

American Political Divides and Great Debates

Prof. Jonathan Cervas

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Professor Jonathan Cervas¹

Office: Posner Hall 374

Email: cervas@cmu.edu

Location: POS 145 Time: Tuesday/Thursday 2:00p-3:20p Eastern²

Office Hours: Tuesday 3:30p-4:30p, Wednesday 2-3p, and by appointment (arrange via email)

CMU Academic Calendar³

Course Relevance: DC: Perspectives on Justice and Injustice

Learning Resources: All resources will be provided via Canvas

Prerequisite Knowledge: NONE

¹ The most up-to-date version of this syllabus can be found [here](#)

² Subscribe to course calendar on your phone

³ This course syllabus is a work in progress. The instructor will take note of student feedback and course schedule will evolve based on student preferences

Course Description

This course explores why Americans are so politically divided, how those divisions create and reinforce inequalities, and what we can do to address them. We look at key issues like voting rights, healthcare access, racial and economic disparities, ethical uses of AI, and environmental justice. Through guided discussions and debates, you will build critical thinking, public speaking, and empathy skills. If you are interested in political science, law, or social justice, this class will give you a clear understanding of today's U.S. political landscape and ideas for promoting fairness and equity at every level of society.

Learning Objectives

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

1. **Explain** the historical and structural factors that contribute to political polarization in the United States.
2. **Describe** how political divisions intersect with and reinforce racial, economic, and social inequalities.
3. **Analyze** key policy issues (e.g., voting rights, healthcare, environmental justice) through the lens of fairness and equity.
4. **Evaluate** different perspectives on contentious political issues with empathy and critical reasoning.
5. **Apply** principles of ethical reasoning to assess the social impacts of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence.
6. **Demonstrate** improved skills in public speaking, structured debate, and respectful civic discourse.
7. **Synthesize** information from political science, law, and social justice frameworks to form evidence-based arguments.

8. **Reflect** on their own values, biases, and roles as civic participants in a divided society.

Due Dates

Assignment	Due Date
Weekly Reflection Journals	Due Sundays, weekly
Book Review	October 13.
AI-Powered Debate Simulation	Five times total
Op-ed, first draft	September 22
Op-ed peer review	September 25
Op-ed final draft	September 29
Debate	TBD
Group Project	December 2/4

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.

Attendance & Participation Regular attendance and active involvement form a significant part of your final grade (see grading section). To recognize that occasional absences are sometimes unavoidable (e.g., for religious observance, job interviews, university-sanctioned events, or illness), you are allowed two excused absences without penalty. If you must miss class, please notify me at least 24 hours in advance (unless it's an emergency or sudden illness) so we can arrange a way for you to catch up.⁴

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 small penalty⁵ 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.

⁴ If you need to miss more than two sessions due to extenuating circumstances, let me know as soon as possible so we can discuss how best to support you.

⁵ Typically one percentage point per day

Assessment

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

Assignment	Percent of Final Grade
Participation	20%
Discussion	20%
• <i>Attendance</i>	(10%)
Weekly Reflection Journals	10%
Book Review + Presentation	15%
• <i>Written Review (3-5 single-spaced pages)</i>	(10%)
• <i>10-minute Presentation</i>	(5%)
Op-Ed Project (Rough Draft + Final)	20%
AI-Powered Debate Simulation	10%
Structured In-Class Debate/Dialogue	10%
Final Capstone: Group Policy Brief	25%

Assignment Details

*Participation & Discussion (15%)*⁶

- *Objective Alignment:* 4, 6, 8
- Active, respectful involvement in class discussions, including preparedness (e.g., completing readings) and thoughtful contributions.
- Can include small-group work and peer feedback.

⁶ *Purpose:* Civic discourse, empathy, critical thinking

*Weekly Reflection Journals (10%)*⁷

- *Objective Alignment:* 1, 2, 4, 8
- Short (300-500 word) reflections on how class topics connect to current events, reactions to course readings, or evolving viewpoints.

