

SOC 230
SOC 230: The Sociology of Political Polarization: Bigots and Snowflakes
3 credit hours

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

Recent years have revealed significant changes in how we think and talk about controversial sociopolitical issues. Communicating across ideological divides has become increasingly difficult and conversations on important issues (those that touch race, gender, or immigration, for example) often lead nowhere. This is, in part, due to a collective tendency to oversimplify problems that are anything but simple. We create binaries where none exist and force people into positions that can be labeled as: for or against, good or bad, and right or wrong. These divides are further compounded by the absence of an explicit recognition of differences in how people understand and interpret the world.

One of the broad aims of sociology is to better understand the nature of social problems, including those that are controversial. A crucial component of that understanding is looking at how we frame those problems or, more specifically, which paradigm (or lens) we use to view them. Becoming more cognizant of the range of paradigms that exist and learning how to communicate across them is critical to understanding society and to bridging divides. We will base our semester-long study on one of the most important fundamentals of social science research, which is that paradigms can't be proven true or false—they can only be discussed as more or less useful. We discuss several lenses, talk about differences between them, how users of one view users of another, and how we can use this to improve our understanding of our society. Students learn to recognize their own lens-driven assumptions and those of others, while developing a healthy ability to question both.

In this course, we will examine the prevalence, nature, and sources of these communication breakdowns. Part of this examination includes making our underlying assumptions and beliefs explicit—and therefore open to criticism. Doing this, while maintaining a position of humility, can take us further in building bridges and solving problems. In some ways, I would like this class to be a semester-long informed exploration of: the kind of society we want to live in, where we currently stand, and what we need to do to get where we want to be. An important part of our study will include considering the role currently played by higher education and how it could be changed for the better.

The nature of the course material is such that we talk about a wide range of political and ideological perspectives. Because the tilt on campus (here and elsewhere) is to the left, we will often focus on opinions and perspectives that are traditionally omitted (often associated with the center and the right). These often coincide with non-progressive (conservative or libertarian) views and some uncomfortable questions.

We will delve into topics and listen to perspectives that some will find distasteful or even offensive. This course will require students to consider ideas and perspectives that some have deigned unfit for public (or private) discourse; students can and should decide for themselves whether that is a valid or an effective strategy.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Although attendance will not be taken, class engagement (described in more detail below) constitutes a significant portion of your grade. Engagement requires participation and participation requires you to be in class. Put differently, it is not possible to earn a high mark for class engagement *without* both regular attendance and regular participation. In addition, I expect all readings, video, or audio to be reviewed prior to the corresponding class meeting and all work to be completed on time. I also insist upon acceptance of the following terms:

Commitment to Constructive Disagreement. In order to create a classroom environment that supports respectful, critical inquiry through the free exchange of ideas and perspectives, the following principles will guide our work:

- Treat every member of the class with respect, even if you disagree with their opinion;
- Bring light, not heat;
- Reasonable minds can (and should) differ on any number of perspectives, opinions, and conclusions;
- Because constructive disagreement sharpens thinking, deepens understanding, and reveals novel insights, it is not just encouraged, it is expected;
- All viewpoints are welcomed;
- No ideas—no matter how cherished—are immune from scrutiny and debate;
- Worldviews, beliefs, interpretations, assumptions, and perspectives will be identified as such whenever possible (and are thus open to being challenged);
- You will not be graded on your opinions.

STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

Upon successful completion of the course requirements, you will:

- Have an understanding of political polarization—both where it comes from and what it looks like
- Be able to critique the role of higher education in the broader sociopolitical conversation

- Describe perspectives on a wide array of social issues using different lenses (for example, is a particular point of view drawing from a paradigm (or lens) that focuses on structural determinants of outcomes or one that focuses on individual-level determinants)
- Be able to describe the paradigm (lens) you use to interpret the world and contrast it with others that differ

REQUIRED TEXTS

We will read significant portions of each of the following texts. During the corresponding class, we will summarize together what we read and discuss how it pertains to our understanding of paradigms and lenses in social science and beyond.

Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress by Stephen Pinker. Penguin Random House, 2018.

The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion by Jonathan Haidt. Vintage Books, 2012.

Shame: How America's Past Sins Have Polarized Our Country by Shelby Steele. Basic Books, 2015.

The Sacred Project of American Sociology by Christian Smith. Oxford University Press, 2014.

ELECTRONIC ETTIQUETTE POLICY

Laptops, tablets, and phones in the classroom environment can undoubtedly be a distraction. These policies aim to minimize their impact.

Cell phones.

- Cell phones must be put away (not visible) and silenced for the duration of class.

Laptops/tablets.

- Laptops/tablets are permitted for notetaking or class-related work only. I don't want to micromanage your use; please don't put me in a position where I have to.

Recordings.

Audio or video recordings of any kind are strictly prohibited without written permission from the instructor.

Exceptions to the electronic etiquette policy will be made for students with appropriate DRES documentation. However, sharing and distribution of audio and/or video recordings are always prohibited.

ATTENDANCE POLICY

Attendance will not be taken, but class engagement is part of your grade.

GRADING

Component	Point Value
Class Engagement	100
Race-based college admissions analysis	75
Op-Ed	100
Case Study of Strong Backlash	
Presentation	100
Analysis of and response to the case study	100
End-of-the-semester reflective paper	50
Total Points	525

This course will use a +/- system. A total score of 473 and higher equates to an A- or an A, while 95% (499 points and higher) is an A+. *There is no final exam for this course.*

Note 1 on grading: I reserve the right to administer pop quizzes (if needed) assessing your ability to summarize the assigned reading—these would be reflected in your class engagement grade.

Note 2 on grading: Please note that most of the grades for this course occur late in the semester. The exception is the race-based college admissions analysis.

Class Engagement = preparation + participation. Either one on its own is insufficient. The framework below come from [this link](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/participation-points-making-student-engagement-visible/) (also available at <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/participation-points-making-student-engagement-visible/>):

Engagement	Preparation (happens outside of class)	Participation (happens in class)
I am fully engaged	<p>Exemplary preparation</p> <p>I read carefully and research background information on the author/topic ahead of time.</p> <p>I research social, cultural, historic, economic, political connections to the text/topic.</p>	<p>Animated participation</p> <p>I attend class and I speak daily.</p> <p>I try to advance the conversation by presenting evidence to support my ideas.</p> <p>I present related research, implications, or complexities in the text/situation/topic.</p>
I am occasionally engaged	<p>Novice preparation</p> <p>I read and prepare assignments ahead of time.</p> <p>I do basic research to understand the material, but I do not go beyond the obvious.</p>	<p>Occasional participation</p> <p>I attend class daily.</p> <p>I speak occasionally—mainly when called upon by the professor.</p> <p>Sometimes I present general evidence to support my position.</p>
I'm not sure how to be engaged; I need some direction	<p>Inadequate preparation</p> <p>Sometimes I do the reading.</p> <p>I don't research to understand the material, nor do I go beyond the obvious.</p>	<p>Inadequate participation</p> <p>My attendance is inconsistent.</p> <p>I participate only when prompted.</p>
I am disengaged	<p>No preparation</p> <p>I neither read nor research before class.</p>	<p>No participation</p> <p>My attendance is inconsistent.</p> <p>I do not speak in class.</p>

While daily participation in discussion is strongly encouraged, your class engagement grade will depend on your engagement over the entire arc of the semester. Participation in small group discussions counts just as favorably towards your class engagement grade as whole group participation.

