

THE DISMANTLING AND REBRANDING OF AMERICAN POLITICS

THE OVERVIEW

To paraphrase Friedrich Nietzsche, madness is rare in individuals - but in parties it is the rule. From the very founding of our American political system, we have been less than sane when it comes to our politics and political parties. But what makes the madness different today? And why does it feel so personal? How does political activism and the rise of grassroots movements such as Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street and even “Trumpism” impact policymakers or even create a pathway for a “third way” as the dominant political parties try to hold on to voters and rebrand themselves?

We’ll look at both the madness and the methods of our political parties and the systems they create in the fight for domination and electoral success; and ultimately how the emergence of Donald Trump, Bernie Sanders and the next presidential contenders may signal not just a profound transformation of both political parties but their eventual end.

Week 1 (Feb. 25).

How to win an election and lose the Country.

Proposed Guest: Jon Meacham

We’ve always had political fights between our nation’s political parties. It’s part of the fabric of American politics. We are passionate, verbose and quite serious about our politics sometimes to the point of violence. Our early history is replete with stories of political mayhem at the hands of our elected officials—the caning of Senator Charles Sumner (R) by Representative Preston Brooks (D) on the Senate floor or the duel between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton. Heck, many of the biggest instances of name-calling, bad-mouthing and in-your-face aggression have occurred *within* the respective parties. From the tumultuous floor fight at the Republican convention of 1912 in Chicago) to the “Red, White and Bruising” at the Democratic Convention in 1968 (also in Chicago—what is it about Chicago?).

Week 2 (Mar. 4)

1986-2016: A Political Odyssey. How did the political strategy to elect a president of the United States pollute and ultimately polarize the electorate?

Proposed Guest: Steve Kornacki, MSNBC host, political journalist, and writer.

How did this tribalism begin? What makes the rhetoric and the vitriol between Rs and Ds today so different? What happened to those Rodney King moments expressed by the likes of President Reagan and Speaker Tip O’Neil? How potent was the Newt Gingrich approach to Congressional control? Are the national parties alienating voters (“War on Women”, “You can keep your healthcare” “Deplorables”) to the point that they no longer are reliable brands? Have the seeds of discord and disagreement ultimately distorted the relationship between the president and the congress to the point neither can govern—regardless of party?

Week 3 (Mar. 11)

“Hope and Change” or “Stronger Together” or “Make American Great Again”: I Don’t Know, Pick One!

Proposed Guest: Doug Heye, Former Deputy Chief of Staff for Communications for House Majority Leader Eric Cantor; Communications Director for the Republican National Committee.

The branding of American Politics. Political sloganeering and driving the voters “mad” or just to the voting booth? The election of Barak Obama was supposed to have ushered in a new era in American Politics. It did—but was it what we expected? Hillary Clinton campaign struck a personal tone with “I’m With Her” but found it fell flat with voters. Trump redefines the political conversation with “Make America Great Again” and pushes the Clinton campaign to ‘Stronger Together’.

Week 4 (Mar. 18)

Money, Politics and the Power of Activism on US Policy

Proposed Guest: TBD

Part 1: What is the true role of money in electing a candidate? How the courts got it wrong with McCain-Feingold and Citizens United and just made it worse. Who is the Tea Party and why were they so ticked off? Did the marriage of “Tea Party Conservatism” and “Occupy Wall Street Progressivism” give birth to “Trump Nationalism”? How potent are their offspring #MeToo, Black Lives Matter and March For Our Lives? Why do the respective political parties really want nothing to do with such “movements” and would prefer that once they serve their purpose, they go away.

Part 2: Insights into American Foreign and Domestic policy. Where the battle lines are drawn between Republicans and Democrats.

Week 5 (Apr. 1)

Why Elections Matter and What Happens When Citizens Believe They Don’t

Proposed Guest: TBD

Part 1: How Donald Trump won had everything to do with why Donald Trump won—too bad the press nor the political establishments understood that. What (not who) was the ideal presidential candidate? Does that creature even exist?

Part 2: Now What Speaker Pelosi? How much of the 2018 Mid-Terms are a precursor to the 2020 presidential? The true power to reckon with beyond 2018: Women

Meeting Times

This non-credit Study Group will meet five Mondays this semester from 2:30-4:00 p.m. in the Kim Koo Library at the Watson Institute, 111 Thayer Street. Please commit to attending all five sessions.

Dates are:

February 25

March 4

March 11

March 18

April 1

Study Group Materials and Classroom Rhythm and Flow

Readings will be assigned for each class. These readings will provide the foundational materials for class discussions. I recognize that each of you has other class responsibilities that go on your transcript. As such, I will attempt not to overload you with reading. At the same time, the more you read and the more prepared you are for class, the more you can meaningfully participate, and the more you will learn. I also plan to invite guest speakers to several sessions to help us delve more deeply into these topics.