⁷ *Purpose:* Personal reflection, connection to course theme

*Book Review Assignment Details (15%)*⁸

- *Objective Alignment:* 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7
- **Written Review (10%)**⁹
 - *Length:* 3-5 single-spaced pages (approx. 1,500–2,500 words)
 - *Content Guidelines:*
 - * Summarize the author's central argument(s) succinctly.
 - * Critically evaluate those arguments using logical reasoning and textual evidence.
 - * Identify any assumptions or ideological lenses the author brings.
 - * Discuss broader political, ethical, or social implications.
 - * Make connections to course themes such as inequality, polarization, or justice.
 - * Use citations for any quoted or paraphrased material.

⁸ *Purpose:* Deep analysis, critical evaluation, communication

⁹ *Purpose:* Argument analysis, assumption critique, implication discussion

- **Presentation (5%)**¹⁰

- *Format*: 10-minute in-class presentation, followed by 2-3 minutes of Q&A.
- *Expectations*:
 - * Clear, engaging summary of key ideas from the book.
 - * Highlight your critical take or most interesting insight.
 - * Use slides, visuals, or handouts to aid clarity (optional).
 - * Encourage discussion by posing a question or provocation.

¹⁰ *Purpose*: Verbal synthesis, peer engagement, clarity of thought

*Op-ed w/ peer-review*¹¹

- *Objective Alignment*: 1, 2, 3, 5, 7
- **Written Paper (10%)**

- Drawing on a topic related to this course, or something political from your own life or experience, write an op-ed that could be published in a newspaper or blog.

- **Peer Review (10%)**

- Peer review should address the substance of the paper, along with grammar (e.g., “Is the thesis clear?”, “Is evidence convincing?”, “Does it speak to a broader audience?”).

¹¹ *Purpose*: Persuasive writing, revision, public engagement

*AI-Powered Debate Simulation (10%)*¹²

- *Objective Alignment*: 4, 5, 6, 8
- *Description*: Students interact with or program AI-generated personas (e.g., a libertarian voter, environmental activist, rural health worker) to simulate debates on divisive policy topics.
- *Options*: Use tools like ChatGPT to role-play or build simple scripted bots that represent different ideological views.
- *Goal*: Understand ideological nuance and test one’s arguments against realistic opposition.
- *Deliverables*: A short reflection or transcript + analysis of what students learned from the AI interaction.

¹² *Purpose*: Perspective-taking, applied argumentation, tech-enhanced learning

*Debate or Structured Dialogue (10%)*¹³

- *Objective Alignment*: 4, 6, 7
- Students argue or explore opposing views on controversial topics in pairs or teams.
- Graded on preparation, clarity, and respectful engagement—not just “winning.”

¹³ *Purpose*: Verbal reasoning, empathy, respectful engagement

*Final Capstone: Group Policy Brief (30%)*¹⁴¹⁴ *Purpose:* Research, equity-centered solutions, teamwork

- *Objective Alignment:* 3, 5, 7
- **Written Brief:** Small teams choose a politically polarizing issue tied to inequality (e.g., gerrymandering, Medicaid expansion, tech bias) and write a formal policy brief (~1,500–2,000 words).
- *Components:*
 - Executive Summary
 - Problem Definition
 - Background/Context
 - Policy Options & Stakeholder Analysis
 - Recommendation(s)
 - Equity Impact Statement
- **Presentation:** Teams present findings in a mock legislative or community forum during finals week.

-
- Chemerinsky, Erwin. 2024. “The Underlying Issues Concerning Free Speech in Schools.” *Stanford Law Review* 76: 1427. <https://www.stanfordlawreview.org/print/article/the-underlying-issues-concerning-free-speech-in-schools/>.

Pick one? - Barker, Taylor J. 2024. “Expressive Association Claims for Private Universities.” *Stanford Law Review* 76: 1787. <https://www.stanfordlawreview.org/print/article/expressive-association-claims-for-private-universities/>.

