

# Polarization in America

PLSC 2701-2 // Spring 2023 // Sturm 335 //  
MW 4:00 – 5:50 PM // Professor Philip Chen // [philip.chen@du.edu](mailto:philip.chen@du.edu)  
Office: Sturm Hall 474 // Office Hours: Wednesdays 10:00 AM – 12:00 PM

## **Land Acknowledgement**

The University of Denver and the city of Denver reside within the traditional territories of Hinonoëino (Arapaho), Tsitsista (Cheyenne), and Nunt'zi (Ute). I recognize the descendant communities of the Northern Cheyenne Tribe of Montana, the Northern Arapaho Tribe of Wyoming, the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma, the Southern Ute Indian Tribe, and the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe. I also acknowledge that over 40 different Indigenous nations continue to be in relation with the lands currently called Colorado.

Denver is home to many different citizens of Indigenous nations, and I recognize their enduring presence on this land by paying respects to their elders, both past and present. In class and throughout your time at the University of Denver, I ask that we consider the legacies of violence, displacement, migration, and resettlement perpetrated against Indigenous nations and reflect upon and reconcile how the genocidal acts against Indigenous communities intersect with our learning, collaboration, and sharing of knowledge.

## **Course Description**

From the 1930s through the 1970s, the most conservative Democrats in the Senate were actually further to the right than the most liberal Republicans. Since that time, the parties slowly but steadily distanced themselves from each other, leading to our current state of politics; One defined not by compromise and conference committees, but rather by obstruction, gridlock, and filibusters. Voters mimic this divide, becoming increasingly hostile and antagonistic to their political opponents. This course covers major themes surrounding polarization in American politics. First, we examine the role of political parties in a democracy and the recent polarization of these parties. We then turn to some potential causes of elite and mass polarization. Next, the course turns to the study of affective polarization and the consequence of polarization. We finish the quarter reflecting on some (potential) solutions to the issues plaguing American politics today.

## **Course Objectives**

By the end of this quarter, you should be able to:

- Understand and describe the various (potential) causes of elite and mass polarization in the United States
- Analyze how these causes structure contemporary U.S. politics
- Identify and critique proposed solutions to political polarization

## **Structure of the Class**

I will occasionally lecture on new topics or extensions of the readings. However, I do not plan on lecturing extensively on the readings because a) you are expected to have read them already and b) I'm not witty or interesting enough to lecture all the time.

The majority of the class will be spent on discussion and activities that are designed to help you integrate the readings and materials. Please come to class prepared to discuss the day's readings and bring copies of the readings, either in electronic or paper form, as this is a key component of this course.

## **Office Hours and Help**

I strive to make this course understandable and accessible for all students. If you have any questions about the content or structure of the course or about specific assignments, please do not hesitate to contact me. I am always happy to help if you come to me before assignments or exams are due. Please do not wait to ask for help until after the due date, come talk to me before if you are struggling.

## **Required Texts**

This class will feature mostly academic books and articles. The required books are listed below and are available at the college bookstore or from Amazon or other places online. Readings are available on the class Canvas site at:

<https://canvas.du.edu/courses/159491>

There is one required book for the course:

Mason, Lilliana. 2018. *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

## **Grading**

Grades are based on five different components, described in more detail below. 35% of your grade will come from reading quizzes posted on Canvas (1). An additional 10% of your grade will come from a response essay on the readings for one day of class (2). On the day you write your response essay, you will also be responsible for leading class discussion for approximately 10 minutes, which counts for 5% of your grade (3). 10% of your grade consists of attendance and participation in class (4). Finally, 40% of your grade will be based on a final literature review that you write on a topic of your choosing related to polarization in the United States (5).

