

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

Overview

“The American conservative movement,” write the 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, you should at least 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 seminar 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 a seminar presentation on all the required readings for one week. Each presentation should be about 10 to 15 minutes and follow a brief (one-page) outline that you share (via Canvas) with class members at least 24 hours before 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 might 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.

4. **Response paper to a conservative periodical.** To aid your understanding of the American political right, you are expected to read a regularly published conservative periodical of your choice during the Spring 2025 semester. I suggest one of the following, all of which are available through UW Libraries: *The American Conservative*, *The American Spectator*, *Commentary*, *Human Events*, *National Review*, *The New American*, or the *Wall Street Journal* (editorial page). Begin by doing a little research on the history of the periodical and which strain of conservatism it expresses. Select three articles published in the periodical during the semester and write a short response paper that shows how the articles shed light on one of the four main seminar questions. Please limit your response paper to 1,200 words and submit it by **April 3 at 2:30 pm**.
5. A 1-2 page **prospectus** for a term paper is due by **April 17 at 2:30 pm**. The paper should address one of the four main seminar questions or a related issue, question, or controversy covered during the semester. Your paper may go 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.
6. A **term paper**, following the plan of an approved prospectus, is due no later than **May 4 at 11:59 pm**. 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:

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| • Attendance: 10% (to paraphrase Woody Allen, ten percent of success is just showing up) | • Response paper: 15% |
| • Participation: 20% | • Prospectus: 10% |
| • Presentation: 15% | • Written seminar paper: 30% |

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

Reading Assignments

One book is required for the course: Hacker and Pierson, *Let Them Eat Tweets*. All other required reading assignments are available online through UW–Madison Libraries (indicated by hyperlinks below) or on Canvas. If you experience any problems with the readings, please inform me as soon as possible.

Week 1 | January 23 | Introduction

No reading

Week 2 | January 30 | Overview

- Jerome L. Himmelstein, [*To the Right: The Transformation of American Conservatism*](#) (University of California Press, 1990), 1–27.
- Julian E. Zelizer, “Rethinking the History of American Conservatism,” *Reviews in American History* 38, No. 2 (June 2010), pp. 367–92.
- Kathleen M. Blee and Kimberly A. Creasap, “Conservative and Right-Wing Movements,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 36 (2010): 269–86.
- Kim Phillips-Fein, “Conservatism: A State of the Field,” *Journal of American History* 98, no. 3 (Dec. 2011): 723–43.
- Neil Gross, Thomas Medvetz, and Rupert Russell, “The Contemporary American Conservative Movement,” *Annual Review of Sociology* (2011) 37: 325–54.
- Ben Merriman, “Establishing the Conservative Phenomenon,” *Sociological Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2019): 354–70.
- Samuel Goldman, “The Problem of American Conservatism, Revisited,” *American Political Thought* 13, no. 2 (Spring 2024): 239–51.

Recommended:

- Alan Brinkley, “The Problem of American Conservatism,” *American Historical Review* 99, no. 2 (April 1994): 409–29.
- Andrew J. Perrin, J. Micah Roos, Gordon W. Gauchat, “From Coalition to Constraint: Modes of Thought in Contemporary American Conservatism,” *Sociological Forum* 29, No. 2 (June 2014): 285–300.
- David Austin Walsh, [*Taking America Back: The Conservative Movement and the Far Right*](#) (Yale University Press, 2024), 1–123.
- Nissim Mizrachi, [*Beyond Suspicion: The Moral Clash Between Rootedness and Progressive Liberalism*](#) (University of California Press, 2024).

Week 3 | February 6 | The growth of a movement

- Himmelstein, [*To the Right*](#), 28–94.
- Michael Kazin, [*The Populist Persuasion*](#) (Cornell University Press, 1998), 1–7, 221–66.

Recommended: David Austin Walsh, [*Taking America Back*](#), 127–239.

