The Ends of Democracy

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Numerous bestsellers have discussed the declining health of democracy. Organizations such as Freedom House have documented the international decline after decades of advances. One of the few points Republicans and Democrats can agree on is that our politics have become more negative and less concerned with the facts, as detailed in this Pew Research survey (6/19/19). We will step back from the barrage of ads and campaign commentary to reflect on the ends of democracy in the dual sense of where our democracy could end and what ends we hope democracy can achieve. This course outline is a first draft based on the campaigns up to July. The readings will change to address the issues that come up as the campaign unfolds.

While the campaign is unlike any we have seen, you can expect that we will follow this basic course structure. In the first three classes, we will review the campaign up to our class start and the profiles of the candidates. In the fourth and fifth classes (before and after the election), we will examine the polls and election results against research on how we think about partisan issues. We will conclude the class by reflecting on the implications of the election for the major challenges facing our democracy—particularly the global problems that are likely to impact the generations who are coming of age in a moment that some have compared to the Great Depression. Throughout our class, we will do our collective best to speak respectfully of opposing views and candidates. To provide a space for diverse views, we will do an anonymous survey to see where people are on the issues, and each two-hour class will be followed by an optional half-hour discussion. We will also use the sidebar chat discussion feature in Zoom.

No book encompasses the varied issues we will address, so I suggest you consider if any of these books connect with your interests. I have listed links to other readings so that you can read the publicly accessible ones ahead of time. In September I will send out a revision of the syllabus and a link to a folder with copies of the copyrighted book chapters, and also the online articles so you do not have to click through the ads and pop-ups.

- Our Time Is Now: Power, Purpose, and the Fight for a Fair America (2020) by Stacy Abrams provides a progressive African-American viewpoint, as detailed in this excerpt.
- *Trumpocracy: The Corruption of the American Republic* (2018) is by Republican supporter David Frum who is critical of Democrats as well as the President. The first chapter is also online.
- *Trump and the American Future: Solving the Problems of Our Time* (2020) by Newt Gingrich argues for President Trump's agenda.
- *How Democracy Ends* (2018) by David Runciman is one of the best of the many accounts of the decline of democracy.
- The Last Republicans (2017) by Robert Updegrove provides an account of the virtues of George W. and George H.W. Bush.

1. The ends of democracy (10/5): To set up our focus on the threats to and purposes of democracy, we will consider international declines in support for individual rights, the rule of law, equal opportunity, and fair elections. We will then assess how those challenges are being addressed in campaign ads, nomination speeches, and party platforms. On these and other points, we will shift back and forth between the pragmatics of the campaign and the historic challenges we face. To help with that dual focus, we will discuss your responses to a short anonymous survey of your political views. We will also take note of reliable polls and related commentary on polling.

- "The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy" by William Gaston, *Journal of Democracy* (4/17/18)
- Excerpts from nomination speeches and party platforms , including Barak Obama's 2004 convention speech, which made the freshman Senator a national figure, and Ronald Reagan's acceptance speech at the RNC in 1980.
- "Is This Really How It Ends? Democracy's Midlife Crisis," Jan-Werner Müller, *The Nation* (4/29/19)
- A couple of articles reviewing the campaign and conventions to be selected later

2. Who supports Trump? (10/12): We will take note of the President's impact and [approval ratings](). Throughout his term, Trump has retained the unwavering support of over 80% of Republicans despite his impeachment, the pandemic, and daily attacks from the "mainstream media," which he characterizes as "fake news." We will examine [liberal and conservative media biases]() as part of our discussion of "post-truth" politics. Many critics have identified the President's disregard for the truth with his populist rejections of scientific research, foreign policy expertise, and other aspects of the "deep state." Trump has promoted these attitudes with direct appeals to his supporters in twenty or more daily Tweets. In these and other ways, President Trump has been highly effective at dominating the flow of news. More people now get their news from social media than print. These trends have made the mediation of the news into [a global concern]().

- "[Why the Media Love Presidents and Presidents Hate the Media]()," Michael Nelson, *VQR* (Spring/10)
- "[Conservatives see a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity in Trump]()," Merrill Brown, CNN Opinion (2/15/20)
- "[Why Anger at Trump May Not Help Democrats Win,]()" Matt Grossmann, FiveThirtyEight (5/19/20)
- "[Post-truth politics and why the antidote isn't simply 'fact-checking']()" John Keane, *The Conversation* (3/22/18)
- [A tally of Trump's social conservative achievements]() is provided by this Family Research Council.

3. Is anyone really excited about Biden? (10/19): [The excitement gap in Biden's candidacy may be decisive.]() Polls have found that 70% of Trump voters support him and his policies, while about 60% of those who support Biden do so to oppose Trump. We will follow up on this point to consider whether Biden can rebuild white working-class support for Democrats. That discussion will lead into a review of the two parties' demographical coalitions, Trump's dominance of the GOP, and progressive's influence on Democrats. This polarization has intensified with identity politics that focus less on issues than group identifications that require people to give up who they are to change their positions. This tribalism strengthens resistance to factual evidence and compromises on solutions-oriented approaches.
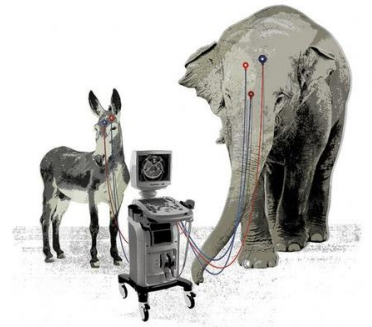
- "[Unconscious Reactions Separate Liberals and Conservatives]()**,**" Emily Laber-Warren, *Scientific American* (9/1/12)
- "[Don't believe the polls: Trump's populist presidency may carry him to victory in 2020,]()" Joshua Sandman, *The Hill* (6/20/20.
- "[Progressives thought they'd overtaken the Democratic Party. Now they are in despair.]()" Alex Thompson *Politico* (5/18/20)
- "[Has the Democratic Party a Future?]()" Thomas Mott Osborne, *The Atlantic* (May 1908)
- We will look at some of the more substantive polls and related analyses, likely from [Pew Research Center]().

