

Application for 2013 NEH Summer Seminar for Faculty

Polarized America: Are We
as Divided as Our Politics Suggest?

June 4-June 27, 2013
SUNY Potsdam

Seminar Leader:
Cornell Clayton

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Applications Due by Friday, January 25th to:
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Polarized America: Are We as Divided as Our Politics Suggest?

"I don't want to pit Red America against Blue America. I want to be the president of the United States of America." – President Barak Obama at the 2007 Jefferson-Jackson dinner in Iowa

"In the aftermath of the 2012 election, the vast majority of states are either entirely blue or entirely red, their entire legislatures and governors of one party or the other. In 46 states, the same party now controls both chambers of the legislature, creating distinct divisions between red and blue states. That's the highest number in 70 years. If this continues, we are watching the end of America as we know it. We only get to elect one president. But on a state-by-state basis, it's clear that the American people have two very different ideas of which way they want this country to head." – Ben Shapiro, *Wall Street Journal*, November 14, 2012

"America has crossed the political Rubicon. On the one shore, that of the red states, people are rooted in more traditional values, religion, individualism and entrepreneurialism. On the blue shore, people embrace different often trendier values, cherish political correctness and secularism, they oft do favor entrepreneurialism, but view an activist government as a benefit rather than a bane. The candidates in 2012 reflected this contrast. They both appealed to good people who nonetheless have a different vision of where American should be going, and probably more poignant, What America should be. They speak the same language, but their message is somehow lost in translation on the other shore. They speak not with each other, but often at each other."—John Metzler, *World Tribune* November 8, 2012

Shortly after winning reelection in 2012, President Barack Obama spoke to supporters gathered at McCormick Place convention center in Chicago about the hope of bringing a politically polarized nation together. "We are not as divided as our politics suggests," he suggested, nor are "we're not as cynical as the pundits believe. We are greater than the sum of our individual ambitions, and we remain more than a collection of red states and blue states. We are and forever will be the United States of America." His speech echoed themes he made popular during both the 2004 and 2008 election cycles, when he also exclaimed that "there is not a liberal America and a conservative America - there is the United States of America."

Despite the president's rhetoric, American society is more polarized politically than at any time since the 1930s. The divide is often depicted in the now familiar map of the United States

separated into red states and blue states. The map represents not only differences in presidential voting patterns but also two different world-views. Americans living in blue states are said to be politically liberal, more affluent, less religious, more cosmopolitan and culturally diverse; while Americans living in red states are said to be more conservative, generally less affluent, more religious, more traditional and less open to cultural diversity.

Although too much can be made of the red state/blue state partition, geography has become a powerful predictor of electoral outcomes (red/blue state electoral patterns have remained relatively constant since 1980 and poll data consistently reveal important regional variations in mass public attitudes about cultural values and ideology). Moreover, the evidence from congressional voting data makes clear that the two parties in Congress are more ideologically polarized than any time since the 1870s. The leading scholars of congressional party politics write:

“Congressional moderates have virtually disappeared during the past thirty years and the parties have pulled apart. Before the early 1970s there was considerable (ideological) overlap of the two political parties. In the past ten years that overlap has almost completely disappeared, with Republicans becoming consistently more conservative and Democrats more liberal. The trend to polarization is reflected in the leaders then and now. Nancy Pelosi and Tom Delay are far more extreme and far less bipartisan than Tip O’Neil and Gerald Ford were thirty years ago.”

Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole, Gerald Rosenthal, *Polarized America* (2007)

Studies showing the polarized nature of America’s elected elites also are echoed increasingly in studies of mass public opinion. Although most Americans remain more moderate in their policy positions than their representatives in Congress, the public has become increasingly ideologically polarized as well, especially among those with self-expressed partisan attachments. Thus, polarization is blamed not only for the partisan gridlock afflicting Washington D.C. policymakers, but also for the more bitter and angry nature of America’s public discourse. Partisan affiliations, social psychologists such as Jonathan Haidt argue, have become tribal-like identities that make Americans less able to talk to each other about their political differences or even to agree about basic facts in political debates.

If evidence of America’s political polarization is clear, the causes and consequences of polarization are less well understood. Many scholars who have studied polarization argue that it is caused by the growing level of inequality in the distribution of wealth and income over the past thirty years. Others have argued that it is the consequence of a turn toward post-materialist politics in which economic policies have become less important than divides over cultural, religion and lifestyles. Still other scholars have pointed to the role played by media

fragmentation, the changing nature of American communities, or the decline in manners and rituals of public discourse as the causes of polarization.

Are American as divided as our politics suggest? Are our politics more polarized than in the past? If so, what are the causes and its consequences of such polarization?