Race-based college admissions analysis (Due Week 5). Drawing from the readings, write a 3-4 page (double-spaced, 12 pt. font, 1 inch margins) analysis, using the paradigms (lenses) we've talked about in class to describe the different perspectives (both for and against race-based college admissions) brought to bear on this topic. Be clear and specific about the assumptions and beliefs that underpin each perspective. For instance, what relevant beliefs about: individual versus structural causes to social problems or a focus on process versus outcome. (*Hint: You should incorporate Pinker's ideas on progress and Loury's "development" and "bias" narratives.*)

Op-Ed (Due Week 8). Write a 2-3 page (double-spaced, 12 pt. font, 1 inch margins) carefully-thought-out, opinion piece in which you make an argument relating to political polarization. This can be in response to any of the following prompts:

- Why Political Polarization Is Something We Should All Pay Attention To
- Political Correctness Is...
- Why The Concerns Over Political Polarization Are Overblown
- How To Reduce Political Polarization
- *Other related topic of your choosing (please check with me first)*

There are many sources with good suggestions for how to write a strong op-ed. [Here](#) is one (also available here https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/hks-communications-program/files/new_seglin_how_to_write_an_oped_1_25_17_7.pdf)—there are several others linked within that page.

Case Study of Situation with Strong Backlash.

This assignment has two parts. The first is a written analysis and the second is a short presentation. You must clear your topic with me beforehand. Groups and topics must be finalized no later than April 2.

Part 1. Case Study Analysis (Due Week 11).

Write a 4-5 page (double-spaced, 12 pt. font, 1 inch margins) analysis of a controversial sociopolitical situation, incident, or person. Describe what happened, why it is/was controversial, link it to other, similar situations if applicable, and discuss what you would hope to see happen differently in the future (while discussing the costs and benefits of any path you choose). In your write-up, you should be explicit about the different lenses (or paradigms) used by parties on both sides of the issue. To do this well, you'll need to draw on the semester's readings from Pinker, Haidt, and Steele in particular.

This analysis is intentionally due in advance of the presentation. You should do your background research for the paper and then winnow down the information to that which is useful in a presentation.

Examples of possible topics include (but are certainly not limited to):

- Pete Buttigieg (exchange with The Root's Michael Harriot)
- James Damore (Google's Ideological Echo Chamber)
- Matt Damon (comments on a "spectrum" of behavior)
- Aziz Ansari (babe.net story)
- Jonathan Friedland (fired from Netflix)
- Amy Wax (Penn, numerous controversies)
- Nicholas and Erika Christakis (Yale)
- Trans women competing in women's category sports
- CA lawsuit to remove the SAT/ACT as part of the admissions process
- Camille Paglia (numerous controversies)
- Anyone who's been "cancelled"
- *There are many other examples for you to choose from (you must clear it with me first)*

Part 2. Presentation (Last three class meetings).

Using the same case study you picked for your analysis, develop a 5-10 minute to share the key information with the class.

Note 1: Presentations will be done at the end of the semester. If you attend only your own presentation and ignore those of your classmates, this *will* be reflected in your grade.

Note 2: If enrollment approaches 50, these may become partnered presentations. In that case, students each will be responsible for their own written submission. However, the presentation portion will be graded jointly, with both students receiving the same grade. Students will be responsible for finding a partner and clearing their topic with me.

End of the Semester Reflective Paper (Due Last Class Meeting).

This should be a 3-4 page (double-spaced, 12 pt. font, 1 inch margins) personal reflection on the semester's course work and on your personal experience with it. You should include a well-articulated discussion of what you learned and how you think it will (or won't) shape your thinking going forward. Specific personal examples from outside of class will make this stronger. Examples could take the form of a conversation or an experience you had that you understand differently because of this class, something you read that you questioned that you wouldn't have questioned before, or any other way in which you have found yourself thinking differently.

For this paper, you should draw upon the readings we've done over the course of the semester and frame the structure of your paper around the paradigms (lenses) that were invoked in the instance you're describing (including, for instance, individual versus structural determinants of social problems, a focus on process or outcomes, and the role

of discrimination. Include a discussion of how understanding these lenses helped you understand that interaction.

