Course Description:

Racial politics is one of United States’ most enduring issues. With a history that is rooted in slavery and then the Civil War, race relations have never been entirely “normalized” despite the tremendous progress of the past two generations. Well-publicized public opinion surveys provided ample evidence of the racial divide in the early 21st century. For example, racially divergent assessments of the fairness and legitimacy of law enforcement and the judicial system routinely produce polls showing that African Americans are much more likely to believe that a black suspect is innocent, while whites are more likely to believe he or she is guilty. Barack Obama’s presidency has raised many more questions about race and politics, prompting some to note an “end to black politics” while others argue that race is still very central to American politics. Donald Trump’s presidential campaign indicated that the racial and ethnic divide is alive and well. Appeals to “build the wall,” deport millions of Mexican Americans, keep Muslims out of the country, and references to “inner city people” stealing elections have deepened racial divisions.

This course examines the sources and policy implications of the racial divide by analyzing a range of issues. We will examine the historical background of race relations and the current policy debates, with a focus on trying to find common-ground solutions. We will examine issues such as affirmative action in the workplace and in higher education, the use of black majority districts as a tool of enhancing the representation of minority interests in Congress, differences in public opinion between white and black respondents, and issues concerning multi-racial and ethnic tensions. The goal of this seminar is to stimulate critical thinking on this important issue and get you think about race and politics in new ways.

Course Evaluation:

The grades for the course will be based on seminar attendance and participation (25%), five short (2-page) reaction papers (5% each for 25%) a paper (25%), and a final exam (25%). The format of the exam will be short essays. All reading material and seminar discussions will be fair game on the exam. I will pass out a handout on the paper assignment in a few weeks. Briefly, it will be a 10-12 page paper on a topic that interests you from the seminar. The class participation grade will be based on the following expectations:

1. That you will attend each seminar.
2. That you read the assigned readings before coming to seminar. I expect a critical reading of the material. You certainly will not agree with everything you are presented with in this class – indeed, I always try to present contrasting points of view on every topic.
3. That you come to class prepared to make a meaningful contribution to seminar discussion.
4. Each of you will be responsible for one class presentation of five minutes in length that will highlight a current event that is relevant for the topic we are discussing that week (if you can’t find something on the specific topic, something generally related to race and politics would be fine).

The reaction papers should be critiques rather than summaries of the readings for that week. You will not be able to discuss all of the issues raised in a given week’s readings, so pick three or four topics for each two-page paper. Challenge a claim made by an author, question their use of evidence, integrate and
synthesize the various arguments presented by the authors and show how they relate to one another. These papers are good preparation for the seminar discussion, because this is the type of critical discussion we will be engaging in.

**Seminar Schedule and Reading Assignments (readings are available on the course Moodle site):**

**Part 1 – The Context of Race and Politics**

January 23 – Identity, Discrimination, and Privilege

We begin the examination of race and politics with some basic questions concerning racial identity. To what extent are racial categories objective and to what extent are they historically and socially contingent?

*Introduction in* *Whitewashing Race: The Myth of a Colorblind Society.*

Hua Hsu, ”The End of White America,” *The Atlantic,* January/February, 2009.


D’Vera Cohn, ”Census Considering a New Approach to Race, By Not Using the Term At All,” Pew Research Center, June 18, 2015.


January 30 – Historical background and the law

This discussion will focus on the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, different techniques used in the South to disenfranchise blacks, civil rights legislation aimed at reversing those restrictions, the idea of the “melting pot,” and the current status of racial classification in the law (with a focus on racial redistricting).


Abraham Lincoln, ”The Perpetuation of our Political Institutions.”

Martin Luther King, Jr., ”Letter from the Birmingham Jail.”


Chapter 1 in *Whitewashing Race: The Myth of a Colorblind Society.*


February 6 – Affirmative action and Racial Discrimination

What is the nature of racial discrimination today? Does affirmative action provide a necessary remedy for
past discrimination and help produce a path out of poverty? Or does affirmative action constitute unfair reverse discrimination while producing no real benefits for minorities, as Amy Wax argues? These questions continue to be debated on our nation’s campuses as affirmative action in college admissions has been upheld by the Supreme Court. There is also one short article that examines discrimination toward Arab Americans.

Racial Justice Project, Amicus brief in Fisher v. University of Texas, Austin, October, 2015.

Part 2 – Race and Politics at the Individual Level

February 13 – Public opinion and race

What is the nature of the racial divide in public opinion? Are racial minorities and whites divided on all issues, or just some subset of issues? How firmly entrenched are racist opinions among white? Can they be changed with new information? How did racial considerations playing a role in Obama’s 2008 campaign and how do perceptions of Obama influence one’s opinions on other issues? Is "color blindness" a legitimate ideal, or does it ignore the problem of racial bias?