- Citron, Danielle Keats. 2024. “The Surveilled Student.” *Stanford Law Review* 76: 1439. <https://www.stanfordlawreview.org/print/article/the-surveilled-student/>.

- Corbin, Caroline Mala. 2024. “The Government Speech Doctrine Ate My Class: First Amendment Capture and Curriculum Bans.” *Stanford Law Review* 76: 1473. <https://www.stanfordlawreview.org/print/article/the-government-speech-doctrine-ate-my-class/> (Accessed June 24, 2025).

- Cremins, David. 2024. “Defending the Public Quad: Doxxing, Campus Speech Policies, and the First Amendment.” *Stanford Law Review* 76: 1813. <https://www.stanfordlawreview.org/print/article/defending-the-public-quad/>.

- Driver, Justin. 2024. “The Coming Crisis of Student Speech.” *Stanford Law Review* 76: 1511. <https://www.stanfordlawreview.org/print/article/the-coming-crisis-of-student-speech/>.

- Gersen, Jacob E, and Jeannie Suk Gersen. 2024. “Academic Freedom and Discipline: The Case of the Arguably Peaceful Protestors.” *Stanford Law Review* 76: 1537. <https://www.stanfordlawreview.org/print/article/academic-freedom-and-discipline/>.

- Kenji Yoshino. 2024. “Reconsidering the First Amendment Fetishism of Non-State Actors: The Case of Hate Speech on Social Media

Platforms and at Private Universities.” *Stanford Law Review* 76: 1755. <https://www.stanfordlawreview.org/print/article/reconsidering-the-first-amendment-fetishism-of-non-state-actors/> (Accessed June 24, 2025). - McNeal, Laura. 2024. “Integrating the Marketplace of Ideas: A New Constitutional Theory for Protecting Students’ Off-Campus Online Speech.” *Stanford Law Review* 76: 1575. <https://www.stanfordlawreview.org/print/article/integrating-the-marketplace-of-ideas/>. - Papandrea, Mary-Rose. 2024. “Law Schools, Professionalism, and the First Amendment.” *Stanford Law Review* 76: 1609. <https://www.stanfordlawreview.org/print/article/law-schools-professionalism-and-the-first-amendment/>. - Post, Robert. 2024. “Theorizing Student Expression: A Constitutional Account of Student Free Speech Rights.” *Stanford Law Review* 76: 1643. <https://www.stanfordlawreview.org/print/article/theorizing-student-expression/>. - Ross, Catherine J. 2024. “Are ‘Book Bans’ Unconstitutional? Reflections on Public School Libraries and the Limits of Law.” *Stanford Law Review* 76: 1675. <https://www.stanfordlawreview.org/print/article/are-book-bans-unconstitutional/> (Accessed June 24, 2025). - Smith, Carson. 2024. “Bias Response Teams: Designing for Free Speech and Conflict Resolution on the University Campus.” *Stanford Law Review* 76: 1837. <https://www.stanfordlawreview.org/print/article/bias-response-teams/>. - Tsesis, Alexander. 2024. “The Establishment of Religion in Schools.” *Stanford Law Review* 76: 1725. <https://www.stanfordlawreview.org/print/article/the-establishment-of-religion-in-schools/> (Accessed June 24, 2025).

Klein, Ezra. 2020. *Why We’re Polarized*. Avid Reader Press / Simon & Schuster. <https://books.google.com/books?id=1G6gDwAAQBAJ>.

