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History 204-302: Conservatism From Taft to Trump

The early 1950s may have been the nadir for modern American conservatism. Conservative hero Robert Taft had lost the Republican nomination for President to a more moderate candidate for the third time, many in the Republican Party had moved to accept some of the most popular New Deal programs, and a moderate, internationalist consensus had taken hold in the country. Yet, from these ashes, conservatism rose to become a potent political force in the United States over the last half century. This seminar explores the contours of that rise, beginning with infrastructure laid and coalitions forged in the 1950s. We will see how conservatives built upon this infrastructure to overcome Barry Goldwater's crushing 1964 defeat to elect one of their own, Ronald Reagan, president in 1980. Reagan's presidency transformed the public philosophy and helped shape subsequent American political development. Our study of conservatism will also include the struggles that conservatives confronted in trying to enact their ideas into public policy, and the repercussions of those struggles.

We will explore conservatism's triumphs and failures politically, as well as the cultural changes that have helped, hindered, and shaped its rise. In many ways, this class is a study in the transformation of American politics and in American culture over the last sixty-five years. Its focus is on the hows and the whys of the rise of conservatism from the low point of the early 50s to the rise of the Tea Party and Trumpism in the 2000s and 2010s. In many places, we will discover a surprisingly complex story. This complexity means that we must grapple with clashing interpretations as to why and how conservatism developed, and why conservatism appealed to many Americans at various points in time.

The seminar will be oriented chronologically to the degree that it is possible, spending several weeks on each decade between the 1950s and the 2000s, Yet, we will also focus on several themes and relationships throughout the class. These include the role played

by certain pivotal political figures, the ideas that propelled conservatism and bound the conservative movement together, the relationship between conservatives and the Republican Party, and the tensions within the diverse Reagan coalition (which have spilled over with increasing regularity, especially during the 2016 presidential campaign). We will ask critical and often difficult questions involving topics such as the role of racism and bigotry in the rise of conservatism. We will also consider the big picture— is the United States really any more conservative in 2016 than it was in 1950? If not, why do many consider conservatism to have risen politically? At the end of the semester we will ponder whether some of the current conservative divisions are new, or continuations of fissures that have long existed.

Methodology:

This course will offer students an opportunity to interact with all of tools in a historian's toolbox. We will use primary sources, including video clips, and a variety of scholarly secondary sources, including biography, works with spatial analysis, journalistic narratives, and works by historically minded political scientists. We will evaluate the claims made by scholars and attempt to make sense of some of their conflicting conclusions. Students will also have an attempt to conduct historical research on a topic of their choosing.

Grading Breakdown:

Participation, Activities, & Short Responses: 40%

Research Paper/Project: 60%

Class Participation/Activities: The quality of the class discussion in a seminar truly defines how educational and interesting the class is. Reflecting that importance, participation is worth forty percent of your class grade.

We have an opportunity to learn from one another and to push ourselves to think about the material in new and innovative ways. Students are always encouraged to share thoughts—**there is no stupid idea or question.** This is the portion of your grade over which you have total control—**a student who comes to class each week and says**

nothing all semester will receive a C for class participation. Students who are active participants each week will do well.

Do not feel as though you need to say something about each topic. Participation grades will **not** reflect quantity of participation alone. Quality matters as well. A student who makes three really tremendous points per class may do as well as a student who makes ten comments. But when you have a thought, share it. Also do not hesitate to push each other. As long as interaction is respectful, some of the best classroom discussions come when students question one another and we puzzle together over a topic.

Class will not always consist of one large group discussion; often the class will be split into smaller groups to ponder a question. There will also be a fair number of interactive group activities, exercises, or debates throughout the course of the semester. These will change things up, and provide a variety of ways to participate in the class. These activities may include plotting a museum exhibit or podcast on a relevant topic, researching or simulating a historical debate, or identifying popular culture forms that embody specific ideas or understandings.

Sometimes the instructor may ask the class to identify and explain the significance of a key term related to the class material. The objective of this exercise is not to play “gotcha” or to force students to memorize definitions. Rather, the goal will be to make sure that all members of the class are working from the same playbook, and to ensure that students are pulling key concepts from the readings and are comfortable working with these terms as we assess broader questions.

There may also be several short quizzes or writing assignments (as in 10-15 minutes or less), as well as several brief response assignments. Again, the goal is not to play “gotcha;” rather the goal is to help you to organize your thoughts and to make sure that everyone is coming away from the readings with the key points. These quizzes will be elements of your class participation grade. To a certain degree, whether or not there will be quizzes will be dependent on the quality of class discussion and whether it appears from discussion that everyone is gleaning the key arguments from the readings.

The instructor understands that some students are shy and have difficulty with public speaking. Such shyness, however, does not excuse students from their responsibility to participate in class. Rather, participation can come in many forms— e-mailing questions or thoughts about the readings to the instructor in advance of class, participating in class discussion using twitter (we will sometimes use hashtags and have twitter discussions), disseminating relevant articles and some brief commentary linking them to the class themes to the class or the instructor, participating in smaller group activities, etc.

