

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 do policymakers manage the growth of grassroots movements from the Tea Party to “Trumpism” while dealing with insurgencies within their own ranks?

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 myriad of political actors signal not just a profound transformation of both political parties but their eventual end.

Week 1 (Sept. 11)

How to win an election and lose the Country.

Proposed Guest: TBD

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 (Sept. 18)

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

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 have hardened the tribalism they often complain about? 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 (Sept. 25)

“Hope and Change” or “Stronger Together” or “Make American Great Again”: A Political Pick’em or Pickle

Proposed Guest: Elise Jordan. Journalist, political speechwriter and commentator. She served as a director for communications in the National Security Council from 2008-09. She also worked in the White House Office of Presidential Speechwriting, at the U.S. Embassy, Baghdad and for the Commanding General's Strategic Advisory Group at the International Security Assistance Force headquarters in Kabul, Afghanistan, and was a speechwriter for Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice

The branding of American Politics is all about communication, political sloganeering and engagement but is such branding designed to get voters to the polls or does it just make them mad and disinterested enough to stay home? The election of Barak Obama was supposed to have ushered in a new era in American Politics. It did—but voters were less interested in hope and frustrated by little change. Hillary Clinton’s campaign struck a personal tone with “I’m With Her” but found voters were not—with her. Donald Trump redefined the political conversation with “Make America Great Again” and opened enough old wounds for many voters to feel it was more about making America white again.

Week 4 (Oct. 2)

Politics and Race

Confirmed Guest: Deana Bass, Co-founder of Bass Public Affairs. She formerly served as Deputy Director of Coalitions Republican National Committee; Executive Director of The Gloucester Institute and Director of Coalitions for the House Republican Conference

It should not be lost on us that the racial lines of black and white America are not as well defined as they once were. In fact, those lines have taken on new hues and textures as America has changed. Which is why we still find ourselves “shocked” when we hear or read racially charged comments or tweets. How much of have our anxieties about immigration, the economy and jobs contributed to the rise of white supremacy and nationalistic calls of “America First”? Is American Exceptionalism being replaced by American Nationalism? How have our politics shaped our views about events like Charlottesville and Baltimore; or policies that would place children in cages?

Week 5 (Oct. 9)

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

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

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 to challenge him in 2020?

Part 2: Now What Speaker Pelosi? How much of the 2018 Mid-Terms are a precursor to the 2020 presidential? Are women, particularly African American women, the true power to reckon with in 2020 and beyond?

Meeting Times

This non-credit Study Group will meet five Wednesdays 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:

September 11

September 18

September 25

October 2

October 9

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.