

American Political Divides and Great Debates

[84-309] | Fall 2026

Prof. Jonathan Cervas

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CMU Academic Calendar

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The most up-to-date version of this **syllabus** can be found [here](#).

Course Relevance: DC: Perspectives on Justice and Injustice

Learning Resources: All resources will be provided via Canvas

Prerequisites: NONE

August

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November

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December

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☒ in person

☒ remote

☐ no class

01 Course Description

Are Americans really so divided? The question sounds rhetorical, but political scientists have spent thirty years disagreeing about the answer, and the first month of this course works through that argument: whether the public has genuinely polarized or merely sorted itself into tidier parties, what people mean by “affective polarization” and whether it does the damage commonly attributed to it, how race and partisanship reinforce one another, and whether any of this actually threatens democracy. You will read scholars arguing with each other in print, sometimes over the same data.

The rest of the semester belongs to you. Working in teams of four or five, you will choose a topic, assign your classmates the readings, set the questions, and run the discussion yourselves. Alongside that you will write an op-ed for a general audience, review a book and present it to the class, and build a policy brief with a small team.

Running through all of it is a question about justice: how political division creates and entrenches inequality — who gets heard, who gets represented, and who absorbs the costs of a politics organized around mutual dislike. No previous coursework in political science is expected, and no statistics beyond reading a chart.

02 Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. **Explain** what political scientists have actually established about polarization in the United States, and identify where they still disagree.
2. **Distinguish** ideological polarization, partisan sorting, affective polarization, and negative partisanship, and weigh the evidence offered for each.
3. **Analyze** how political divisions intersect with and reinforce racial, economic, and social inequality.
4. **Evaluate** competing arguments on contested questions — including the argument you disagree with, in its strongest form.
5. **Facilitate** informed discussion: select readings, frame questions that have no easy answer, and moderate disagreement without flattening it.
6. **Communicate** persuasively to a general audience, in writing and aloud.
7. **Develop** evidence-based policy recommendations and account for their consequences for equity.
8. **Reflect** on your own values, biases, and role as a civic participant in a divided society.

03 Assessment

The course grade will be a weighted average of the following components:

Assignment	Percent of Final Grade
Attendance	25%
Discussion Board (before each class)	15%
Student Led Topics	9%
Surveys (3: intake, midterm, evaluation)	2%
Book Review (Slides + Presentation)	12%
Op-Ed Project (Draft + Review + Final)	20%
Group Policy Brief	17%

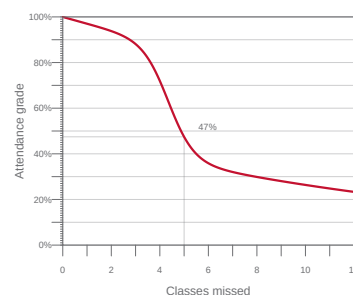
04 Due Dates

Assignment	Due Date
Discussion board post	9:00 a.m., each class day
Surveys (3)	August 26, October 7, final week
Op-ed, first draft	September 21
Op-ed peer review	September 24
Op-ed final draft	September 28
Book Review (slides)	November 23
Group Project	December 1/3
Group Project reflection	December 4

05 Assignment Details

Full instructions for every assignment are in Canvas, under Assignments. What follows is the shape of each one and what it is worth.

- **Attendance** (25%). Show up. The first three absences cost almost nothing; four to six is where a semester goes wrong.
- **Discussion Board** (15%). One short post before every class, due **9:00 a.m.** on the day we meet. Either raise something or answer someone. Your two lowest scores are dropped.
- **Student Led Topics** (9%). In a team of four or five you pick a topic, assign the readings, set the questions, and run one eighty-minute session – plus a short reflection within three days of your own.
- **Surveys** (2%). Three short surveys: August 26, October 7, and the final week. Graded for completion; screenshot the confirmation and upload it.
- **Book Review** (12%). A slide deck (5%) and a presentation to a small group on November 24 (7%).
- **Op-Ed Project** (20%). A rough draft (10%), two peer reviews (8%), and a final draft (2%). **The draft deadline is the one hard deadline in this course** – two classmates are assigned to read you, and whatever exists is what



Absences and the attendance grade. The first three cost almost nothing; four to six is where it bites.

they get.

- **Group Policy Brief (17%).** A written brief (10%), a presentation in finals week (5%), and an individual reflection (2%).

06 Grading

Your grade depends heavily on active engagement. This course is interactive: your preparation (completing the readings), contributions to discussions, and participation in debates are essential to your success.