- Klein, Introduction: What Didn’t Happen
- Klein, Chapter 1: How Democrats Became Liberals and Republicans Became Conservatives
- Klein, Chapter 2: The Dixiecrat Dilemma
- Klein, Chapter 3: Your Brain on Groups
- Klein, Chapter 4: The Press Secretary in Your Mind
- Klein, Chapter 5: Demographic Threat
- Klein, Chapter 6: The Media Divide beyond Left-Right
- Klein, Chapter 7: Post-Persuasion Elections
- Klein, Chapter 8: When Bipartisanship Becomes Irrational
- Klein, Chapter 9: The Difference between Democrats and Republicans

- Klein, Chapter 10: Managing Polarization—and Ourselves

Course Schedule (Subject to Change as Semester Progresses):

August 26: Syllabus Day

- Introduction to the Course; topic selection, draft privacy/free speech statement
 - *No Reading*

August 28

- What is Political Polarization?

Kleinfeld, R. (2023). Polarization, Democracy, and Political Violence in the United States: What the Research Says. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

September 2

1. The 1619 Project

- Title: “America Wasn’t a Democracy Until Black Americans Made It One” – Essay by Nikole Hannah-Jones <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/black-history-american-democracy.html>
 - Introduces the central thesis of the project: re-centering slavery and Black Americans in the nation’s founding narrative.
- Title: “In Order to Understand the Brutality of American Capitalism, You Have to Start on the Plantation” – Essay by Matthew Desmond <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/slavery-capitalism.html>
 - Connects slavery to contemporary economic systems.

2. The 1776 Report – Arnn, Larry P., Carol Swain, and Matthew Spalding. 2021. The President’s Advisory 1776 Commission. Washington, D.C: The White House.

- Presents a traditionalist, patriotic framing of American founding values.

September 4

- **The 1776 Report**

- “AHA Statement Condemning Report of Advisory 1776 Commission.” <https://www.historians.org/>. <https://www.historians.org/news/aha-statement-condemning-report-of-advisory-1776-commission/> (Accessed June 25, 2025).
- McKenna, Konstantin. 2025. “The 1776 Project Is a Desperate Search for the Right Enemies.” *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/21/1776-project-desperate-search-enemies-identity-politics-unamerican/> (Accessed June 25, 2025).

- **The 1619 Project**

- Hannah-Jones, Nikole. 2019. *The 1619 Project*. The New York Times Magazine. https://pulitzercenter.org/sites/default/files/full_issue_of_the_1619_project.pdf?_gl=1*av7vjw*_gcl_au*MTA2MTewMzQ4NS4xNzUwODgxODA1*_ga*MjA3ODQ2OTEyMi4xNzUwODgxODA1*_ga_ZYQYTZTT61*cze3NTA4ODE4MDMkbzEkZzEkdDE3NTA4ODI2NzEkaJm4JGwwJGgxNjcwMTY0ODcx (Accessed June 25, 2025).
- Silverstein, Jake. 2020. “On Recent Criticism of The 1619 Project.” *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/16/magazine/criticism-1619-project.html> (Accessed June 25, 2025).
- “We Respond to the Historians Who Critiqued The 1619 Project.” 2019. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/20/magazine/we-respond-to-the-historians-who-critiqued-the-1619-project.html> (Accessed June 25, 2025).

3. Optional for ambitious students

- Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” (1852)
- (~20 min read, historical context for both projects)
- Chemerinsky, Erwin, and Howard Gillman. 2018. *Free speech on campus*. Paperback edition. New Haven; London: Yale University Press.

Chemerinsky/Gillman, Chapter 1: The New Censorship
Chemerinsky/Gillman, Chapter 2: Why Is Free Speech Important?

September 9

Chemerinsky/Gillman, Chapter 3: Nullius in Verba: Free Speech at Colleges and Universities
Chemerinsky/Gillman, Chapter 4: Hate Speech

September 11

Chemerinsky/Gillman, Chapter 5: What Campuses Can and Can't Do

Chemerinsky/Gillman, Chapter 6: What's at Stake?