Sasha Issenberg, “It All Comes Down to Race,” Slate.com, June 1, 2012.

February 20 – Elections, political parties, and race

This seminar will examine the racial divide in public opinion discussed in the previous week and examine how these differences play out in partisan politics. We will examine the basic contours of the
racial divide in electoral politics, whether the Democratic party is an adequate vehicle for representing racial interests, the prevalence of racism, and various issues concerning race and the 2016 presidential election.

Eliza Newlin Carney, “Is This the Year of the Latino Voter?” July 5, 2016, American Prospect.

Part 3 – Race and Politics in Institutions

February 27 – Black majority districts and Representation in Congress

The black-majority districts that were created in 1992 to provide more representation for African Americans in Congress have come under attack. In a series of cases starting in 1993 with Shaw v. Reno, the Supreme Court has questioned the constitutionality of these districts, arguing that race cannot be the predominant factor in their creation. What determines the type of racial representation that will be provided in black majority districts? I argue that both sides of the debate on this topic are using the same stereotype – that black politicians only represent black constituents – while reaching different normative conclusions about the value of that type of representation. Both sides of the debate are wrong: a careful assessment of the nature of representation in these districts shows that most black House members represent their entire district, not just the African American voters. Carol Swain present an alternative view on the impact of black-majority districts on racial representation. Shotts and Lublin debate their impact on conservative policy outcomes in Congress. We also will examine issues concerning the 2006 reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act and related Supreme Court case.

Chapters 4 and 5 in Race, Redistricting, and Representation.
March 6 – The Obama Presidency

The election of Barack Obama as president in 2008 was a historical moment. But what does it mean for race and politics in the U.S.? An end to black politics, as Matt Bai suggests? How did Obama fare in attempting to pursue various racial issues while not alienating whites? What is the critique of Obama from the left?


March 13 – Voting Rights

Changes in the laws concerning the administration of elections has become an area of partisan battles. To what extent have these “voting wars” limited the ability of people to vote? Are these laws a legitimate concern with voter fraud, or attempts at voter supression? What is the racial motivation of these efforts?

Heritage Foundation, ”Does Your Vote Count?”, 2016.
Nico Lang, ” The real reason black voters didn’t turn out for Hillary Clinton — and how to fix it,” Salon.com, November 10, 2016.
Alice Mirarda Ollstein, ”Republicans were wildly successful at supressing voters in 2016,” Think Progress, November 15, 2016.
Alice Mirarda Ollstein, ”More than 1.5 Million Florida Voters will be Missing from Tuesday’s Primary,” Think Progress, March 14, 2016.

No class on March 20 — have a great spring break!

Part 4 – Race and Politics in Policy

March 27 – Immigration and Latino Politics

Immigration reform has been one of the hot issues of the past several years (and figured prominently in the 2016 presidential election). From the perspective of broader issues of race and politics, the issue raises some of the fundamental questions addressed in the class concerning discrimination and racial identity. It also raises difficult issues of cross-racial coalitions and tensions. We will discuss President Obama’s plan for comprehensive immigration reform, which was not taken up by the
U.S. House and President Trump’s plan.

Tal Kopan, ”What the immigration battle could look like under Trump,” CNN.com, December 27, 2016.

April 3 – Family, Poverty, and Health

Some of the most complicated questions concerning race are tied up in questions of poverty and health outcomes. To what extent are the problems faced by racial minorities due to discrimination and structural obstacles and to what extent should responsibility be placed on individuals?

Ta-Nehisi Coates, ”The Enduring Solidarity of Whiteness,” The Atlantic, February 8, 2016.

April 10 – Residential Segregation, Housing Discrimination

Most American cities are still very segregated by race. Is this because of discrimination, or personal choice? What implications does segregation have for larger questions of race relations?

April 17 – Crime and policing

Racial disparities in policing have received a great deal of attention in the law few years with the high-profile killing of unarmed black men by police and protests from the Black Lives Matter movement. What are the structural and social bases for these patterns? What impact does the jury system have on racial bias in criminal justice?


April 24 – Education policy and segregation in schools

Racial politics has shifted from a politics of confrontation (as in the 1960s) to a politics of avoidance (simply moving apart). This has been evident in residential segregation but also in public education. What implications does this have for the quality of education in the inner cities? The other central debate concerns the racial gap in academic achievement and how best to address it. Are KIPP schools part of the answer?

May 1 – Various Issues and Concluding Thoughts

Our last seminar will go back to some of the big questions that we started with. Are color-blind policies possible or desirable? How can the problems of race best be addressed by the political system and by our society? What do you think of Barack Obama’s “more perfect Union”? What are new research questions concerning race that political science should be engaged in?

Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at Howard University Commencement Ceremony Howard University,” May 07, 2016.

*** FINAL EXAM, Location, day, and time TBA ***