Assignments & Deadlines You are expected to meet all assignment deadlines. If you anticipate being unable to turn something in on time, contact me before the due date to discuss alternatives. Late work will incur a penalty¹ provided it does not impede your classmates' progress (for instance, in group projects). Failing to participate or contribute meaningfully, especially in ways that affect others' work, will result in a lower grade.

¹ One percentage point per hour late, never falling below 50%. An hour or two costs almost nothing; a day costs a letter grade, but late work is always worth more than no work. Work never submitted scores zero, so handing something in a week late is always worth more than handing in nothing. Canvas applies both automatically.

07 Schedule

Required readings only. Optional readings, and fuller notes on each, are on that session's page in Canvas.

Week 1 — the course, and the Fence

TUE, AUG 25 — INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

- **DUE Wed, Aug 26, 11:59 p.m.** — the “Cervas” Election Study (link in Canvas; screenshot the confirmation).

THU, AUG 27 — THE FENCE

- “CMU Fence Controversy Sparks Censorship Concerns.” Pittsburgh Post-Gazette,
- Strasburg et al. 2025 — In Midnight Move, CMU Students Roll in New Fence to Protest Closure of Free Speech Icon
- Chang et al. 2026 — YAL Rallies at Fence, Delivers Petition to President Jahanian
- Aiken 2026 — Carnegie Mellon Investigating Students over Fence Messages Tied to Israeli-Palestinian Conflict
- Student Handbook, Advertising on Campus - Graffiti and Poster Policy of Student
- Student Government Graffiti and Poster Policy

Week 2 — Polarization unit opens

TUE, SEP 1 — ORGANIZE TOPICS FOR STUDENT LED DISCUSSIONS

- **In class: the Perception Gap.** More in Common, perceptiongap.us.

THU, SEP 3 – POLARIZATION I: PARTISAN AND IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION

- Fiorina 2026 – *Unstable Majorities Continue: The Trump Era* – **Chapter 8. The 2024 Election: Party Performance and Party Policies.**
- Fiorina 2026 – *Unstable Majorities Continue: The Trump Era* – **Chapter 2:** “Once More unto the Breach: Is America Polarized?”
- Fiorina et al. 2008 – Political Polarization in the American Public
- Abramowitz et al. 2008 – Is Polarization a Myth?

Week 3 – Polarization unit

TUE, SEP 8 – POLARIZATION II: SORTING AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

- Mason 2015 – ‘I Disrespectfully Agree’
- Ahler et al. 2018 – The Parties in Our Heads

THU, SEP 10 – POLARIZATION III: AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

- Iyengar et al. 2019 – The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States
- Finkel et al. 2020 – Political Sectarianism in America
- Fiorina 2026 – *Unstable Majorities Continue*, **Chapter 3:** “What About Affective Polarization?”

Week 4 – NO CLASS (Sep 15–17)

TUE, SEP 15 – NO CLASS. ERADICATE HATE CONFERENCE.

THU, SEP 17 – NO CLASS. CONSTITUTION DAY SYMPOSIUM.

Week 5 – Polarization unit

TUE, SEP 22 – POLARIZATION IV: NEGATIVE PARTISANSHIP AND THE WHITE WORKING CLASS

- Abramowitz et al. 2016 – The Rise of Negative Partisanship and the Nationalization of U.S
- Abramowitz 2025 – It’s Not the Economy, Stupid
- Fiorina 2026 – *Unstable Majorities Continue*, **Chapter 5:** “The White Working Class in 2016 (and Earlier)”

THU, SEP 24 – POLARIZATION V: RACE AND POLARIZATION

- Tesler 2012 – The Spillover of Racialization into Health Care
- Mason et al. 2021 – Activating Animus: The Uniquely Social Roots of Trump Support

Week 6 — Polarization unit · geography

TUE, SEP 29 — POLARIZATION VII: GEOGRAPHIC — THE MAP, AND THE POWER IN IT

- Brown & Enos — Partisan Segregation (interactive maps)
- The New York Times 2025 — An Extremely Detailed Map of the 2024 Election Results
- Badger et al. 2021 — A Close-Up Picture of Partisan Segregation, Among 180 Million Voters
- Brown et al. 2026 — How Generational Turnover and Party Switching Reshape the US Political Map
- Brown & Mettler 2023 — Sequential Polarization: The Development of the Rural-Urban Political Divide, 1976–2020
- De Witte 2019 — How the Urban-Rural Divide Shapes Elections
- Cervas 2026 — The Effects of Mid-Decade Redistricting on Electoral Outcomes

THU, OCT 1 — PLACE, IDENTITY, AND RURAL CONSCIOUSNESS

- Mettler et al. 2024 — A Rural-Urban Political Divide Among Whom? Race, Ethnicity, and Political Behavior Across Place
- Jacobs & Shea 2023 — *The Rural Voter: Introduction*, “Two Americas” (pp. 1–22) and **Chapter 11**, “Bridges Across the Rural-Urban Divide” (pp. 380–414)
- Badger & Bui 2018 — Rural and Urban Residents Feel Disparaged (Pew survey)

Week 7 — Polarization unit closes

TUE, OCT 6 — POLARIZATION VI: DOES ANY OF THIS THREATEN DEMOCRACY?