September 16

Student Topics

September 18

Student Topics

September 23

- Partisan Polarization

September 25

Ideological Polarization

September 30

Student Topics

- Immigration Politics
 - <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/protecting-the-american-people-against-invasion/>
 - <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/us-immigration-debate-0>

October 2

Student Topics

October 7

- Affective Polarization
 - Iyengar, Shanto, Yphtach Lelkes, Matthew Levendusky, Neil Malhotra, et al. 2019. "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States." *Annual Review of Political Science* 22(1): 129–146. <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034> (Accessed October 18, 2022).

October 9

- The Internet and Social Media

- Larreguy, Horacio, and Pia J. Raffler. 2025. “Accountability in Developing Democracies: The Impact of the Internet, Social Media, and Polarization.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 28(Volume 28, 2025): 413–434. <https://www.annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annurev-polisci-033123-015559> (Accessed June 24, 2025).
- Barrett, Paul, Justin Hendrix, and Grant Sims. 2021. *Fueling the Fire: How Social Media Intensifies U.S. Political Polarization And What Can Be Done About It*. NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights. https://bhr.stern.nyu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/NYUCBHRFuelingTheFire_FINALONLINEREVISEDSept7.pdf (Accessed June 24, 2025).
- Shapiro, Ari. 2022. “How the polarizing effect of social media is speeding up.” NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2022/09/09/1121295499/facebook-twitter-youtube-instagram-tiktok-social-media> (Accessed June 24, 2025).

October 14

FALL BREAK, no class

October 16

FALL BREAK, no class

October 21

Student Topics

October 23

Student Topics

October 28

October 30

November 4

DEMOCRACY DAY, no class **Register to Vote**

Join us for CMU’s third Democracy Day, an opportunity to focus on our institutional commitment to civic service and democracy on Election Day. There will be programming and resources available throughout the day for our entire community to engage on the key ideals of democracy.

There are no classes on Democracy Day prior to 5 p.m. and the entire CMU community —faculty, staff and students — is encouraged

to participate as their schedules allow.

November 6

November 11

November 13

November 18

November 20

November 25

No class because many people will be missing.

November 27

THANKSGIVING DAY, no class

December 2

December 4

- Final Class

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- No Topic/Readings
 - Evaluate Critical Readings
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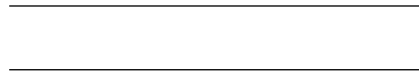
November 4

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- What is Political Polarization?
 - *Reading:* Fiorina, Morris P., and Samuel J. Abrams. “Political polarization in the American public.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008). **Available Online.**
 - *Reading:* Layman, Geoffrey C., Thomas M. Carsey, and Juliana Menasce Horowitz. 2006. “Party Polarization in American Politics: Characteristics, Causes, and Consequences.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 9(Volume 9, 2006): 83–110. **Available Online**
 - * *Optional:* Hare, Christopher, and Keith T. Poole. “The polarization of contemporary American politics.” *Polity* 46.3 (2014): 411-429.

- * *Optional*: Wagner, Markus. 2021. “Affective polarization in multiparty systems.” *Electoral Studies* 69: 102199.
- * *Optional*: Hahm, Hyeonho, David Hilpert, and Thomas König. 2024. “Divided We Unite: The Nature of Partyism and the Role of Coalition Partnership in Europe.” *American Political Science Review* 118(1): 69–87.
- * *Optional*: Lee, Frances E. 2015. “How Party Polarization Affects Governance.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 18(1): 261–282. **Available Online**
- * *Optional*: Seimel, Armin. 2024. “Elite polarization — The boon and bane of democracy: Evidence from thirty democracies.” *Electoral Studies* 90: 102801.
- Affective Polarization
 - *Reading*: Iyengar, Shanto, Yphtach Lelkes, Matthew Levendusky, Neil Malhotra, et al. 2019. “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 22(1): 129–146. **Available Online.**
- Ideological Polarization
 - *Reading*: Carmines, Edward G., and Nicholas J. D’Amico. 2015. “The New Look in Political Ideology Research.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 18(1): 205–216. **Available Online.**
- Negative Partisanship
 - *Optional*: Abramowitz, Alan I., and Steven Webster. 2016. “The rise of negative partisanship and the nationalization of U.S. elections in the 21st century.” *Electoral Studies* 41: 12–22. **Available Online.**
- Judicial Polarization
 - *Reading*: Hasen, Richard L. 2019. “Polarization and the Judiciary.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 22(1): 261–276. **Available Online.**
- Nationalization
 - *Reading*: Amlani, Sharif, and Carlos Algara. 2021. “Partisanship & nationalization in American elections: Evidence from presidential, senatorial, & gubernatorial elections in the U.S. counties, 1872–2020.” *Electoral Studies* 73: 102387. **Available Online.**
- Media’s Role in Political Polarization
 - *Reading*: Prior, Markus. 2013. “Media and Political Polarization.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 16(1): 101–127. **Available Online.**

