America an Oligarchy?" New Yorker.
- Sides, John. 2019. "Many Americans say they want politicians to compromise. But maybe they don't." Washington Post.

January 28: _Human Conflict_ (group formation and stereotyping; attribution; persistence of and reasons for conflict; prospects for deescalation)
- Green, D. P., Palmquist, B., & Schickler, E. 2004. _Partisan hearts and minds: Political parties and the social identities of voters_. Chapters 1-2.
- Tajfel, H. 1970. Experiments in intergroup discrimination. _Scientific American_, _223_(5)

February 2: _Human Deliberation_ (scientific studies of deliberation; political correctness and cancel culture; deliberation and social media)
- Pagel, Mark. 2015. "Why we speak." The Atlantic.
- Haidt, Jonathan and Rose-Stockwell, Tobias. 2019. "Social media is warping democracy." The Atlantic.

February 4: _Reasoning and Rhetoric_ (system 1 vs. system 2 thinking; common cognitive biases; commonly employed logical fallacies)
- Giang, V. "12 ways that people behave irrationally."
- Information is Beautiful. "Rhetological fallacies – errors and manipulation of rhetoric and logical thinking."
- Goldacre, Ben. 2006. Excerpt from _Bad Science_. "Why clever people believe stupid things" and "Bad Stats".

February 9: _Persuasion_ (motivated reasoning; the backfire effect; tips for successful persuasion)
- Swanson, Kelly. 2017. "Experts agree: Don't avoid political conversations with family members." Vox.
- Shaver, Kelly. 2014. "Changing attitudes through persuasion." _Principles of Social Psychology, 1st. Intl Edition._

February 11: MIDTERM

UNIT 2: CONTROVERSIAL POLITICAL ISSUES

February 16: _Gun Rights_ _(Lecture)_
- Gray, Sarah. 2019. "Here's a timeline of the major gun control laws in America." Time.
- Cornell, Saul. 2006. "The early American origins of the modern gun control debate: the right to bear arms, firearms regulation, and the lessons of history."

February 18: _Gun Rights_ _(Debate)_
- Britannica ProCon. Gun Control.

February 23: _Israel/Palestine_ _(Lecture)_
- Beauchamp, Zack. 2018. "Everything you need to know about Israel-Palestine." Vox.
- Fisher, Max. 2016. "The two-state solution: what it is and why it hasn't happened." New York Times.

February 25: _Israel/Palestine_ _(Debate)_
- Britannica ProCon. Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.

March 2: *Economic Inequality, "Socialism", and "Capitalism" (Lecture)*
- Pew Research. 2019. "In their own words: behind Americans' views of 'socialism' and 'capitalism'."
- Metcalf, Thomas. 2019. "Defining capitalism and socialism." and "Arguments for capitalism and socialism."

March 4: *Economic Inequality, "Socialism", and "Capitalism" (Debate)*
- Machan, Tibor. 1993. "In defense of property rights and capitalism." Foundation for Economic Education.
- Kvitrud, Erlend. 2019. "What the right gets wrong about socialism." Foreign Policy.

March 9: *Criminal Justice and Policing (Lecture)*
- Gramlich, John. 2019. "From police to parole, black and white Americans differ widely in their views of criminal justice system." Pew Research.
- The Sentencing Project. 2018. "Report to the United Nations on racial disparities in the U.S. criminal justice system."

March 11: *Criminal Justice and Policing (Debate)*
- Britannica ProCon. Defund the Police.

March 16: *Abortion (Lecture)*
- Diamant, Jeff. 2020. "Three-in-ten or more Democrats and Republicans don't agree with their party on abortion." Pew Research.
- Carmines, Edward; Gerrity, Jessica; and Wagner, Michael. 2010. "How abortion became a partisan issue: media coverage of the interest group-political party connection." Politics and Policy 38(6): 1135-1158.

March 18: *Abortion (Debate)*
- Britannica ProCon. Abortion.

March 23: *Immigration (Lecture)*
- Khalid, Asma. 2019. "Democrats Used To Talk About 'Criminal Immigrants,' So What Changed The Party?" National Public Radio.
- Yglesias, Matthew. 2019. "Immigration makes America great." Vox.
- Frum, David. 2019. "If liberals won't enforce borders, fascists will." The Atlantic.

March 25: *Immigration (Debate)*
- Isacson, Adam. 2017. "Eight reasonable border security proposals (that are not a wall)". Washington Office on Latin America.
- Britannica ProCon. "Should the Government Allow Immigrants Who Are Here Illegally to Become US Citizens?"

March 30: _Marjiuana and Drug Policy_

April 1: _Death Penalty_

April 6: _Climate Change_

April 8: _Flags, Monuments, and Censorship_

April 13: _Health Care_

April 15: _Privacy, Spying, and Law Enforcement_

April 19: ALL PROJECTS DUE