

Contemporary Issues and Politics Focus Questions for Unit 1

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- *Please note: Some of the readings for this course change each time it is taught, and I typically make some edits to this document as the unit progresses. A final version of the guide will be available at least one week before our exam. **Any items added or significantly altered after this guide was first posted are noted with bold formatting.***
- Please make sure to review the handouts I have put together on writing and citation expectations before you submit an essay in this class. Because these are assigned materials, I sometimes cover them in the first exam: What is a “thesis statement,” and what purpose does this critical sentence serve in launching an effective “analytical” essay? What are “topic sentences,” and what specific things should an effective topic sentence do to help the reader follow the logic of your paper’s main argument? Why are topic sentences so important to develop an essay that is logical and easy to follow? When is citation required (i.e., not just with direct quotes)? Why do social scientists need to put page-specific citations in their written research? Why is it better to cite the readings than your professor? Even if these questions do not appear on your test, you will want to know their answers before you submit your first paper.
- What is “political science”? What makes something “political”? What are the main sources of what we know about politics, and how does political science differ from other ways we can learn about politics? What are some of the important things that political scientists “know” that the typical American doesn’t? (Here, you might think about the Gelman and Azari article on the 2016 election). What are some examples covered in class where the empirical data on important political topics differ strongly from what politicians on both sides have been telling their voters?
- What specific qualities does the study of political phenomenon have to have to be considered “scientific” (carefully read through Danzinger’s notes on what science is as well as what the scientific method entails)? What advantages, especially over the long term, come from studying politics scientifically and being open to revising your views based on an unbiased, rigorous review of carefully collected evidence?
- Can you still be personally very political and still be a very good political scientist? (Yes, and you obviously don’t need to agree with your instructor to be a good political scientist or analyst!). How can thinking like a political scientist help you to be more effective in understanding and advocating for your personal political views? Why aren’t most well-informed political commentators scientific even when they use compelling empirical evidence and logic to support every one of their points? Why is it worthwhile to read high-quality journalism that approaches the same topic from different angles?
- Are there any disadvantages to considering only “scientific” findings to be worth considering? Why do some political scientists—see Danzinger—believe that trying to be too scientific in political science sometimes causes political scientists to overlook and misunderstand important political phenomena?
- Gelman and Azari suggest that the 2016 election had some important lessons for political scientists. What are some of these lessons, and how are that election’s lessons for political scientists different from what a political commentator might care about?
- What is political anger, and what are some of the ways political scientists try to measure it both today and over time? (Pay close attention to Webster’s chapter on this issue, but see also the various articles you were assigned to see how other political scientists are trying to “operationalize” the “concept” of anger).
- Why was Martin Luther King told by many other pastors and politicians who shared his desire to increase racial equality that he should move slowly and seek to diffuse anger both among his followers and groups hostile to integration? What was King’s response? What purpose does he see for anger in American society? When is anger appropriate? When it is necessary? What form must anger take to be justified according to King? (Think a lot about this last question and be able to tackle a question about whether today’s anger is consistent with what King called for).
- Are the major concerns over anger and “incivility” in political life anything new in the US? Why did the Founders think that Americans would always be divided into political “factions,” and what solutions to “excessive democracy” did they defend in the Federalist Papers? What assumptions about the behavior and motivations of everyday people and political anger did the key Founders (i.e., especially Madison and Hamilton) share with their intellectual predecessors Thomas Hobbes and John Locke? In what critical way, did the Founders’ ideas about containing and diffusing anger differ from Locke and especially Hobbes)
- Is there any evidence to suggest that other periods in American history after the Founding era and Civil War have been marked by severe political discord? Why might the contemporary period be uniquely angry? What specifically is going on that might make the historical pattern of ebbing and flowing waves “creedal passion” give way to constant anger today?