- * *Optional*: Amy Mitchell, Jeffrey Gottfried, Jocelyn Kiley, and Katerina Eva Matsa. "Political Polarization & Media Habits." Pew Research Center. October 21, 2014. <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2014/10/21/political-polarization-media-habits/>
- * *Optional*: Wlezien, Christopher, and Stuart Soroka. 2023. "Media Reflect! Policy, the Public, and the News." *American Political Science Review*: 1–7. **Available Online**.
- Social Media and Echo Chambers
 - *Reading*: Phillips, Samantha C., Kathleen M. Carley, and Kenneth Joseph. 2024. "Why do people think liberals drink lattes? How social media afforded self-presentation can shape subjective social sorting." **Available Online**.
 - * *Optional but important*: Barberá, Pablo. "Social Media, Echo Chambers, and Political Polarization" in Persily, Nathaniel, and Joshua A. Tucker, eds. 2020. *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform*. 1st ed. Cambridge University Press. **Available Online**. p. 34–55.
 - * *Optional*: Guess, Andrew M. et al. 2023. "How do social media feed algorithms affect attitudes and behavior in an election campaign?" *Science* 381(6656): 398–404. <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.abp9364>.
 - * *Optional*: González-Bailón, Sandra et al. 2023. "Asymmetric ideological segregation in exposure to political news on Facebook." *Science* 381(6656): 392–398. <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.ade7138>.
 - * *Optional*: Guess, Andrew M. et al. 2023. "Reshares on social media amplify political news but do not detectably affect beliefs or opinions." *Science* 381(6656): 404–408. <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.add8424>.
 - * *Optional*: Nyhan, Brendan et al. 2023. "Like-minded sources on Facebook are prevalent but not polarizing." *Nature* 620(7972): 137–144. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10396953/>.
 - * *Optional*: Allcott, Hunt et al. "The effects of Facebook and Instagram on the 2020 election: A deactivation experiment." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 121(21): e2321584121. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC11126999/>.
 - * *Optional*: Törnberg, Petter. 2022. "How digital media drive affective polarization through partisan sorting." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 119(42): e2207159119. <https://pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2207159119>

- * *Optional:* Waller, Isaac, and Ashton Anderson. 2021. “Quantifying social organization and political polarization in on-line platforms.” *Nature* 600(7888): 264–268. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-021-04167-x>
- * *Optional:* Dominic Spohr. 2017. “Fake news and ideological polarization.” *Business Information Review* 34(3): 150–160. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epdf/10.1177/0266382117722446>
- * *Optional:* Jost, John T., Delia S. Baldassarri, and James N. Druckman. 2022. “Cognitive–motivational mechanisms of political polarization in social-communicative contexts.” *Nature Reviews Psychology* 1(10): 560–576. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9342595/>



Student Privacy in Class Discussions

This course will challenge you to think deeply about difficult and potentially provocative questions. You should be prepared to encounter material that may be unsettling or even offensive. If you’re not comfortable with the possibility of being offended, you might want to reconsider enrolling. However, if you choose to participate and find yourself disagreeing with something said by a classmate, or me, or with content from the readings, I encourage you to engage in thoughtful debate and present your own perspective. Simply disliking a viewpoint doesn’t invalidate it. My hope is that, regardless of how strongly we disagree or how passionately we advocate for our beliefs, we will always maintain respect and treat each other with dignity as we share and defend our ideas.