Objectives of the Seminar: This seminar will examine from an historical and interdisciplinary perspective the ongoing debate about the nature of polarization in American politics. During the first two weeks of the seminar participants will read scholarly works that discuss the level and structure of contemporary divisions in American politics. The readings will focus on polarization among both elected elites and the mass public, and place both into an historical and cross-national context.

Having provided a framework for understanding the nature of polarization, the remainder of the seminar will turn to examine its causes and consequences. Week three will consider how growing wealth and income inequality relates to ideological and partisan polarization. The readings explore how inequality may be both a cause and a consequence of contemporary partisan divisions. Readings in week two will turn to consider the powerful role that religion plays in American politics and how earlier sectarian divides (in which artisan attachments based on sectarian affiliations) have been increasingly replaced by a partisan divide based around the level of religiosity. Finally, in week four, readings will consider how polarization is both produced by, and reflected in media and the changing nature of American community and civic discourse. Included in the readings will be Jonathan Haidt's controversial views about the moral psychological basis of contemporary partisan attachments.

Seminar participants will play an active part will be expected to make presentations to the seminar or lead discussions on some of the assigned readings.

A complete syllabus with a reading list and bibliography will be provided closer to the date of the seminar. The outline below is suggestive of topics and readings for each week.

Seminar Schedule (Suggestive and Preliminary):

I. Partisan Polarization: Parties, Elections, and the Polarization of Political Elites

“Congressional moderates have virtually disappeared during the past thirty years and the parties have pulled apart. Before the early 1970s there was considerable (ideological) overlap of the two political parties. In the past ten years that overlap has almost completely disappeared, with Republicans becoming consistently more conservative and Democrats more liberal. The trend to polarization is reflected in the leaders then and now. Nancy Pelosi and Tom Delay are far more extreme and far less bipartisan than Tip O’Neil and Gerald Ford were thirty years ago.”

Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole, Gerald Rosenthal, *Polarized America* (2006)

II. Red and Blue States: How Class, Culture and Race Divide America

“... the more polarized playing field has driven rich conservative voters in poor states toward Republicans and rich liberals in rich states toward Democrats, thus turning the South red and New England and the West Coast blue and setting up a national map that is divided by culture rather than class...”

Andrew Gelman, *Red State, Blue State, Rich State, Poor State* (2010)

“Americans are closely divided, but we are not deeply divided, and we are closely divided because many of us are ambivalent and uncertain, and consequently reluctant to make firm commitments to parties, politicians, or policies.”

Morris Fiorina, *Culture War? The Myth of Polarized America* (2006)

III. Unequal Democracy: The Interplay Between Wealth, Parties, and Polarization

“...partisan politics and ideological convictions of political elites have had a substantial impact on the American economy, especially on the economic fortunes of the middle-class and poor people. Economic inequality is, in substantial part, a *political* phenomenon... Democratic and Republican presidents over the past half-century have presided over dramatically different patterns of economic growth. The substantial

partisan differences suggest that escalating inequality is not simply an inevitable economic trend."

Larry Bartels, *Unequal Democracy* (2010)

"Financial crises are not simply economic phenomena, but have a very important political dimension. In fact behind every financial bubble there is a corresponding "political bubble." Just as financial bubbles in markets are a combination of irrational exuberance and greed, political bubbles brew in their own mix of ideology, institutions, and private interest."

Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole, Gerald Rosenthal, *Political Bubbles: Financial Crises and the Failure of American Democracy* (2013)

IV. Religion

"Americans have become polarized along religious lines. Americans are increasingly concentrated at opposite ends of the religious spectrum – the highly religious at one pole, and the avowedly secular at the other... Religious polarization has consequences beyond the religious realm, because being at one pole or the other correlates strongly with one's worldview... A 'coalition of the religious' tends to vote one way, while Americans who are not religious vote another."

Robert Putman and David Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (2010)

V. Social Psychology, Media Fragmentation, and Political Discourse

"People bind themselves into political teams that share moral narratives. Once they accept a particular narrative, they become blind to alternative moral worlds... so to understand the mess we're in, we've got to understand why some people bind themselves to the liberal team, some to the conservative team, some to other teams or to no team at all.

Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (2012)

"Politics often becomes less civil and more passionate during the very times when politics matters most, when Americans are most divided and the terms of citizenship are most contested. If the U.S. has entered a new period of uncivil political behavior, we should therefore look first to the substantive issues dividing the country."

Cornell Clayton and Richard Elgar, *Civility and American Democracy* (2012)

"In the era of hundreds of channels from which to choose... the increasing gap in political knowledge between the politically interested and uninterested translates into an increasing turnout gap at the polls. Less politically involved, more moderate voters are less likely to turn out than before, while the more politically involved are even more

likely to vote than usual. The electorate is thus robbed of its middle, with the result that the electorate that does go to the polls is more polarized in its views.”