OTHER INFORMATION

Academic Integrity Policy. The Code of Policies and Regulations Applying to All Students will be applied in all instance of academic misconduct committed by students. This applies to all exams, presentations, assignments, and materials distributed or used in this course. You can review these policies at the following website:

<http://admin.illinois.edu/policy/code/index.html>

Request for Special Accommodations. We are committed to providing a learning environment where our students can succeed. If you require special accommodations, please contact Disability Resources and Educational Services (DRES) as soon as possible. To contact DRES, you may visit 1207 S. Oak Street, Champaign, call 217-333-4603, or emails disability@illinois.edu. We will try to meet all accommodations once the process has started. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive to the beginning of the semester, but begin on the day you contact your professor with a current letter of accommodation from DRES.

I am grateful for the chance to teach this class. I look forward to being able to share these ideas with you and also to hearing about your perspectives and experiences. I expect that the course will keep you both busy and interested. Please don't hesitate to share comments, thoughts, suggestions, or questions.

Schedule (Readings are to be completed before class on the day they're listed)

Tuesday	Thursday
Week 1: What is political polarization and what does it look like? (Lens: Individual or structural determinants of differences in outcomes)	
Syllabus Introduction to course	Read: Why Does Racial Inequality Persist? (2019, <i>The Manhattan Institute</i> , Loury) The Fight to Redefine Racism (2019, <i>The New Yorker</i> , Sanneh)
Week 2: Evidence of an ideological divide	
Read: Hidden Tribes Report (Executive Summary (p. 5-16), Ch. 2 (p. 25-56))	Read: Hidden Tribes Report (Ch. 7 & 8 (p. 117-134))
Week 3: Enlightenment values (Lens: emphasis on the individual or the group)	
Read: Enlightenment Now (Intro (p. 1-6), Ch. 1 (p. 7-14) & 4 (p. 39-52))	Read: Enlightenment Now (Ch. 6 (p. 62-67))
Week 4: Progress (Lens: Have things gotten better? Race, gender, and the rights revolutions)	
Read: Enlightenment Now (Ch. 9 & 10 (p. 97-155))	Read: Enlightenment Now (Ch. 13 (p. 191-198)) Discussion: Preparation for race-based college admissions analysis
Week 5: Progress (continued)	
Read: Enlightenment Now (Ch. 20 & 21 (p. 322-384))	Read: Enlightenment Now (Ch. 23 (p. 410-454)) <i>Due: Race-based college admissions analysis</i>
Week 6: Variation in our intuitions about right and wrong	
Read: The Righteous Mind (Ch. 1 & 2 (p. 3-60))	Read: The Righteous Mind (Ch. 3 (p. 61-83))
Week 7: Morality and ideology	
Read: The Righteous Mind (Ch. 4 & 5 (p. 84-130))	Read: The Righteous Mind (Ch. 6 (p. 131-149))
Week 8: Morality and ideology (continued) + Is there a [insert group] experience?	
Read: The Righteous Mind (Ch. 7 & 8 (p. 150-179))	Read: Shame (Ch. 1 (p. 1-28)) <i>Due: Op-Ed</i>
Week 9: Identity	
Read: Shame (Ch. 2-4 (p. 29-68))	Read: Shame (Ch. 5 & 6 (p. 69-90))
Week 10: Identity	
Read: Shame (Ch. 7-9 (p. 91-118))	Read: Shame (Ch. 10 & 11 (p. 119-130))
Week 11: The role of higher education (case of Sociology)	
Read: The Sacred Project (Ch. 1 (p. 1-27) & Ch. 2 (p. 28-60)) <i>Due: Case Study Analysis</i>	Read: The Sacred Project (Ch. 2 (p. 60-86))
Week 12: The role of higher education (continued)	

Read: The Sacred Project (Ch. 2 (p. 86-115))	Read: The Silent Crisis in the Classroom (2019, FIRE conference, Redstone) The Case for Contentious Curricula (2017, The Atlantic, Zimmerman and Robertson)
Week 13: Student presentations	
<i>Due: Student Presentations</i>	<i>Due: Student Presentations</i>
Week 14: Student presentations	
<i>Due: Student Presentations/Wrap-Up</i> <i>Due: End of Semester Reflective Paper</i>	

*PDF files to all articles are linked on the Compass course homepage.