In this course, we value the open exchange of ideas and respect the privacy of all students. To create a safe and supportive learning environment, the following guidelines regarding student privacy in class discussions will be strictly observed:

1. **Confidentiality:** Any personal information, opinions, or experiences shared by students during class discussions, whether in-person or online, are to be treated as confidential. Students are prohibited from sharing or discussing this information outside of class without explicit permission from the individuals involved.
2. **Respectful Communication:** Students are encouraged to express their thoughts and ideas freely while remaining respectful of others’

privacy. Avoid sharing details about other students' contributions, identities, or personal circumstances outside the classroom setting.

3. **Recording and Sharing:** Recording of class discussions, whether audio, video, or text-based, is strictly prohibited. Anyone caught making an unauthorized recording will automatically fail the course—regardless of any accommodations they may have been granted.
4. **Online Discussions:** For online forums and discussions, similar privacy standards apply. Students should be mindful of the public or semi-public nature of online platforms and refrain from sharing sensitive or personally identifiable information.
5. **Consequences for Breach of Privacy:** Violations of this privacy policy may result in disciplinary action, which could include removal from the course, a formal reprimand, or other consequences as determined by the university's code of conduct.
6. **Principle of Charity:** When engaging in discussions, apply the principle of charity. This means interpreting others' arguments in the most reasonable and positive way before criticizing them. Assume that others are making sincere attempts to contribute meaningfully, and engage with their strongest points, not just the easiest to refute.
7. **Space for Additional Context:** Acknowledge that opinions shared in discussions may be based on limited information or experiences. If a classmate's perspective seems unclear or incomplete, allow them the opportunity to provide additional context. Encourage questions that seek to understand rather than dismiss others' views.

By participating in this course, you agree to uphold these privacy standards and contribute to a respectful, inclusive, and secure learning environment for all.

Course Principles

Throughout this course, we will engage with several key themes that intersect and build upon one another to deepen our understanding of the complex social and political landscape in the United States.

1. **Analyzing a Range of Perspectives and Political Divides**

One of our primary themes is exploring how different communities' experiences shape political divides. We will critically examine how

underrepresented voices—those with distinct histories, challenges, and worldviews—contribute to a growing political polarization. Understanding these varied experiences is essential for grasping the roots of political conflict and for developing strategies that bridge divides.

2. **The Significance of Varied Viewpoints in Justice and Injustice**

We will delve into why recognizing and valuing multiple perspectives is crucial for identifying instances of injustice that might otherwise be overlooked. By centering viewpoints from communities whose experiences differ from the majority, we gain insight into how justice is perceived, enacted, and sometimes denied. This work will guide us toward more equitable approaches to social and political challenges.

3. **The Role of Systems and Institutions in Perpetuating Inequality**

Another critical theme is examining how U.S. institutions and systems have historically reinforced privilege and power imbalances. We will analyze how laws, policies, and institutional practices shape access to resources, opportunities, and rights—often disadvantaging certain groups. By understanding these systemic forces, we can begin to address the root causes of injustice.

4. **Ethical Obligations to Address Inequality**

Throughout the semester, we will reflect on our individual and collective responsibility to confront inequalities. This includes considering how we can uplift underrepresented voices, advocate for fair policies, and work against oppressive structures. These reflections will encourage us to think critically about our roles in society and the impact of our actions on the broader pursuit of justice.

These themes will be woven into our discussions, readings, and assignments. By the end of the semester, you will have developed a nuanced perspective on how identity, power, and politics intersect—and you'll be equipped to contribute to meaningful change in your communities.