Literature Review	
Research Questions	Required (No Grade)
Proposal	Required (No Grade)
First Draft	Required (No Grade)
Final Draft	40%
Reading Quizzes	35%
Response Essay	10%
Class Discussion	5%
Participation and Attendance	10%

**Literature Review (40%)** – Each student will write a literature review that identifies a specific research question surrounding polarization in American politics. Many classes culminate with a major research paper and you will all be required to do some type of capstone experience before graduation. It is my belief, however, that we as professors often do our students a disservice by treating the literature review portion of these assignments as little more than a formality or a hoop to jump through.

In this class, rather than writing a long final paper, you will learn write and literature reviews to perfect the art of review and argumentation. A good literature review is neither a summary of prior research nor an all-inclusive list of everything written on a subject. Instead, a literature review begins with a research question and synthesizes relevant literature to make an argument. This may be different than what you have written in the past, but with your dedication to the practice of writing a literature review, the end product will be a concise piece of writing you can be proud of.

You’ll notice a number of components marked “Required (No Grade).” These pieces of the literature review can be thought of as low stakes requirements. In order to receive full credit on your literature review, you must turn in all of these components, even though your performance on these assignments does not factor into your grade. Failing to turn in these assignments will lower your final project grade by 2/3 of a letter grade for each missing piece. For instance, if your grade for the entire literature review project was a B+, but you failed to turn in your research questions, your final grade for the project would be a B-. If you were missing both the research questions and proposal, your B+ would become a C.

**Reading Quizzes (35%)** – Over the past couple years, I’ve come to dislike the concept of midterm and final exams because they place a premium on memorization and intense study rather than a cohesive synthesis of the material we read. In essence, finals and midterms seem to encourage students to memorize minutiae instead of substance.

However, the readings for this class were chosen with intention and I believe they are important for students to get the most out of the class. While I will sometimes lecture on the readings, the reading quizzes will focus both on things we cover in class as well as things that are only located in the readings.

While I would love to be able to simply ask “did you do the reading?” and grade you on this, it seems unrealistic. Approximately every other week, we will have a short, graded reading quiz

posted on Canvas. You are welcome to use both class and reading notes and the readings to answer the questions. These quizzes will consist of a mix of multiple choice, short answer, and longer (2-3 paragraph) questions that ask you to synthesize the readings in some way. Reading quizzes are not cumulative.

I understand that sometimes things come up and readings don't get done. Over the course of the quarter, I will drop your lowest quiz score and the remaining quizzes will be worth 35% of your grade. While no one quiz will make or break your final grade, failing to do any of the readings will severely limit your potential in this class.

Because you have a quiz that is not counted, you cannot make up quizzes for unexcused absences. However, if you miss a quiz for a legitimate, excused absence, I can usually make arrangements for you to re-take the quiz. If you are sick or have an approved absence, just make sure to send me an email or talk to me so you can schedule a time to make up the quiz.

**Response Essay (10%)** – Each student will complete one response essays on the readings for a specific day. You will have an opportunity to pick the class session that you would like to write about. Along with the response essay, each student should turn in three discussion questions about the readings for us to talk about.

Response essays and discussion questions are due to me **by 8 am on the day of the class we are to discuss the readings in**. For example, if you signed up for the readings on Monday, April 17, your questions and essay would be due to me by that Monday morning at 8 am.

Each paper should include a brief summary of the arguments in the reading(s) and a critique of the argument, evidence, and conclusions. Papers should be 3-4 pages long, double spaced. I will distribute a separate handout with more information about this assignment.

**Discussion Leader (5%)** – In addition to your response essay, you will be responsible for leading class discussion on the day you wrote your response essay for. You are not responsible for leading the entire day's discussion. Instead, I will give you the chance to lead approximately 5 minutes of class. You should feel free to use this time to encourage discussion however you'd like. You can simply ask questions, or you may bring in additional short readings or activities. If you would like additional time beyond 5 minutes, that's fine, just ask me so I can plan accordingly.

There will be some days when two or more students are scheduled to lead discussion for the same set of readings. You are welcome to lead discussion together or to lead separate discussions, the choice is yours. If you have a friend in the class who you would like to lead discussion with, feel free to sign up together for a specific date.