Markus Prior, *Post Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections* (2007)

APPLICATION

SUNY Potsdam NEH Faculty Development Program

Summer Seminar for Faculty

Our summer seminar is offered for faculty of SUNY Potsdam and for the faculties of the Associated Colleges of the St. Lawrence Valley. The seminars provide college teachers with opportunities to enrich their knowledge of the subjects that they teach and study by working with distinguished scholars, by studying with other teachers and scholars, and by undertaking individual projects of their own design.

There are up to eight participants selected for each seminar. Through research, reflection, and discussion with the seminar director and with colleagues in a seminar atmosphere, participants have an opportunity to deepen their understanding of their field and improve their ability to convey that understanding to others. Participants are expected to take part fully in the work of the seminar and to complete all seminar projects.

Although writing may be encouraged by seminar directors, lengthy papers typical of graduate courses are not required. Seminar topics are broad enough to accommodate a wide range of interests. The topics allow participants to address significant questions, explore major texts, and extend their thinking beyond disciplinary concerns.

Individual Projects

In addition to the common work of the seminar, participants pursue individual study of their own choosing. Prospective applicants will receive detailed information about the seminar before applying. Particular seminars will vary in their research emphases, some focusing more on individual reading or research projects, others concentrating more on the common work of the seminar. The work to be undertaken beyond the common agenda of the seminar may be a research project or a curriculum project.

Eligibility

To be eligible applicants must be members of the faculty of SUNY Potsdam or faculty of one of the Associated Colleges. Faculty who have participated in previous SUNY Potsdam NEH Seminars are eligible to apply, but preference will be given to those who have not previously participated

Selection Criteria

The selection committee will review applications and select participants on the basis of (1) applicant's qualifications to do the work of the seminar and make a contribution to it; (2) the conception and organization of the applicant's proposed study project in relation to the seminar topic; (3) the potential value of that project to other members of the seminar.

Stipend and Conditions of Award

Individuals selected to participate in the four-week seminar will receive a stipend of \$2500 and an allowance of up to \$500 for purchase of library books and travel related to the seminar project.

Participants are required to attend all seminar sessions and to engage fully in the work of the seminar. During the tenure of the seminar they may not undertake other professional duties which will interfere with their participation in the seminar (in particular, they may not be teaching Summer School in tandem with participating in the seminar).

Immediately following the completion of the seminar, participants will be asked to submit an evaluation. In addition, ten months following the seminar, participants will provide an evaluation of the impact the seminar had on their profession development with particulars about papers given, scholarship published, and curricula projects implemented as a result of participation in the seminar.

APPLICATION MATERIALS

1. Application Cover Sheet

Applicant's Title and Name

Home Address

Work Address

Telephones, Home and Work

Major Field of Applicant

2. Description of Objectives

Applicants must write an essay describing their objectives in applying to the seminar. **Close attention should be given to the preparation of the description of objectives because the description will be considered carefully by the committee as it makes its selections.** This essay should include any relevant personal and academic information. The essay should address reasons for applying to the seminar; the applicant's interest, both academic and personal, in the subject of the seminar, qualifications to do the work of the seminar and to make a contribution to it; what the applicant wants to accomplish in the seminar; and the relation of the seminar to the applicant's professional responsibilities. The descriptive material provided about the seminar should be read carefully because the committee may request that particular information be given in the description of objectives.

The application essay should be **NO MORE THAN** three to four double-spaced pages. Be sure to address the following questions in relation to the proposed project:

- a. The specific study, research, or curricular project, including the basic ideas, problems, and questions that are of interest, with a specific concrete plan of investigation and a statement of its rationale.
- b. Whether the proposed project is part of a long-term undertaking, the present state of the larger undertaking and how the summer project fits in.
- c. The relation of the study to the applicant's immediate and long-range objectives as a teacher and scholar.
- d. Other information relevant to the proposed project.

3. Professional History

An application **must** include the professional history form (provided below). A c.v. may be attached but will not be accepted in lieu of the professional history.

Professional History Form

- 1. Applicant's Name and Institutional Affiliation (include department).**
- 2. Applicant's Field of Specialization**
- 3. Full Time _____ Part Time _____**
- 4. Number of Years Teaching _____**
- 5. Education (list institutions, dates of attendance, major field and graduate degrees**
- 6. Graduate Work in field of seminar**

7. Teaching/Research interests in field of seminar

8. Sabbatical Leaves or other released time for research or study (specify when, where, and for what purpose)

9. Employment History (give institutions, dates, major responsibilities)

10. Courses Taught during the last two years

11. Academic Awards and Grants (mention any special awards or professional distinctions)

12. Previous SUNY Potsdam NEH Seminars

13. *Most significant* Publications and Professional Activities (This list should be selective and not all inclusive.)