

American Culture War
Political Science (POLI) 3358
Fall 2015
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There is no precise date at which the American culture war began, but the best guess would be in 1973, when the U. S. Supreme Court decided *Roe v. Wade*. Women, the Court essentially ruled, had the right to control their own bodies, especially after the first trimester of a pregnancy, and no state could refuse to allow them access to abortion. In thereby choosing the importance of individual autonomy over moral prohibitions rooted in many religious beliefs, the Court's decision contributed to the mobilization of groups determined to overrule the decision or at least to limit its applicability.

Abortion is symbolic of a new set of issues that came to dominate American politics over the past three decades. Unlike the issues with which the New Deal was concerned, which were primarily economic in nature, these new issues are moral, religious and cultural. They involve such questions as what is right and wrong, what obligations people have to current and future generations, and where the line between public and private should be drawn. Besides abortion, issues involving the family, homosexuality, stem cells, religion, and race have defined the American culture war. (Others, such as immigration and multiculturalism are closely allied with them). These issues account for the increased ideological division in American politics, as well as the bitterly contested elections that have increasingly come to characterize American public life.

For a brief period of time, it seemed as if the culture war was over; in the 2008 election, for example, the Republican candidate, John McCain, seemed uncomfortable around the issues that defined the culture war and wanted to make foreign policy the key focus of his campaign. He did, however, choose to nominate Sarah Palin as his runningmate, and Palin's rhetoric and support were concentrated among those who believed that we needed a new religious and cultural revival in the United States.

In 2012 the same pattern repeated itself: Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan stressed economic issues but abortion and race were as prominent as ever, in large part due the fact that their opponent, President Obama, was of mixed race. Increasingly, moreover, the Republican Party has been dominated by the Tea Party movement. It is not clear whether this movement is primarily economic or cultural in its emphasis; indeed this is a question we will discuss toward the end of the course. In addition, Democrats who once seemed to want to avoid culture war issues, figuring that they were on the wrong side of them, now, thinking that they may be on the right side, seem inclined to appeal to them. The United States increasingly seems to be polarized by those who lean in a more libertarian direction and those who seek a return to strong patterns of authority and obedience. No one at this point, of course, can successfully predict whom either party will nominate for the 2016 campaign, but in the debates that have been held so far, especially on the Republican side, abortion is as viable a campaign issue as ever.

This course is meant to introduce students to the major issues in the American culture war. We will read books that have been influential in defining these issues, as well as others that either take sides in them or attempt to provide greater clarity. Students should complete the course with a greater understanding of how contemporary American politics has taken the form it has.

There will be a mid-term and a final exam in the course. In addition, each student will be expected to take one issue in the culture war, especially one that is not discussed in the reading, and to offer an overview of how that issue has played out. This assignment will involve an oral presentation to the class. I will explain this assignment in greater detail as the semester moves forward.

The following are the books we will be reading and discussing:

1. Robert Bork, *Slouching Toward Gomorrah* (Regan Books)
2. Andrew Sullivan, *Virtually Normal* (Vintage)
3. Adam Winkler, *Gunfight: The Battle over the Right to Bear Arms in America* (Norton)
4. Barbara Perry, *The Michigan Affirmative Action Cases* (Kansas)
5. N. E. H. Hull and Peter Charles Hopper, *Roe v. Wade: The Abortion Rights Controversy in American History*. Second edition, revised and expanded (Kansas)
6. Kate Zernicke, *Boiling Mad: Behind the Lines in Tea Party America* (St. Martins).
7. James Davison Hunter and Alan Wolfe, *Is There a Culture War?* (Brookings)

Here are the reading assignments for the semester:

August 31, 2015: Introduction and course requirements, Bork pp. 1-225

September 14, 2015: Bork, pp, 226-343

September 21, 2015: Sullivan, whole book

September 28, 2015: Perry, whole book

October 5, 2015: Midterm exam

October 19, 2015: Hull and Hopper, pp. 1-179.

October 26, 2015: Hull and Hopper, pp. 180-340

November 2, 2015: Winkler, whole book

November 9, 2015: Zernicke, whole book

November 16, 2015: Student Reports

November 23, 2015: Student reports

November 30, 2015: Student reports

December 7, 2015: Hunter and Wolfe (whole book).

The final Exam is scheduled for Friday, December 18th at 12:30PM.

If you are a student with a documented disability seeking reasonable accommodations in this course, please contact Kathy Duggan, (617) 552-8093, dugganka@bc.edu, at the Connors Family Learning Center regarding learning disabilities and ADHD, or Paulette Durrett, (617) 552-3470, paulette.durrett@bc.edu, in the Disability Services Office regarding all other types of disabilities, including temporary disabilities. Advance notice and appropriate documentation are required for accommodations.