POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY SEMINAR:  
THE RISE AND TRANSFORMATION OF THE AMERICAN RIGHT

Overview

“The American conservative movement,” write sociologists Neil Gross, Thomas Medvetz, and Rupert Russell, “that began to gain steam in the post-World War II era had, by the 1980s, emerged as a transformative political force in the United States and the world.” Taking a historical, interdisciplinary, and theoretically oriented approach, this seminar examines competing explanations and changing interpretations of the rise of the right in US politics after the Second World War. The seminar focuses on four main questions:

1) What is American conservatism? What are its central concerns, elements, or themes? To what extent, in what ways, and why has it changed over time?
2) What explains the rise of the right to power in US politics? We will consider different kinds of explanations, including economic causes; cultural factors, including status, race, and gender; the role of institutions that have nurtured and promoted conservative ideas, including right-wing think tanks, legal foundations, and news media; and the role of what Gross, Medvetz, and Russell call “energetic and motivated actors who exercise creativity in envisioning an alternative social world and fashioning the political means to achieve it.” Closely connected to the question of causes are the timing of the right’s rise to power and the social carriers of conservative ideas.
3) Does Trumpism represent a historic break—which is to say, a novel development and significant transformation of the American right—or is it in essential respects continuous with the past history of the conservative movement?
4) What are the broader implications of the rise of the right for American political development? As historian Kim Phillips-Fein puts it, “Does recognizing the importance of conservatism throughout the twentieth century make us see the arc of American history in a new way?”

Course Requirements

1. **Regular assigned readings.** You are expected to complete all required reading assignments before the seminar meeting in which we discuss them. If you are unable to read the entire assignment carefully, at least try to skim through it to get a sense of the main points.

2. **Attendance and active participation:** Please be prepared at class time to discuss all of the required readings for that week. You are expected to attend class regularly, arrive on time, and be prepared to participate in an active, thoughtful, and informed way in class discussions. You are encouraged to raise questions during discussions, which counts as participation. To help foster a more coherent conversation, please try whenever possible to relate your contribution to previous remarks rather than offering something entirely disconnected.

3. **Class presentations.** Each student is required to make two seminar presentation on the required reading for two different weeks. Each presentation should be about 10 to 15 minutes and follow a brief (one-page) outline that you share with class members by Sunday preceding the class meeting. The purpose of the presentation is not to provide a summary of the reading—you should assume that everyone has carefully read the material in advance—but to open the discussion by (a) relating the assigned readings to each other and to texts we have previously discussed, e.g., by noting similarities and differences in the positions of different authors; (b) identifying what you see as the key issues raised by the assigned readings; and (c) raising questions/lines of discussion. Among the types of questions you may raise are exploratory questions that probe evidence; challenge questions that examine assumptions and conclusions; relational questions that ask for comparisons of themes, ideas, or issues; interpretive questions that probe motives or meanings of
social action; *cause-and-effect* questions that ask about causal relationships among ideas, actions, and events; *counterfactual* questions that pose a hypothetical change in the facts; *priority* questions that seek to identify the most important issue; and *summary* questions that elicit syntheses. The presenter for each week will help the instructor to facilitate the class discussion that follows. Students are allowed to “double up” on presentations only after all sessions are filled with at least one presenter. NB: The presenter for week 2 does not need to provide the discussion memo in advance; it’s an incentive!

4. A 1–2 page **prospectus** for a term paper is due no later than **November 24**. The paper should take on a particular issue, question, or controversy covered during the semester. It should build on the assigned readings and discussion while moving beyond what was covered in class, either by addressing the issue in more depth, broadening the focus to related concerns, or examining the implications of the issue for your own research project or agenda. The prospectus should indicate the question your paper will address, the thesis of your paper (your answer to the question), the sources of textual evidence you will likely use, and how you plan to organize your paper.

5. A **term paper** of approximately 20-25 pages, following the plan of an approved prospectus, is due no later than **December 15**. The American Journal of Sociology instructions for authors note that “many referees balk at reading papers larger than 10,000 words.” I will, too. Your paper should therefore not exceed 10,000 words maximum, including references and endnotes.

All written work must be typed in 12-point font, double-spaced, and submitted online through Canvas.

Each student’s overall grade for the semester will be determined as follows:

- **Attendance:** 10% (to paraphrase Woody Allen, 10% of success is just showing up)
- **Participation:** 20%
- **Presentation:** 20% (10% for each presentation)
- **Prospectus:** 15%
- **Written seminar paper:** 35%

A = 93-100, AB = 88-92, B = 83-87, BC = 78-82, C = 70-77, D = 60-69, F = 59 or below.

**Reading Assignments**

Three books are required for the course: Himmelstein, *To the Right*; Hacker and Pierson, *Let Them Eat Tweets*; and Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*. All other required reading is available through Canvas. If you experience any problems with the readings, please inform me as soon as possible.

**Week 2 | September 8 | Introduction and overview**


**Week 3 | September 15 | The growth of a movement**


**Week 4 | September 22 | Electoral coalitions and realignment**


**Week 5 | September 29 | Economic change and capitalist mobilization**

Himmelstein, “The Mobilization of Corporate Conservatism,” in *To the Right*, 129-64.

**Week 6 | October 6 | Economic change and capitalist mobilization (cont’d)**


**Week 7 | October 13 | Race and conservatism**


**Week 8 | October 20 | Status and conservatism**

Recommended: 166-88.
Week 9 | October 27 | Class and culture in Kansas


Week 10 | November 3 | Religion and conservatism

Today is Election Day. Don’t forget to vote!

Week 11 | November 10 | Gender and conservatism


Week 12 | November 17 | The role of institutions: think tanks, law, media


Week 13 | November 24 | Wisconsin: A case study

Prospectus for term paper due

*** Thanksgiving recess November 26–29, 2020 ***
Week 14 | December 1 | The Tea Party and the alt-right


Week 15 | December 8 | Trumpism

Peter Kivisto, The Trump Phenomenon (Bingley, UK: Emerald, 2017), 49-51.
Nancy Fraser, “From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump—and Beyond,” American Affairs 1, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 46–64.