**Participation and Attendance (10%)** – The participation portion of your grade includes regular attendance in class, completion of in-class activities, participation in class discussions, and asking questions during class.

Half of this grade is based purely off of attendance. I will hand out a sheet for everyone to sign in at the start of class. If you are late to class, please check with me after class to make sure I've

recorded your attendance for the day. There are 19 days in the quarter that we will meet as a class, and I will use the following scale to determine your attendance grade:

A (100%)	0 – 2 absences
B (86%)	3 – 4 absences
C (76%)	5 – 6 absences
D (66%)	7 – 8 absences
F (60%)	9 or more absences

NOTE: This count does NOT include excused absences. If you miss class because of an approved college activity, illness, or prior arrangement with me, this will not count against your attendance grade. But you do need to let me know!

The other half of this grade is based on in-class participation. I'll advise you that I take the participation portion of the class seriously. I give very few A grades for participation. Thus, you shouldn't assume that simply attending class regularly is enough to get full participation. I grade participation holistically. If you are attentive in class, offer opinions and reactions to readings, and are engaged in discussion, you will do fine. But these are not simply "free" points for the class.

**Grade Scale:**

A	93-100	C	73-76
A-	90-92	C-	70-72
B+	87-89	D+	67-69
B	83-86	D	63-66
B-	80-82	D-	60-62
C+	77-79	F	<60

**Grading** – On some assignments, you may receive a grade of B+/A- or something like that. This is just my shorthand way of assigning a number grade between two letter grades. Thus, an A grade is recorded in the grade book as 100 points while an A- grade is recorded as 92 points. If I think your work fell between these points, you may get an A-/A, which would be recorded as 96 points. So a A-/A is technically an A grade, but in the middle of the A range instead of the high end.

When calculating final grades, I always round up. So an 88.7% in the class becomes an 89% (B+), but an 89.1% would be rounded up to a 90% (A-).

## Course Schedule:

### Week 1 – What’s the big problem?

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Monday, March 27	First Class – No Readings
Wednesday, March 29	APSA 1950* Nivola & Brady Volume One, Chapter 1* Nivola & Brady Volume One, Chapter 3*

### Week 2 – What’s the big problem?

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Monday, April 3	Fiorina, Chapter 3* McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal 2006* McCarty Blog* Brownstein Blog*
Wednesday, April 5	<b><i>Reading Quiz #1 Opens on Canvas (Open for 1 week)</i></b> Heltzel & Laurin 2020* Iyengar et al 2019*

### Week 3 – Causes

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Monday, April 10	Hetherington/Weiler 2009* (Authoritarian Personality?) Bishop 2008* (Geography?) Brewer & Stonecash Ch. 6* (Culture Wars?)
Wednesday, April 12	<b><i>NO CLASS – PROFESSOR AT CONFERENCE</i></b> <b><i>CHECK CANVAS FOR VIDEO LECTURES</i></b> Levendusky & Malhotra 2016* (Media?) Levendusky Blog* (Media?) Arceneaux Blog* (Media?)

### Week 4 – Causes

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Monday, April 17	<b><i>DUE: Research Questions</i></b> Taber & Lodge 2006* (Motivated Reasoning?) Peterson & Iyengar 2021* (Partisan Cheerleading?)
Wednesday, April 19	<b><i>Reading Quiz #2 Opens on Canvas (Open for 1 week)</i></b> Theriault & Rohde 2011* (Gingrich Senators?) Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus 2013* (Elites?)

