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Course Description

This course will examine nine major social problems facing the United States today—income inequality, political polarization, race, immigration, poverty, education, incarceration, work and family, and climate change. We will read leading social science books and articles (from sociology, political science, economics, and psychology) that define the problems, discuss their causes and consequences, and propose solutions. Because there will be a presidential election occurring we will spend some time discussing how the candidates differ in positions on public policies addressing these problems. Toward the end of the semester, the class will collectively decide on three other problems we should learn about and three teams of four students each will prepare a presentation and paper on the topic.

Requirements: Class participation, a short paper on the readings (3-5 pages), a blog entry on a topic we are discussing in class and two comments on a classmate’s blog, a final team presentation and paper.

The course has three goals:

1. To understand and debate important social problems in the United States.
2. To become good consumers of social science research. To learn how to read social science research and to evaluate the use of evidence in those articles and books. To understand how the facts used in the debates are produced by social scientists (how do we measure poverty, income and wealth inequality, discrimination, public opinion etc.)
3. To examine how debates in the presidential campaign and in the media use, or do not use, social science research. How does what we learn in the class help us to make sense of the debates swirling around us about the future of our country?
Books to Purchase:


(The remaining readings will be made available on the course website).

Requirements:

Paper 1

Due: Week 5

October 4, 2016

(3-5 pages)

Choose either income inequality, political polarization, or race. Discuss the sources of evidence and the logic used by the authors we read and the discussions we had in class. Describe other kinds of evidence that would be useful to you in addressing this question. How would your new evidence better help you to diagnose and fix the social problem you have chosen?

Blog Posts

Due: Week 9

Post your blog entry by Midnight, Sunday night October 30, 2016

Choose a topic we have covered so far in class and address how it is being debated in the media and in the campaign. What policies are advocated by the Democratic and Republican candidates for President on the topic? What use do they make of social science research on the topic? What are their assumptions about the causes and consequences of this problem? Provide links to online commentary, debate, or news articles that illustrate different positions on your topic. Your blog post should be about 1000 words and you can include charts and pictures.
Then you need to comment on at least two of your classmates’ blog entries. Comments should be 300-500 words. What does their blog entry make you think about?

**Post at least two blog comments on classmates’ blogs by Midnight, Tuesday night November 1, 2016**

**Final Paper and Presentation:**

**Presentation is due in class during last three weeks. Paper is due Friday December 9, 2016**

One thing we do not need to worry about in this class is running out of social problems to worry about. Even though we have covered nine, there are many more we have not had time to consider. Examples include terrorism, violence by and against the police, physical and mental health disparities, gun violence, drug addiction, homelessness, divorce and family dissolution, and many more that you can think of. We will divide into three teams of four students each and each team will select a social problem, decide on common readings for the class, and prepare a 30-minute PowerPoint on the topic covering cutting edge social science findings. The team will run the class discussion on the topic and then prepare a 10-page memo for the new president outlining the scope of the problem, the possible solutions, and the recommended course of action from the team. If there are differences of opinion among the team, all the better; you should outline those differences and the logic or evidence they are based on.

**COURSE SCHEDULE**

**Week 1**

**August 31, 2016**

**Introduction to the Course**

Bring your computer to class. We will look at census data on each student’s home census tract together using Social Explorer and get a baseline on income inequality, poverty, incarceration, educational outcomes, occupations, family type, race, and immigration status.


Week 2

September 7, 2016

Economic inequality

Why did economic inequality start to grow in the 1970s and what is the shape of it now?


Watch this infographic on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPKKQnjnsM

Further Reading:


Week 3

September 12, 2016

Poverty

How do we measure poverty and how many people are in deep poverty? What kind of support is available for people who are desperately poor?

Further Reading:


Week 4

September 19, 2016

Divided Politics

Why does America seem so divided on political issues? Who votes and what kinds of difference does it make?


Further Reading:


Week 5

September 26, 2016
Race Relations and Discrimination

Are conditions getting better or worse for African Americans? Are we forever divided by race or moving towards a postracial society?


Week 6

October 3, 2016

Immigration

Are immigrants and their children integrating into American society? How did we come to have 11 million undocumented people and what should we do about it?


Further Reading:


NO CLASS OCTOBER 10, 2016 (Columbus Day)
Week 7

October 17, 2016

Education

Are American schools failing? How can we improve our education system?


Week 8

October 24, 2016

Incarceration

Why does the US incarcerate more people than any other country on earth? What are conditions like in prisons and what happens to people when they get out?


Further Reading:


Week 9

October 31, 2016

Work and Family
How can men and women both have careers and raise children? What kinds of personal tradeoffs and policy supports are necessary to support families in the US?


Further Reading:


Week 10

November 7, 2016

Climate Change

Why do so many Americans doubt climate change? Are we going to survive this major challenge and if so, how?

Naomi Klein. 2014. This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate. New York: Simon and Schuster.


Week 11

November 14, 2016
Student Presentations

Week 12
November 21, 2016
Student Presentations

Week 13
November 28, 2016
Student Presentations

FINAL PAPER DUE FRIDAY DECEMBER 9, 2016