Identity Politics: Race, Gender, Class and Sexuality

Race is one of the most salient cleavages in American politics and society. Partisan identification is deeply divided on racial lines: in 2012 Mitt Romney was only able to attract a majority of White voters while African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, and those who identified as “some other race” voted overwhelmingly for Barack Obama. Black and White Americans hold different views about the role of government in citizens’ lives and whether individuals are to blame for being poor. Meanwhile, the Black-White gap in wealth continues to widen. Despite the salience of race as a line of division, scholars have questioned whether we can truly understand race without simultaneously examining a variety of other categories of difference, like gender, class, and sexuality.

In this class we will use an intersectional approach to study race and its effects on a wide variety of political outcomes including public opinion, personal identification, political representation, party politics, and public policy. In the final week of the class we will apply the theories we have learned to the case(s) of sexual violence and lynching to understand the simultaneous effects of race, gender, class, and sexuality on our perceptions of this issue.

Questions:

1. How can we understand the simultaneous construction of race and many other identities, including gender, class, sexuality, and immigration status? Can we discuss one of these identities without discussing the other?
2. How does race matter for politics? Does its relevance change across other categories of difference?
3. How do intersecting identities matter beyond the identity of the individual—in interaction, in institutions, and as structure?
4. Are group-based political movements always subject to marginalization (e.g., can we have a feminist movement that includes the needs and issues of women of color and/or low-income women? Can we have an LGBTQ movement that addresses the concerns of trans individuals?)
5. How do race, gender, and class influence our understanding of politics?

Goals/Learning Objectives:

1. At the end of this course, students will be able to engage theories of the social construction of race, and be able to debate how they relate to the social construction of other categories of difference.
2. Students will learn to apply theories to political problems and gain an analytic perspective of current debates regarding race/ethnicity.
3. Through leading a course discussion, students will master the readings for one week and learn how to ask questions and facilitate a thoughtful and respectful academic debate.
4. Students will improve their writing skills through two papers, in which they will be asked to use existing research to craft an interesting argument and then support it with relevant evidence.
5. Students will learn to question preexisting ideas about race as they relate academic writing to their own experiences and views of the world.
Grade/Assignments:
- Midterm paper (20%)
- Final project: research paper (35%) and presentation (10%)
- Reading response papers (10%)
- Discussion facilitation (5%)
- Participation (20%)

Midterm Paper:
Choose one of the prompts below and write a 6-8 page paper answering the question. Your paper should have a clearly stated argument and should provide evidence to support your claims. Remember, there are no right answers here but you must be able to clearly articulate and support an argument.

Prompts:
1. Choose a category of difference and argue for how it affects the construction of race.
2. Does an intersectional perspective add to a theoretical study of racial construction? Why or why not?
3. Choose race and one other category of difference (e.g. race and class, race and gender, or race and sexuality). Is it possible to analyze race without discussing the other category? Can scholars focus on only one of these identities at a time?

Final Project:
Choose a political outcome that interests you (this could be anything from political representation to public goods provision to voter behavior) and research how identity affects this outcome. For example, you could ask how race and class affect proximity to environmental toxins or how race and sexuality shape discourse on same sex marriage bans. A successful paper will make use of the readings as well as outside sources to examine the social construction of identity on multiple levels to analyze the topic of interest. Your research should be question-driven and should use existing research and data to make an original argument. Your final paper will be 10-15 pages including references and any figures. Additionally, each student will give a presentation of his/her research to the class, which will count for 10% of the final course grade.

Reading Response Papers:
Students must write two 2-page response papers during the quarter. A response paper selects one or more readings for the week and engages critically with the topic from the reading.

Response papers must include the following three components:
1. A few sentences summarizing the study’s approach, methods, and claims.
2. At least one paragraph addressing any unique findings or interesting aspects of the study.
3. At least one paragraph offering questions or concerns about the study.
An excellent response paper extends past (3) and explores how you might build on these findings if you were a researcher.

Discussion Facilitation:
Each student will be in charge of leading (or co-leading) discussion once during the quarter. To prepare for facilitating discussion, each student will schedule a time to meet with me to go over
possible discussion questions.

Participation:
Participation is a key element of your grade. Good participation will not only challenge you, but will improve the learning experience of everyone else in class. Granted, “good participation” is a very amorphous concept. If you have any questions about how you could improve your contribution to our discussion, I would be happy to talk with you at any point. Below are the types of questions/statements that can contribute to a productive learning environment. This list is in no way exhaustive, but may prove helpful to you:

1. Any question you ask in an effort to help yourself better understand the course material— if you’re confused, someone else probably is too!
2. Questions and comments about the validity and strength of an author’s argument or evidence.
3. Questions and comments that deal with how the course materials relate to one another.
4. Questions and comments that tie readings and lectures to current events and ideas from outside the course.

During the week, if you come across a news story relevant to our course content you can send it to me. I will send out the articles I receive from students. By contributing articles, you can earn extra participation points.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF DIFFERENCE

Week 1: Race and Whiteness


Week 2: The Contingent Construction of Race


INTERSECTIONALITY

Week 3: What is Intersectionality?


**THE POLITICS OF INTERSECTIONAL IDENTIFICATION**

**Week 4: The Politics of Race and Gender**


**MIDTERM PAPERS DUE AT THE END OF WEEK 4**

**Week 5: The Politics of Race and Class: Does Race Matter Anymore?**


**Week 6: The Politics of Difference and Political Attitudes**


**Week 7: The Politics of Difference and Secondary Marginalization**


**CASE STUDY: THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE**

**Week 8: Sexual Violence**


**Week 9: Lynching and/as Sexual Violence**


**Week 10: Final Project Presentations**

**FINAL PAPERS DUE AT THE END OF FINALS WEEK**