## Week 5 – Polarizing Identities and Affective Polarization

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Monday, April 24                      Mason Ch 1  
   Mason Ch 2

Wednesday, April 26                Mason Ch 3

## Week 6 – Polarizing Identities

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Monday, May 1                        ***DUE: Proposal***  
   Jigsaw Groups  
   Mason Ch 4  
   Mason Ch 5  
   Mason Ch 6

Wednesday, May 3                  ***Reading Quiz #3 Opens on Canvas (Open for 1 week)***  
   Mason Ch 7  
   Mason Ch 8

## Week 7 – Consequences

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Monday, May 8                        Cassese 2021\* (Dehumanization)  
   Martherus et al 2021\* (Dehumanization)  
   Allamong & Peterson 2021\* (Empathy)

Wednesday, May 10                Osmundsen et al 2021\* (Fake News)  
   Shapiro & Bloch-Elkon 2008\* (Facts)

## Week 8 – Consequences

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Monday, May 15                      Nayak et al 2021\* (Anxiety)  
   Fowler & Gollust 2015\* (Vaccines)  
   Klar & McCoy 2021\* (Sexual Misconduct Belief)

Wednesday, May 17                ***Reading Quiz #4 Opens on Canvas (Open for 1 week)***  
   Levendusky 2010\* (Maybe it's not that bad?)  
   Jones 2010\* (Maybe it's not that bad?)

## Week 9 – Can we fix it?

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Monday, May 22                      ***DUE: First Draft***  
   Mackaman 2013\*  
   Masket 2013\*  
   Edwards 2013\*

Wednesday, May 24                Small Group Paper Workshops

Week 10 – Can we fix it?

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Monday, May 29

***Reading Quiz #5 Opens on Canvas (Open for 1 week)***

Mann & Ornstein Ch. 6\*

Fishkin et al 2021\*

Wednesday, May 31

Final Class – No Readings

Monday, June 5

**Final Draft Due by 5:50 PM**



Attendance: Regular attendance is vital for your success in this course. I understand, however, that sometimes circumstances prevent you from coming to class. Missing one class will not destroy your grade; missing several will.

Late Work: Assignments are due by the end of the day they are listed as due, unless otherwise specified in the syllabus. Any assignments turned in after this time will be subject to the following late penalty: For each day late, I will deduct a third of a letter grade. So if an assignment is due Friday and you turn it in on Saturday, a B+ paper would receive a B. If you turn it in Sunday, it would be a B-, Monday would be a C. Assignments should be turned in using the Canvas system or handed in with a hard copy.

Grade Changes: Any appeals of a grade must be made at least **24 hours after** I hand back an assignment or exam. If you would like to appeal the grade you got on an assignment, prior to meeting with me you must submit a written statement (email is fine) detailing why you think your grade should be changed. I will then meet with you to discuss your statement and why you think your grade should be changed. If I make a mistake in totaling your grade for an exam or assignment (e.g. I added the points up incorrectly) then you do not need to write a statement or wait 24 hours. Just talk to me after class or during office hours and I'll double check and fix the mistake.

Contacting the Professor: I encourage you to contact me with questions and concerns about the course, readings, and assignments. In general, quick clarification questions can be handled over email. More in-depth questions are best discussed in person during my office hours, where we can have an actual conversation. If my office hours conflict with your class or work schedule, I am available by appointment as well. Please allow a full 24 hours for an email response. Often, my responses will be quicker than this, but do not send multiple emails about the same request until 24 hours have passed. I cannot guarantee that if you email me right before an assignment or exam that I will be able to answer your question in time, so please make sure and email me early if you have a time-specific question.

Extra Credit and Retakes: There is no scheduled extra credit in this course. You may not retake quizzes. There may be opportunities for extra credit, however.

Disability Services and Accommodations: Students with diverse learning styles, backgrounds, and needs are welcome in this course. Students who have disabilities (i.e., physical, medical, mental, emotional, and/or learning) and who want to request accommodations should contact the Disability Services Program (DSP); (303) 871-3241; 1999 E. Evans Ave.; 4th floor of Ruffatto Hall. Information is also available online at [www.du.edu/dsp](http://www.du.edu/dsp); see Handbook for Students with Disabilities