Week 4 | February 13 | Electoral coalitions and realignment

- Kevin P. Phillips, [*The Emerging Republican Majority*](#) (Princeton University Press, [1969] 2014), 2–22.
- Himmelstein, “The New Republican Edge,” in [*To the Right*](#), 165–81.
- Dov Grohsgal and Kevin M. Kruse, “How the Republican Majority Emerged,” *The Atlantic*, August 6, 2019.
- Michael W. Hughey, “The New Conservatism: Political Ideology and Class Structure in America,” *Social Research* 49, No. 3 (Autumn 1982): 791–829.

Recommended: Patrick Ruffini, *Party of the People: Inside the Multiracial Populist Coalition Remaking the GOP* (Simon & Schuster, 2023), 1–27.

Week 5 | February 20 | Economic change and capitalist mobilization

- Himmelstein, “The Mobilization of Corporate Conservatism,” in [*To the Right*](#), 129–64.
- Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Let Them Eat Tweets: How the Right Rules in an Age of Extreme Inequality* (W. W. Norton, 2020), 1–75.

Week 6 | February 27 | Economic change and capitalist mobilization (cont’d)

- Hacker and Pierson, *Let Them Eat Tweets*, 77–214.

Recommended: David Leonhardt, “[The Republican Party’s Split on Economics](#),” *New York Times*, August 7, 2023.

Week 7 | March 6 | Race and conservatism

Rogers M. Smith and Desmond King, [*America's New Racial Battle Lines: Protect versus Repair*](#) (University of Chicago Press, 2024), 3–66, 69–150. Recommended: 280–98.

Recommended: Dan T. Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963–1994* (Louisiana State University Press, 1996).

Week 8 | March 13 | Status and conservatism

Daniel Bell, “The Dispossessed,” in *The Radical Right*, ed. Daniel Bell (Doubleday, 1963), 1–38.

Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” *Harper's Magazine* (November 1964), pp. 77–86.

Joseph R. Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade* (University of Illinois Press, [1963] 1986), 1–24. Recommended: 166–88.

Arlie Russell Hochschild, [*Strangers in Their Own Land*](#) (New Press, 2016), 3–23, 135–51.

Arlie Russell Hochschild, [*Stolen Pride: Loss, Shame, and the Rise of the Right*](#) (New Press, 2024), 178–208.

Recommended: Elaine Godfrey, “[‘Stop the Steal’ Is a Metaphor](#)” (interview with Theda Skocpol), *The Atlantic*, Aug. 12, 2022.

Week 9 | March 20 | Religion and conservatism

Levi Allen, “Religion and Conservative Politics,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Politics and Religion in Contemporary America*, ed. Jeffrey Haynes (Routledge, 2024), 249–63.

Himmelstein, “The Rise of the New Religious Right,” in [*To the Right*](#), 97–128.

Andrew L. Whitehead, Samuel L. Perry, and Joseph O. Baker, “Make America Christian Again: Christian Nationalism and Voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election,” *Sociology of Religion* 79, no. 2 (2018): 147–71.

Philip Gorski, “Why Evangelicals Voted for Trump: A Critical Cultural Sociology,” *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 5, no. 3 (2017): 338–54.

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Week 10 | April 3 | Gender and conservatism

Response paper due

Leslie McCall and Ann Shola Orloff, “The Multidimensional Politics of Inequality,” *British Journal of Sociology* 68, S1 (2017): S34–S56.

Myra Marx Ferree, “The Crisis of Masculinity for Gendered Democracies: Before, During and After Trump,” *Sociological Forum* (May 2020): 1–20.

Week 11 | April 10 | The role of institutions: think tanks, law, media

Jason M. Stahl, [*Right Moves: The Conservative Think Tank in American Political Culture since 1945*](#) (University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 1–6, 47–95, 198–201.

Steven M. Teles, [*The Rise of the Conservative Legal Movement*](#) (Princeton University Press, 2008), 1–21, 265–81.

Nicole Hemmer, [*Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics*](#) (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), ix–xvi, 252–76.

