Is American Democracy in Peril?
Polarization and Tribalism, The Decline of Civility, etc.

I. Overview of the Course

II. Opening Thoughts on 2018: Our Historical Moment in Politics
   A. The Decline of Serious Discourse: The American Public Sphere has Come to Resemble a Tabloid
   B. Trump (for a moment)
      1. An Imploding Presidency
   C. Hostile Takeover vs. the Restoration of Responsiveness
   D. The Gravity of the Current Moment and the Imperative not to Binge on Trump

III. Democratic Self-Repair and the Urgency of Restoring Public Agency over American Politics
   A. The General Idea of Cycles of Democratic Complacency and Mobilization
   B. Pendulum Swings vs. Death Spirals
   C. Thesis 1: The Further into the Process of Democratic Decline, the More Difficult the Project of Democratic Self-Repair
   D. Thesis 2: Democratic Self-Repair Requires Broad-Based Popular Mobilization Organized into Powerful Social Movements to Restore and/or Alter the Terms of Political Discourse and thereby the Rules of the Democratic Game
   E. Thesis 3: Potential Trade-offs Between Expressing Outrage at Current Dysfunction and Building Kind of Broad-Based Mobilization Democratic Self-Repair Requires
   F. Note: Especially True for U.S. in Light of Checks and Balances, Separation of Power, etc.
   G. Concluding Thoughts: On the Urgency of the Issues we Face
IV. Thoughts on the Nature and Extent of Polarization, the Decline of Democratic Discourse, and What We Can Do About It

A. Controversies in Understanding and Characterizing the Nature and Extent of Partisan Polarization
   1. Asymmetrical Polarization (Grossman and Hopkins; Hacker and Pierson)
   2. Identities More than Issues (Mason)

B. Evidence of the Recent Deterioration of Political Discourse
   1. Erosion of Partisan Elite’s Democratic Norms (Levitsky & Ziblatt)
   2. Growth of Partisan Sorting, Negative Partisanship and their Consequences: Bias, Mobilization and Affect/Anger (Mason; Iyengar & Krupenkin)
   3. Rapid Growth in Social Intolerance and Anti-Democratic Attitudes (Miller & Davis)
   4. Resentment Against and Removal of Conversational Constraints as an Elite Construct that Marginalizes the Recently Disadvantaged (Legault, et. al.)
   5. Increased Attention to Core Questions of Civic Membership and Status (Edsall, Lieberman, et. al.)

V. Why Are We so Polarized: Competing Theses
   A. Growing Inequality, Declining Mobility, and Opportunity Hoarding (e.g. Bremmer, Reeves)
   B. White Resentment of Declining Privilege and Power in an Emerging Multi-Racial Democracy
   C. Other Contributory Factors
      1. Media Segmentation and Bias (Sunstein, Baker)
      2. Gerrymandering, Money in Politics, Decline of Party Strength & Discipline (Nivolo & Brady; Persily)
      3. The Crisis of Political Responsiveness

VI. Where Cross-Cutting Discourse Occur, Between Whom, and Does it Matter? Diana Mutz, Hearing the Other Side
   A. How and When Does Cross-Cutting Discourse Work
   B. Who Deliberates?
   C. Where Deliberation Occurs
VII. A Hypothesis about the Decline of Cross-Cutting Public Political Discourse in Informal Political Conversation

A. The Dynamic Tension Between the General and the Particular in the Way in which the Public is Imagined (Jürgen Habermas, Nancy Fraser, Michael Warner)
B. Imagining the Addressee of Public Discourse as the General Other
C. Recent Efforts to Expand the ‘We’ of the American Public and their Consequences: A Fracturing of Newly Expanded Public into Two Fragile Contra-Publics

VIII. Ideal Political Discourse: Reasonableness, a Deliberative Disposition, An Ethos of Generosity (J.S. Mill, John Rawls)
A. Mainly Unaddressed Problem: Using Discourse itself to Transform the Currently Unreasonable
B. Exemplars of Expanding the Public Imaginary: Gandhi, MLK, Mandela & the Legacy of Nonviolent Action (Barber, Jones)
C. The Difficult Work of Decentering without Marginalizing the Hitherto Dominant General Other of Public Discourse
D. Some Sympathy for the Fragility of those who Derive Self-Respect by Differentiating Themselves from Abject Others (Hegel, W.E.B. Dubois, DiAngelo)

IX. Some Concluding Thoughts on the Relative Importance of Restoring Meaningful Discourse and the Dangers of Unilateral Disarmament
A. Against Reciprocal Incivility
B. Against Unilateral Disarmament
C. Building on Policy Convergence in a Climate of Partisan Antipathy: Dilemmas of Securing the Status of Equal Citizenship in a Climate of Polarization
D. Imagining and Projecting an Inclusive, Multi-racial, Non-Patriarchal, Post-conventional, Egalitarian Public
Works referred to or drawn on:

- Michael J. Barber and Nolan McCarty, “Causes and Consequences of Polarization,” in Persily, ed.
- Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (MIT: 1989)
- Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (MIT: 1992)
- Steven Livitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*
• Diana Mutz, Hearing the Other Side (Cambridge: 2006)
• Nathaniel Persily, ed., Solutions to Political Polarization in America (Cambridge: 2015)
• John Rawls, Political Liberalism (Columbia: 1993)
• Cass Sunstein, #Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media (Princeton: 2017)
• Michael Warner, Publics and Counterpublics (Zone Books: 2002)