- What are the main ideologies that have motivated Anger in American society, per Paul Starobin? (He emphasizes three; in class, we'll talk about another: libertarianism)? What useful outcomes have these anger bases produced over time? What does Starobin think that all of these types of anger have been helpful to some degree and recurring in the US over time? (Some of these are issues we will talk about later on when discussing the ideological bases of America's political parties).
- What are some of the specific problems that political anger and incivility causing for contemporary American politics? (i.e., Make a list from your different readings). How is it influencing who runs for office? How is it shaping what kinds of issues shape politics? How is it influencing the ability of America's political system to deliberate, reach consensus, and get things done? How is it shaping views about the role of political violence in politics?
- What specifically are "we" angry about (take a close look at the readings from Drutman, Webster, the Pew Foundation, and the Esquire-NBC News survey)? While many Americans say that politics in general is making us angry, who is angry about what? How do levels of anger differ across major demographic groups (i.e., gender, age, and race), and to what degree does the level of anger reflect (or not) differences in opportunity in the US? What issues make different groups most angry, and what issues seem to anger pretty much all of us?
- While some activists (e.g. ML King) see intense, widespread civil disobedience to political norms and institutions as justified and useful under some circumstances, many social scientists (e.g., Maisel and Webster) are concerned that things have gotten out of hand recently. Why does the recent political resistance related to the 2020 election results and pandemic-related mandates align or deviate from the kind of disobedience Dr. King recommended?
- Conversely, drawing from Martin Luther King's careful discussion of political resistance in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail as well as arguments laid out by Shea & Sproveri as well as Paul Starobin, under what circumstances does intense political disagreement appear to most help American society to address important issues? When might it be harmful (you may want to take the readings on political polarization into account here, too)?
- What are "political ideologies"? What are the core assumptions about the way the world works according to *classical* (not tree-hugging, gun-hating) liberals (see the first part of the Reiner chapter)? What are the basic assumptions of the main ideological competitors to classical liberalism: *traditional* (not the contemporary American brand) conservatism, socialism/communism, fascism, and nationalism/fundamentalism? (Using Lawson, be able to describe the distinguishing assumptions of each ideology in a sentence or so and carefully review the chart on page 78 that summarizes each theory vis-à-vis the others).
- In what sense are almost all Americans classic "liberals," and how does our country's dominant ideological tradition differ from that of most European democracies? What are the main differences between American liberals and American conservatives, and to what extent do the former draw inspiration from European socialism while the latter draws very minimally from classical conservatism? Thinking back to the article you read by Paul Starobin, how much are these two ideologies distinct from the other major belief systems that are deeply rooted in US political culture (populism and libertarianism)?
- To what extent are today's Democratic and Republican parties ideologically pure representatives of American liberalism and conservatism, respectively (you may find it helpful to think about the Pew Foundation's political typology)? What are some of the major divisions within (i.e., not between) the American versions of conservatism and liberalism (see Pew's typology reading)?
- What percentage of the people making up the conservative base of American politics are the "Faith and Flag Conservatives" that the media, liberals, and many Republicans cite as the "typical" Republican? What percentage of Democrats are part of the Progressive Left that many Republicans see as being representative of the typical Democrat? What percentage of Americans as a whole fall is extremely conservative or liberal, and how are the strongest voices in both parties quite distinct from their fellow partisans and Americans as a whole? Why do the most liberal and most conservative wings of American politics have more influence within their party than their numbers suggest would be the case?
- Based on your reading of recent survey data from the Pew Foundation, how much difference is there between America's two main parties? What major splits are there in the demographic groups that form the core base of support for each party? Looking at ideological splits and policy preferences, what, exactly, do America's main parties disagree about concerning the role of government? Which social and economic policies do they prefer? How do they differ concerning their views about voting and the value of teaching young Americans about historical practices of racism and its connections to racial disparities now? Are there any major issue areas where the parties' preferences largely overlap?
- What evidence is there to suggest that America's political parties are more polarized than they used to be? What evidence is there to suggest—see Perry Bacon's article—that Americans are defining themselves and choosing how to live based on their political identities? How partisan division is typically measured? (Here, make sure that you know how we measure political division in the electorate and the Congress, which you can

see in the last two Pew readings/chart sets on this topic)? What are the main causes of this polarization, and to what extent is polarization here to stay over the long run? Is political polarization more acute among politicians or everyday Americans? What evidence is there to suggest that American conservatives and liberals increasingly live different social lives?

- What are the major tradeoffs that a democracy like the US or Britain has to consider when making the big institutional choices about how to structure its government? Here, think about the relative importance of: being quickly responsive to voters, representing the will of the majority, making sure that voters have an equal influence on government wherever they live, protecting political minorities, limiting the size and scope of government, making sure that governmental action reflects careful deliberation and consensus, having clear rules the government must always follow, having a government that can respond to new issues over time, allowing states and communities a large amount of say in policies, making sure that every American is treated the same by the government now matter where they live, making sure that some aspects of government are not overly influenced by what the people want at any specific moment in time. In short, be aware that there are lots of choices a democracy must make when deciding what aspects of democracy it will emphasize when designing its governmental and electoral systems.
- What are the main institutional features of America's democracy, and how distinct are they when compared to the governmental, electoral, and party systems found in other advanced democracies? Why did America make the specific institutional choices it made at its founding, emphasizing: republicanism with indirect elections for the Senate, judiciary, and presidency; federalism (strong state governments), enumerated Constitutional powers and specific liberties, having both separation of powers and checks and balances among multiple branches of government, and having a dual chamber Congress and separate executive.
- Following from the last question, why did the Founders (see Federalist 10 and 51) think that this system of government would work? Why didn't they think that everyday people should have more of a say in everyday policymaking?
- How have key developments not envisioned by the Founders (among them, the emergence of polarized national political parties, judicial review by the Supreme Court, presidents becoming directly involved in passing laws, direct elections for the Senate and President, an explosion in the use of the filibusters, and extreme gerrymandering in House elections by both parties) undermined the ability of the Constitution to foster the type of compromise, careful deliberation, limited federal government reach, and focus on the common good of all Americans the Founders envisioned?
- How and why is it possible for certain, relatively small interests to block the will of the political majority in the US? What are the main shortcomings of America's national political system in this regard? Looking elsewhere, as Matthew Iglesias does, what is the track record of American-style democracy in other countries, and what typically happens when this type of system no longer functions well enough to solve a nation's biggest problems?
- Why do some legal scholars and political scientists believe that many parts of our Constitution are undemocratic by today's standards? Be able to identify and explain the specific issues identified by Levinson and other scholars.
- Why is it possible in the US for candidates to win the presidency even if s/he receives fewer votes than another candidate? How is it that the party that has received fewer votes for its Senate or House candidates as a whole, has nevertheless sometimes controlled the majority in one or both houses of Congress? How does "gerrymandering" work to distort voter representation in the US House (the Senate doesn't have gerrymandering because the whole state is the district), and what are the major drawbacks to gerrymandering? What sociodemographic and political groups are over-represented in the Senate? What are some of the solutions that have been suggested to better align parties' vote shares with their level of support in the electorate?
- What are some of the main proposals out there for fixing the structural problems in the American political system (for example, adoption of a parliamentary system that uses proportional-representation elections or starting to use multi-member Congressional districts as proposed by FairVote)? What is ranked voting, and what advantage does it have over a winner-take-all voting system? How would ranked voting work in a primary, for example?