- Druckman et al. 2023 — Does Affective Polarization Contribute to Democratic Backsliding in America?
- McCoy et al. 2019 — Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies
- “Would You Vote Against Your Own Side to Save Democracy?”
- Graham et al. 2020 — Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States

THU, OCT 8 — WHO PAYS FOR THE NEWS?

- Darr et al. 2018 — Newspaper Closures Polarize Voting Behavior
- Martin et al. 2019 — Local News and National Politics
- Pickard 2020 — Restructuring Democratic Infrastructures

Week 8 — FALL BREAK, no class (Oct 13–15)

TUE, OCT 13 — NO CLASS. FALL BREAK.

THU, OCT 15 — **NO CLASS**. FALL BREAK.

Week 9 — Student-led sessions open

TUE, OCT 20 — STUDENT-LED SESSION — TEAM AND TOPIC TBA

THU, OCT 22 — STUDENT-LED SESSION — TEAM AND TOPIC TBA

Week 10 — Student-led • before the vote

TUE, OCT 27 — BEFORE THE VOTE: LOSER'S CONSENT

- Layman et al. 2023 — Political Parties and Loser's Consent in American Politics

THU, OCT 29 — STUDENT-LED SESSION — TEAM AND TOPIC TBA

Week 11 — Student-led • election week

TUE, NOV 3 — **NO CLASS**. DEMOCRACY DAY; THE MIDTERM ELECTIONS. NO CLASSES BEFORE 5 P.M. REGISTER TO VOTE.

THU, NOV 5 — STUDENT-LED SESSION — TEAM AND TOPIC TBA

Week 12 — Student-led

TUE, NOV 10 — STUDENT-LED SESSION — TEAM AND TOPIC TBA

THU, NOV 12 — STUDENT-LED SESSION — TEAM AND TOPIC TBA

Week 13 — Student-led

TUE, NOV 17 — STUDENT-LED SESSION — TEAM AND TOPIC TBA

THU, NOV 19 — STUDENT-LED SESSION — TEAM AND TOPIC TBA

Week 14 — Book review presentations

TUE, NOV 24 — VIRTUAL CLASS — BOOK REVIEW PRESENTATIONS

- **Everyone presents today.** You will not present to the room — you will be put into a small breakout group and present there, which is how thirty-four presentations fit into eighty minutes.
- Slides are due Mon, Nov 23 at 11:59 p.m., uploaded to Canvas.
- Speak to your slides rather than reading them, and open the floor with a question. A group

- Being in a small group does not make this informal. It is the same 7% it would be in front

THU, NOV 26 — **NO CLASS**. THANKSGIVING.

Week 15 — Group policy briefs

TUE, DEC 1 — GROUP POLICY BRIEF

THU, DEC 3 — GROUP POLICY BRIEF

08 Student Privacy in Class Discussions

Draft only — we write the real one together on the first day.

A discussion course works only if people will say what they actually think, and people say what they think only when they know what happens to their words afterward. That is what this agreement settles: what is on the record, what stays in the room, what may be repeated outside it and in what form. It exists to make candour possible.

Shared Community Agreement (draft)

To foster a respectful and productive learning environment, the following policies apply:

No Recording of Class Discussions

- Audio or video recording of class discussion is **not permitted**.
- Recording of lectures may be allowed with approval from **Disability Resources**.

Anonymity in Submissions

- All written work should be anonymized (**no names on papers or submissions**).
- Peer reviews will also remain anonymous.

Confidentiality of Classroom Contributions

- When discussing ideas from class outside of this setting, you may reference the **content** but not the **identities** of the individuals who contributed.

Respectful Dialogue

- Listen attentively and allow peers to finish their thoughts before responding.
- Do not talk over one another.

- Treat others with the same respect you would expect for yourself.

Civility in Communication

- Speak at a moderate volume.
- Critique **ideas**, not individuals.
- Assume the most generous interpretation of your peers' statements.