If you are shy and looking for an alternative means of participating in the seminar, come speak with me **early in the semester** so that we can work out an arrangement. Too often students wait until the end of the semester to inform an instructor about such shyness, at which point it is too late to help the student salvage his/her participation grade. Students should also be aware that I like to ask follow up questions during discussions. This practice should not intimidate anyone. It’s merely an attempt to push

students to think critically about their views, as well as the course material. These questions do not reflect any judgment regarding your ideas, nor are they an attempt to intimidate students in any way.

One final note: class participation does not end when class ends. Students are encouraged and invited to circulate relevant materials that they may come across in the news, be they clips from the *Daily Show*, tweets, news stories, etc. While this is a history class, we will see themes that we discuss enter into the news, as well as continuations of trends that we're discussing and parallel developments.

Reading: As a seminar, this class will require more reading and a different type of reading than a lecture class on the same topic might require. Recognizing that students increasingly prefer to have a variety of different assignments (and less reading than has been traditional in seminars) some weeks we will employ an element of crowd sourcing in which students will do primary source research to go with a more limited amount of secondary reading.

Music: We will devote time in each class to listening to songs that relate to the period and topic that we are studying. Some weeks students will be asked to either come into class with a song that they think relates to the week's topic or to work in groups to select a song that exemplifies some theme or otherwise relates to our discussion.

Research Project: Students will complete one of two assignments:

Option 1: Write a research paper of no less than 4500 words and no more than 6000 words on some topic related to the class themes. Topics must be approved by the instructor either by email or in office hours no later than **March 14th**. Students must use a combination of primary and secondary sources and they must present an argument. **A fantastically written paper that is entirely summary and citations will earn no higher than a B+.** The idea is to present an argument on a topic of interest and to utilize research findings to support that argument. It behooves students to have a rough hypothesis as they start their research, but to be willing to adapt that hypothesis in accordance with what they find while researching. Students should make sure to have a clear thesis stated in the most specific terms possible before the end of the second page of their papers.

Appropriate citations are required, though the instructor does not care which citation style students use (i.e. Chicago Manual, APA, etc). I do not require students to use a minimum number of sources for the research paper. However, the research in the paper will be adjudicated along with the writing and the quality of the argument. Students must use a sufficient number of sources to adequately present and support their arguments. Failure to do so when there are readily available sources that would have improved the paper will factor into the grade.

Option 2: Increasingly, we are replacing written expression with multimedia alternatives. As such, I want to give those of you who are more inclined to be creative or who excel at video production, graphic design, web design, etc, a chance to do a more modern research project. For this option, the written component of the project can be negotiated with me individually, but as a general rule, it will be no shorter than 2500 words (and if it will be shorter than 4500 words, there will be additional components to the project—**this option is not a way to avoid a substantive project**). Instead of a traditional research paper, however, the final product might be a documentary, a website, a spin on the popular Comedy Central Drunk History series, a photo-essay, or a multi-media presentation. You might write a script for a podcast relating to your topic, you might record such a podcast, etc. **The standards and requirements for this second option remain the same as for option one. Your project MUST make an argument, and MUST reflect substantial and high quality research from a variety of primary and secondary sources. Additionally, all sources must be cited. Anyone who would like to select option two must meet with the instructor to have the format of their project approved before April 1st.**

Academic Integrity: It goes without saying that students are required to comply with the university's academic integrity policies. All violations of these regulations will be reported to the relevant authorities. **If you have any questions as to what compliance entails—whether regarding citations in written work, referencing your own prior work, collaborating with peers, etc—ask the instructor in advance of completing an assignment.** Erring on the side of caution never hurt anyone, and I'm happy to answer any questions you might have about my expectations. The only students who run into problems are those who choose not to ask questions.

Note on Materials: Given its subject matter, the class will often wade into uncomfortable territory. The instructor believes that a good history class challenges our preconceived notions and provides exposure to a broad array of cultural perspectives, values, and ideas. Nonetheless, I am cognizant that some of the movies, television episodes, music, and other material in the class might make some students uncomfortable, depending on a student's background and personal experiences. If you have a problem or concern about any of the materials in the class, please come and talk to me.

Tentative/Draft Schedule:

Week 1: Introduction & Exploration of the Conservative Coalition

Week 2: Business Finds Religion

Week 3: Goldwater

Week 4: Wallace/Racial Conservatism

Week 5: Republican Politics of the 60s and 70s

Animating Question: Why does conservatism win out within the Republican Party?

Week 6: Suburban Conservatism Emerges

Animating Question: Is racism at the core of Suburban conservatism?

Week 7: The 1970s: Opportunities Knock & Uprising From Grassroots America

Week 8: The Politics of Family/The Rise of Social & Cultural Conservatives

Week 9: New Ideas, Organizations, and Institutions

Week 10: Reagan—Government is the Problem & The Next Wave of Conservatives

Animating Question: Why did Reagan's conservatism succeed where Goldwater's failed?

Week 11: The New Political Colossus—Conservative Media Arises

Week 12: Triumph of the Neocons: George W. Bush & Post 9/11 Foreign Policy

Week 13: The Tea Party

Week 14: The Big Picture: Putting It All Together & Looking Into the Future (Possible Guest Speaker)

Animating Questions: Has conservatism strayed from its roots?

Is there a form of conservatism that might prove attractive to millennials?

Was modern American conservatism ever ideologically coherent?

