



## **Exploring Hyper-Polarization in Modern American Politics: How Did it Happen and Where Do We Go From Here?**

**Fall 2023**

**Rep. James R. Langevin  
Senior Fellow, Watson Institute**

**Session Dates: September 27, October 11, October 25, November 8, November 15**

### **Overview:**

The United States is experiencing one of the most intense periods of political polarization in our nation's history. Americans are becoming increasingly divided along partisan lines, and irresponsible political leaders are often exploiting these fractures to stoke fear and resentment.

In many ways, political polarization is already eroding the foundations of our democracy. Less than three years ago, election deniers questioned the legitimacy of the outcomes of our elections and incited a violent insurrection against the U.S. Capitol on January 6th.

Additionally, [faith in public institutions](#), such as Congress, the Supreme Court, and newspapers, are approaching all-time lows. More and more, Americans are sheltered within their own ideological echo chambers, which are reinforced by partisan news outlets and social media algorithms. All the while, fringe political leaders have become emboldened at the expense of the bipartisan middle, which has made across-the-aisle compromise exceedingly difficult to achieve.

However, this period of bitter polarization is not without historical precedent. To begin, this course will examine several moments in U.S. history when severe political polarization gripped the nation. Starting with the Civil War and continuing through the 1960's and early 2000's, we will place our current political tumult within historical context. We will also seek to better understand the rise of political populism in the United States over the last 15 years. Together, we'll study the success of populist figures across the political spectrum, and we'll debate the merits of their ideas and policies.

This course will also examine the tools of division that are being used to pit Americans against each other. We will explore the evolving media environment, including the rise of social media, and we will study how our foreign adversaries are taking advantage of these elements to further

divide us and undermine our national security. We will also spend time discussing the structural contributors to political polarization, including the barriers to bipartisan legislating, the increase of partisan gerrymandering, the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision and the rise of the SuperPACs, as well as shifting political incentives.

As a member of Congress from 2000-2022, I witnessed the dramatic changes in American politics over the last two decades firsthand. I worked hard to find common ground with my colleagues across the aisle, and I was frustrated to see bipartisan policy making become increasingly rare towards the end of my career. Together, I hope to use this study group to explore our current moment of intense political polarization and discuss the possible paths forward for the nation, while also contending with the potential consequences of unchecked political polarization.

### **Course Expectations**

This course will take place over five sessions of ninety minutes. Each session will feature remarks, either from me or from one of the leaders who have been invited to guest lecture one of our sessions. However, this study group places a priority on discussion, and students can expect that at least half of each class will be dedicated to open conversation on the concepts covered during the lecture and in any suggested readings.

### **Schedule**

#### Session #1: Polarization in Context: From the Civil War to the Iraq War (September 27th)

Our first session will lay the foundation for the course by exploring the previous periods of intense polarization throughout American history.

To begin, we will discuss the Civil War, the deadliest of all American wars. Next, we will turn towards the 1960's and early 70's. President Kennedy was assassinated, President Johnson's term was overshadowed by the unpopular war in Vietnam, and President Nixon was forced to resign following the Watergate scandal. Social movements, such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Anti-War movement, were organizing across the country, which sparked backlash and violence.

Finally, we will explore the legacy of President George W. Bush. Starting with the contested 2000 Election, and continuing through 9/11 and the Iraq War, we will seek to understand how this era may have contributed to the polarization we experience today.

#### Session #2: Seeds of Polarization: The Rise of Populism in the 21st Century (October 11th)

Building upon our understanding of previous periods of political polarization, our second session will be focused on the rise of populism in modern American politics. We will examine the political movements that arose on both sides of the political spectrum over the last 15 years, and

we will discuss how these movements helped to lay the groundwork for today's polarization.

Following Barack Obama's landslide election in 2008 – which was widely viewed as a rebuke of President Bush's policies – deep divisions emerged and populist movements gained traction. On the right-wing, the Tea Party activists stormed Congressional town halls across the nation to oppose President Obama's Affordable Care Act, which they decried as “big government overreach.” Motivated in part by opposition to the first black President, the Tea Party and their followers helped to deliver the House majority to Republicans in 2010, and helped the GOP reclaim the Senate in 2014. Donald Trump played on similar anti-Obama sentiment to lead the “Birther” movement, which helped to elevate Trump's political profile ahead of the 2016 presidential run. We will also examine how Donald Trump, like an entertainer reading an audience, has tapped into voter discontent, the anger of people who feel the system isn't working for them, who feel they been ignored or left behind.