Use of Generative AI (GAI)

- You may not use a peer's work in generative AI tools without their **explicit permission**.
- Consider each peer's work as **copyrighted**.

Representation of Opinions

- A peer's views expressed in class do not represent the official position of their clubs, organizations, or extracurricular affiliations.

09 Devices in Class

Laptops, tablets, and phones are not to be used for anything that is not pertinent to what we are doing in the room. The simplest version of this: keep them in your bag. If you are found using a device for something unrelated to class, **you will be marked absent for that session** — attendance is 25% of the grade, so this is not a small thing.

10 AI Use Policy for Student Work

The rule is short: **the argument has to be yours**. Use these tools to help you work; do not use them to do the work.

Reasonable use. Brainstorming. Generating the best counter-argument to your own position so you can answer it. Checking grammar and clarity. Asking for an explanation of something in a reading you did not follow. Asking where a draft of yours is unclear.

Not reasonable. Submitting generated prose or slides as your own. Producing your discussion-board posts. Having a tool write your peer review — that one takes something from a classmate who is owed a real reader. Turning in an argument you could not defend if asked about it here, in this room, out loud.

That last test is the one that matters, and it is specific to this course. Nearly everything you write here you may be asked to say aloud: your board post seeds a discussion, your slides come with a presentation, your op-ed and your brief are positions you have taken in front of people who can question them. If you cannot say why your argument makes the move it makes, how the text got produced is beside the point. You do not have the thing the assignment was for.

Say what you used. A line at the end of the op-ed or the brief, a final slide on the book review deck, a clause in a post: *I used [tool] to [purpose]*. That is the whole requirement. Disclosure costs you nothing and is never itself a problem. Undisclosed use is.

Do not put a classmate's work into these tools without their explicit permission. Their draft is theirs, and they gave it to you to read, not to feed to something else.

Submitting generated work as your own is a violation of the university's academic integrity policy and will be handled as one. If you are unsure whether something falls inside these lines, ask me before you submit rather than after.

11 Representation Statement

I am committed to including a broad range of perspectives in the readings and materials for this course. If you believe a critical voice is missing, please let me know so I can improve the syllabus now and in future offerings.

We must treat every individual with respect. We come from many different backgrounds, and this variety of viewpoints is fundamental to building and maintaining an equitable and inclusive campus community. "Representation" can refer to the ways we identify ourselves—race, color, national origin, language, sex, disability, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, creed, ancestry, belief, veteran status, or genetic information, among others. Each of these identities shapes the perspectives our students, faculty, and staff bring to campus. Promoting these varied viewpoints not only fuels excellence and innovation but also advances the pursuit of justice. We acknowledge our imperfections while fully committing to the work—inside and outside our classrooms—of building and sustaining a campus community that embraces these core values.

Each of us is responsible for creating a safer, more inclusive environment.

Unfortunately, incidents of bias or discrimination do occur, whether intentional or unintentional. They contribute to an unwelcoming atmosphere for individuals and groups at the university. Therefore, the university encourages anyone who experiences or observes unfair or hostile treatment on the basis of identity to speak out for justice and seek support—either in the moment or afterward. You can share your experiences using the following resources:

- **Ethics Reporting Hotline**

Submit an anonymous report by calling 844-587-0793 or visiting **cmu.ethicspoint.com**.

All reports are documented and reviewed to determine whether further action is needed. Regardless of the incident type, the university will use your feedback to transform our campus climate into one that is more equitable and just.

12 Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

If you have a documented disability and an accommodations letter from the Office of Disability Resources, please discuss your needs with me as early in the semester as possible. I will work with you to ensure that accommodations are provided as appropriate. If you suspect you may have a disability and are not yet registered with the Office of Disability Resources, you can contact them at **access@andrew.cmu.edu**.

13 Student Well-Being

The past few years have been challenging. We are all under significant stress and uncertainty. I encourage you to find ways to move regularly, eat well, and reach out to your support system—or to me at **cervas@cmu.edu**—if you need help. We can all benefit from support during stressful times, and this semester is no exception.

As a student, you may experience a range of challenges that interfere with learning, such as strained relationships, increased anxiety, substance use, feeling down, difficulty concentrating, or lack of motivation. These mental health concerns or stressful events can diminish your academic performance and reduce your ability to participate in daily activities. CMU offers services that can help, and treatment does work. Learn more about confidential mental health services available on campus at:

- **Counseling and Psychological Services:** <http://www.cmu.edu/counseling/>
Phone (24/7): 412-268-2922

Please remember that support is always available—don't hesitate to reach out.