Recommended:

Jennifer Medina, “[G.O.P. Contenders Feed Voter Distrust in Courts, Schools and Military](#),” *New York Times*, Aug. 7, 2023.

Stephen E. Hanson and Jeffrey S. Kopstein, *The Assault on the State: How the Global Attack on Modern Government Endangers Our Future* (Polity, 2024), 1–43, 129–35.

Week 12 | April 17 | Wisconsin: A case study

Prospectus for term paper due

Lewis A. Friedland, "Laboratory of Oligarchy," in [*Education for Democracy: Renewing the Wisconsin Idea*](#), ed. Chad Alan Goldberg (University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), 225–54.
Katherine J. Cramer, [*The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*](#) (University of Chicago Press, 2016), 1–25, 45–89, 164–67. Recommended: 184–206.
Chad Alan Goldberg and Masoud Movahed, "The New Class and Right-Wing Populism: The Case of Wisconsin," *Sociological Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2024): 105–125.

Recommended: Paul Krugman, "[Can Anything Be Done to Assuage Rural Rage?](#)" *New York Times*, Jan. 26, 2023.

Week 13 | April 24 | Partisans and the Tea Party

Nicole Hemmer, *Partisans: The Conservative Revolutionaries Who Remade American Politics in the 1990s* (Basic Books, 2022), 1–14, 67–92, 187–208, 209–229, 298–301.
Vanessa Williamson, Theda Skocpol, and John Coggin, "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism," *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 1 (Mar. 2011): 25–43.

Recommended:

Jonathan Rauch, "[The Strange History of American Conservatism](#)," *New York Times*, April 19, 2022.
Kim Phillips-Fein, "[Want to Understand the Right? Look to the 1990s](#)," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 24, 2024.
Theda Skocpol, "[Why the Tea Party Isn't Going Anywhere](#)," *The Atlantic*, December 26, 2013.

Week 14 | May 1 | The alt-right and Trumpism

George Hawley, [*Making Sense of the Alt-Right*](#) (Columbia University Press, 2017), 1–9, 91–114.
Thomas J. Main, [*The Rise of the Alt-Right*](#) (Brookings Institution, 2018), 3–10, 33–35, 82–84. The rest of chapter 3 is recommended.
Thomas J. Main, [*The Rise of Illiberalism*](#) (Brookings Institution Press, 2022), 1–5.
Masoud Movahed and Chad Alan Goldberg, "Working-Class Revolt, Political Alienation, or Status Threat? Explaining the Rise of Right-Wing Populism in the US" (article ms. under review).

Recommended:

Peter Kivisto, [*The Trump Phenomenon*](#) (Emerald, 2017).
Dylan Riley, "What is Trump?" *New Left Review* 114 (November-December 2018): 5–31.
Jack Thompson and George Hawley, "Does the Alt-Right Still Matter? An Examination of Alt-Right Influence between 2016 and 2018," *Nations and Nationalism* 27, no. 4 (Oct. 2021): 1165–1180.
University of Chicago Project on Security and Threats (CPOST), *American Face of Insurrection: Analysis of Individuals Charged for Storming the US Capitol on January 6, 2021* (January 5, 2022).
US House of Representatives Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol, *Final Report of the Select Committee*, December 22, 2022.
Chad Alan Goldberg, "Eros and Trumpism: A Marcusean Interpretation," *American Imago: Psychoanalysis and the Human Sciences* 79, no. 4 (Winter 2022): 705–730.
Julian E. Zelizer, ed., *The Presidency of Donald J. Trump: A First Historical Assessment* (Princeton University Press, 2022).
Mark Denbeaux and Donna Crawley, *The January 6 Insurrectionists: Who They Are and What They Did* (Seton Hall University School of Law Center for Policy and Research, August 7, 2023).

Term paper due Sunday, May 4, 2025 at 11:59 pm.

Deadline for instructors to submit final grades is Monday, May 12, 2025.