We will also examine the rise of left-wing populism, from the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011 to Senator Bernie Sanders' run for President in 2016. As the country struggled to recover from the Great Recession – which began in 2007 – these movements highlighted the consequences of widening income inequality. We will also discuss other social movements that spawned during this era, including the Black Lives Matter movement.

### Session #3: The Modern Tools of Division (October 25th)

This session will focus on the ways in which the media landscape has shifted, and how opportunistic political actors, entities, and nation states have weaponized these changes to exacerbate political polarization.

Not too long ago, the vast majority of Americans received their news from 3 major television networks, a limited number of radio stations and local newspapers (in Rhode Island, the Providence Journal). These legacy media organizations prioritized fact-checking and getting the story right.

Since the rise of Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms, pre-existing political preferences are increasingly reinforced by algorithms. These algorithms are designed to keep users engaged, allowing “viral” stories to spread across the internet without robust verification or fact-checking. Likewise, the advent of the 24-hour news cycle and the growing prominence of partisan media outlets have weakened legacy media organizations, diminished journalistic standards, and emboldened extreme public personalities. These dynamics have created undue pressure to get the story out rather than getting the story right.

Together, we will also consider how Russia, China, and other foreign adversaries are using social media to spread mis- and dis-information in order to further inflame domestic tensions. We will learn about Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which provides social media companies with legal protections for hosting harmful or objectionable material on their platforms.

We will also examine the ongoing movement to undermine faith in our election systems and

deny the results of free and fair elections, which incited the January 6th Capitol attacks.

#### Session #4: Structural Obstacles and Opportunities for Unity and Bipartisanship (November 8th)

The United States is one of the oldest democracies in the world, but our system of government and politics are far from perfect. In this session, we will examine the structural factors that have contributed to today's polarization.

We will study Congress's attempts to rein in money in politics, and the Supreme Court's decisions that weakened those efforts. We will study the consequences of the Supreme Court's 2010 *Citizens United* decision, which allowed wealthy individuals and big corporations to use unlimited amounts of money to influence our elections. We will explore the increasingly common use of aggressive gerrymanders by state legislatures, which have skewed the partisan lean of congressional districts, rather than politically balanced districts, which would perhaps lead to more bipartisan outcomes when legislating. We will also discuss the role of party primaries, which are elevating the most extreme candidates at the expense of moderates. And we'll talk about the new trends in political fundraising, which incentivizes candidates to seek attention by catering to the extremes on either side instead of the persuadable middle. Finally, we'll study the restrictive rules that govern Congress, which often limit debate and prevent bipartisan legislation and amendments from receiving a vote.

Together, we will consider these obstacles to unity and bipartisanship, and then we will identify opportunities for reform.

#### Session #5: Where We Go From Here (November 15th)

In this final session, we will look ahead to the 2024 elections and beyond. We will discuss the current political status quo, as well as the potential consequences of runaway political polarization.

In 2022, extreme candidates for political office who denied the results of the 2020 election were largely unsuccessful. Will the center hold again in 2024? President Joe Biden is running to be the oldest Commander in Chief in U.S. history. Former president Donald Trump is running after being the first President to face criminal charges. How do these political dynamics impact political polarization today?

We will also consider the potential structural reforms that could reduce political polarization. Should term limits exist for Members of Congress? Should social media companies be held accountable for the content they host? How can Congressional rules be changed to incentivize bipartisan legislating? Which reforms to the primary system might reduce political polarization? Should gerrymandering be banned?

Finally, we will consider the possible implications of unchecked political polarization. Will the United States experience further civil unrest over the coming years? Can our institutions survive this moment of intense polarization?

Join us as we seek to answer these critical questions, which will help to determine the future of our democracy.

### **About the Instructor**

Rep. James R. Langevin served in the United States House of Representatives from 2001-2023, representing the second district of Rhode Island. He was a senior member of the House Armed Services Committee, where he served as the Chairman of the Cybersecurity, Innovative Technologies, and Information Systems Subcommittee. He was also a founding and senior member of the House Committee on Homeland Security.