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:

- **Center for Student Diversity and Inclusion**

Email: csdi@andrew.cmu.edu

Phone: (412) 268-2150

- **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.

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.

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.

Eberly Center

Students,

This semester, I am working with the Eberly Center on educational research. Because of this, I have included a statement about the research and your rights as a research participant in your syllabus. That same statement along with common questions can be found below in this email.

Please reach out to Laura Pottmeyer lpottmey@andrew.cmu.edu with any questions about the study.

Best,
Jonathan

Research to Improve the Course

For this class, the Eberly Center is working with your instructor on educational research. This research will involve your coursework. You will not be asked to do anything above and beyond the normal learning activities and assignments that are part of this course. You are free not to participate in this research, and your participation will have no influence on your grade for this course or your

academic career at CMU. If you do not wish to participate or if you are under 18 years of age, please send an email to Laura Pottmeyer (lpottmey@andrew.cmu.edu), and then your data will not be included. Participants will not receive any compensation. The data collected as part of this research will include student grades. All analyses of data from participants' coursework will be conducted after the course is over and final grades are submitted. In the future, once we have removed all identifiable information from your data, we may use the data for our future research studies, or we may distribute the data to other researchers for their research studies. The Eberly Center will conduct the data analysis and interpretation of the results for this research project. The Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence & Educational Innovation is located on the CMU-Pittsburgh Campus and its mission is to support the professional development of all CMU instructors regarding teaching and learning. To minimize the risk of breach of confidentiality, the Eberly Center will never have access to data from this course containing your personal identifiers. All data will be analyzed in de-identified form and presented in the aggregate, without any personal identifiers. If you have questions pertaining to your rights as a research participant, or to report concerns to this study, please contact Laura Pottmeyer (lpottmey@andrew.cmu.edu).

Plain language interpretation:

- After the semester is over, the data generated by students in this course, which often comes from things like assignments, projects, surveys, etc., is stripped of all identifying information and aggregated into a larger research dataset for analysis.
- As a potential participant in this research, you have a say in what happens to your data. If you are OK with data generated by you in this course being de-identified and aggregated into a larger research dataset, then there is nothing you need to do - simply proceed through the course as you would with any other course.
- IF you would NOT like your data to be used for that purpose (or you are under 18) that is when you email Laura Pottmeyer and say "Hi Laura, this is my name and course number, I would like to opt-out, thanks, goodbye", and your data will not be included in the research analyses.
- This opt-out process is confidential, and your instructors will not know whether you have opted out or not.
- Importantly, your decision in this matter will NOT affect your experience in the course. You are only making a decision about what happens to your data AFTER the course is over.

Below are some potential questions students may have...

QUESTION	ANSWER
What do I need to do?	If you would like to opt out of your data being used in research analyses, all you need to do is email Laura Pottmeyer (email is in the syllabus) with your name, course number, and say “I’d like to opt out”. If you do not wish to opt out, you do not need to do anything.
What is this research about?	Unfortunately, we cannot provide further details at this time. If, after the course is over, you are curious about this kind of work, please feel free to contact Laura Pottmeyer or anyone else at the Eberly Center (lpottmey@andrew.cmu.edu).
Do I have to make up my mind right now?	No, there is no need to make up your mind right now. You can choose to opt out anytime, even if it is on the last day of the semester.
What if I don’t want to participate?	If you’d like to opt out, the only thing that will change is what happens to your data AFTER the course is over. Your required coursework will be the same regardless of your decision.
Can I see the results?	Often the results from this kind of work do not come together right away. If you are curious about the results after this course is over, please feel free to contact Laura Pottmeyer, and we would be happy to give you an update, if possible.
How will the data be used?	In two ways: to help improve the course and to contribute to educational research on how students learn best. Note that all analyses occur after course grades are submitted and student identifiers are removed.
If I opt out, do I still have to complete work assigned by the instructor?	Yes.