I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should ‘make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,’ thus building a wall of separation between Church and State.

– Thomas Jefferson, 1802, Letter to the Danbury Baptists

If we ever forget that we were one nation under God, then we will be one nation gone under.

– Ronald Reagan, 1984, Ecumenical Breakfast, Dallas, TX

1 Course overview

For better or worse, religion pervades American politics. Why? Jefferson and the Framers were deeply suspicious of religion in service of politics, and yet they stamped the trappings of civil religion across their private and public writing. This was no mistake. The Framers read Rousseau, whose book, The Social Contract, argued that civil religion formed the moral and spiritual foundation essential for modern society. And, yet, it is likely that the Framers could not have predicted that the inclusion of this religious language would have serious ramifications for the interpretation of vital rights and liberties many decades and centuries later. Put another way, this civil religion morphed into an explicitly political one over time.

This course explores both the origin of religion’s role in American politics, as well as the more recent evolution of religion’s political clout within the conservative movement. In doing so, one of our primary tasks will be to understand and evaluate how the Religious Right developed and evolved into a major force behind the modern Republican Party. Yet, we will also consider how variety in religious beliefs and practices contribute to political behavior and shape public opinion.
To this end, we will investigate the basic theories, concepts, and controversies that exist within the field of religion and politics. In some sense, we are jumping into the deep end of the pool: we will not only evaluate narrative or qualitative accounts of the role of religion, but will wrestle with quantitative social science research that studies these questions. These tasks will require you to both critically engage with your peers and reflect on this material in short essays. As a result, I expect that this course should hone your ability to communicate as much as it sharpens your writing skills.

2 Course objectives

After we complete this term, I expect that you will be able to do the following things:

1. Explain how religion shapes institutions, laws, and the behavior of public officials.
2. Contextualize the historical roots of religious–partisan sorting
3. Explore the linkage between personal religious convictions and individual-level political behavior and policy attitudes
4. Grapple with whether or not the separation of church and state outlined in the Constitution has been effective.

3 Readings

Textbook. You are responsible for purchasing the following book:


Other readings. All other readings are available online in our shared website repository. Please be sure to download and read these materials during the appropriate week.
4 Assignments

4.1 Reading summaries (30%)

You will write three summaries of individual articles that have been assigned over the term (you may not review the assigned textbook reading). You may select an article from the week in which the assignment is due OR you may select an article from a prior week. These summaries should be roughly 450-500 words; if you write less than 450 points, then you will not be eligible to receive full marks; you do not need to draw these out beyond 500 words, however. The point of these reading summaries is a) for you to internalize the research, but also b) to learn how to write with economy and clarity. When writing these summaries, think about the following things:

1. Think about the overarching theme of the reading. What is the research question that the author asks? What sort of historical context surrounds this question?
2. Who is the author writing about? What research question are they addressing?
3. What are the conclusions that the author draws from the research? Do you see any holes in their logic? Does their conclusion match the evidence?
4. On the subjects of grammar and narrative structure:
   - Take time to think about your writing; make sure your summary flows in a logical manner.
   - Prioritize simple, clean ways of describing the material. If I need a thesaurus to figure out a word you’ve used, then you’ve probably lost the reader.

4.2 Reading quizzes (10%)

There will be five randomly assigned reading quizzes in multiple choice format throughout the semester to ensure that you are keeping up with the reading. These will occur at the beginning of class and cover the major points from the associated week’s reading. I am not trying to trick you on these quizzes; if you did the reading, then you should earn full marks. I will gladly throw out your worst quiz at the end of the term, which gives you some wiggle room if you have a bad day or need to miss class for any reason.

4.3 Presentations (20%)

During our two weeks on religion, law, and courts, you will choose a major court case from a list of cases I provide and present the case to the class. You are responsible for a five minute presentation
that summarizes the court case, the motivation of the plaintiff, the underlying social, political, or economic context surrounding the case, the major arguments for and against the plaintiff’s case, and a brief description of the case’s outcome. These presentations should be compact and direct. You should develop a short powerpoint to accompany your presentation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>General grading rubric for assignments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A (9-10 points)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>Demonstrates a deep understanding of the assignment and the relationship among concepts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application / discussion</td>
<td>Applies concepts in the reading to either related historical or recent events in a compelling manner; offers insight or creative discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>Clear, logical organization of material; submission flows from a well-developed introduction, to body, to conclusion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality of writing</td>
<td>Excellent grammar, vocabulary, and word choice</td>
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4.4 Exams (Midterm: 20%, Final: 20%)

Students will take a multiple choice mid-term exam in-class. This test covers the first half of the term’s material. For the final, you will be tasked with completing a take-home essay exam. Because you will have full resources available to answer the questions on that essay, this exercise will be graded accordingly.

5 Course schedule

Week 1 – Introduction

- RPA Chapter 1
- “It’s not Harry Potter.”

Weeks 2 & 3 – A brief history of religion in the United States


Week 4 – Christianity and politics

- RPA Chapter 2
- Chapter 6: Harder

Week 5 – Religious pluralism

- RPA Chapter 3

**Week 6 – Religious roots of voting**

- RPA Chapter 4

**Week 7 – Religious interest groups**

- RPA Chapter 5

**Week 8 – Religion and “elites”**

- RPA Chapter 6

**Week 9 – Religion, civil society, and political culture**

- RPA Chapter 7

Week 10 – Religion, politics, and the law
• RPA Chapter 8

Week 11 – Church-state disputes in the courts
• RPA Chapter 9

Week 12 – Minorities, religion, and politics
• RPA Chapter 10

Week 13 – Gender, religion, and politics
• RPA Chapter 11


**Week 14 – Theoretical perspectives, exam review**

• RPA Chapter 12