4. Why can't people be reasonable about politics? (10/26): Many of us tend to look to confirm our political views rather than listen to opposing arguments. This tendency is reinforced by search algorithms that give us what we look for on the internet and by partisan mindset that has intensified with the polarization of our major parties. We will discuss how these tendencies have compounded our anxieties over the complexities of public issues, including the global pandemic. As with problems such as climate change, partisan differences are reinforced by [populist distrust of experts](). To reflect on these trends, we will take the [Common Ground's self-assessment]() of how we perceive opposing views.

- "[The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider]()," Pew Research Center (10/5/17)
- "[Partisan Differences on the Pandemic Response are Growing]()," Pew Research Center (6/2/20)
- "[Unconscious Reactions Separate Liberals & Conservatives,]()" Emily Laber-Warren, *Scientific American* (9/1/12)
- "[How Politics Breaks Our Brains,]()" Brian Resnick et al., *The Atlantic* (9/24/14)
- "[What Makes People Vote Republican?]()" Jonathan Haidt, *Edge* (9/8/08)
- "[Why Won't They Listen?]()" William Saletan, *New York Times* (3/23/12)

5. Why don't people vote their self-interests? (11/2): Following up on the prior class, we will discuss how people are often less motivated by policies issues and more motivated by their identifications with their identity groups. We will use this frame to discuss the polls and key moments in the campaign in our last class before the election. We will also use this frame to connect with the overall focus on democracy by noting that republicans from Aristotle to James Madison assumed that democracy would lead to mob rule because the common people would demand that property be redistributed. This view is interestingly at odds with the alignment of the white working class with a billionaire real estate magnate who did not have a history of addressing working-class concerns when elected.

- Readings will be selected to address the final phase of the campaign.

6. How was the election decided? (11/9): We will use this class to analyze the election results. We will do a rhetorical analysis of key ads, speeches, and themes against the demographics of how people voted to explore how the results were shaped by how people consume news, the impact of money on campaigns, and the impact of the pandemic, impeachment hearings, economy, international events, and other factors that may emerge in the campaign.

- Readings will be selected to address the outcome of the election.

7. Given the election debates, how can we hope to solve the historic challenges we face? (11/16)

The Hidden Tribes is a profile of our divided country that will provide us with a chance to reflect on what happens when debates about immigration, globalization, climate change, and income inequality become shaped by "tribal identities." We will use the report to bridge familiar partisan divides and explore potential coalitions that could be mobilized to address the blockbuster issues of our times—the issues we have been unable to bust through the blocks to address.

- *[The Hidden Tribes: A Study in America's Polarized Landscape](#)*, Stephen Hawkins, Daniel Yudkin, Míriam Juan-Torres, and Tim Dixon, 2018.

More in Common's efforts to seek compromise have been criticized from [the left](#) and [right](#). I consulted [their self-assessment tool](#) in creating the anonymous survey that you will be asked to complete to provide us with a profile of our class's political views. We will also note the findings of their survey of [attitudes to the pandemic](#).

According to the surveys and analyses in *Hidden Tribes,* the US population includes

- *Progressive Activists (8* and *%): younger, highly engaged, secular, cosmopolitan, angry.*
- *Traditional Liberals (11%): older, retired, open to compromise, rational, cautious.*
- *Passive Liberals (15%): unhappy, insecure, distrustful, disillusioned.*
- *Politically Disengaged (26%): young, low income, distrustful, detached, patriotic, conspiratorial.*
- *Moderates (15%): engaged, civic-minded, middle-of-the-road, pessimistic, Protestant.*
- *Traditional Conservatives (19%): religious, middle class, patriotic, moralistic.*
- *Devoted Conservatives (6%): white, retired, highly engaged, uncompromising, patriotic.*

8. Coming of Age in a Pandemic (11/23): We will conclude by reviewing the election from the perspective of Gen Z (those born since 1996), who are projected to make up 10% of electorate. Gen Z are graduating and commencing their independent lives at a moment that is economic, racial, international, and climate problems. We will explore their perspectives on those issues to consider how globalism and globalization have evoked the anxieties that shape our politics and the ways we can work to develop a more equitable and effective democracy.

- "[Facing Adulthood with an Economic Disaster's Lasting Scars](#)," Eduardo Porter and David Yaffe-Bellany, *New York Times* (5/20/20).
- "[How 2020 is Impacting Gen Z's Worldview](#)," Morning Consult (a live database tracking 1000 Gen Z responses)
- "[On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: What We Know About Gen Z So Far](#)," *Pew* (5/14/20)
- "[Ill Fares the Land,](#)" Tony Judt, *New York Review of Books* (2010)
- "[The Future of Democracy,](#)" *The New Yorker* (We will draw on this ongoing series of election-related articles.)