

PLSC 20150: The Art of Productive Political Debate

WINTER 2026

Time and Location	M 2:30 - 5:20 PM, Logan Center 603
Course Credit	100 units
Professor	Isaac Mehlhaff (imehlhaff@uchicago.edu)
Office Hours	T 2:00 - 4:00 PM, Pick 413 (calendly.com/imehlhaff/office)

I think it's worth declaring that educated people know how to pay attention—to others and to the world around them. They work hard to hear what other people say. They can follow an argument, track logical reasoning, detect illogic, hear the emotions that lie behind both the logic and the illogic, and ultimately empathize with the person who is feeling those emotions.

—William Cronon

“‘Only Connect...’ The Goals of a Liberal Arts Education”

This course explores how to engage productively in political disagreement. Four of our nine weeks will involve group discussion of academic literature concerning political discussion, disagreement, and the psychology of reasoning and persuasion. The remaining five weeks will provide opportunities to put insights from that literature into practice through small-group discussions and debates on contemporary issues in American politics. We will practice articulating a range of viewpoints, constructing persuasive arguments, and responding to opposing perspectives with clarity and respect. We will place particular emphasis on faithfully articulating multiple sides of an issue and learning to communicate in the “language” of those with whom we disagree. Students will develop skills for engaging in productive political disagreement that they can apply in their personal, academic, and professional lives.

Course Logistics

Discussions of Substantive Material (Weeks 1, 2, 4, and 6)

During weeks in which we discuss academic literature, class will be divided into two halves, with a short break in between. At the beginning of each half, a small group of students will kick off our discussion with a presentation on some of that week’s readings. Those same students will then be responsible for leading the discussion for that half of class. The instructor will handle the discussion in Week 1, with student contributions beginning in Week 2.

Discussions and Debates of Issues (Weeks 5 and 7-9)

During weeks in which we engage in small-group discussions and debates of current political issues, class will be divided into thirds, with short breaks in between. During the first third, a small group of students will provide an informational presentation on the issue at hand. Those same

students will then be responsible for leading a short discussion, with the aim of providing a solid understanding of the facts for all students.

During the second and third portions of class, you will be randomly grouped into pairs or small groups to debate the issue. You will also be randomly assigned a side of the issue for which to argue. The objective of these debates is to articulate and defend a viewpoint in a charitable and persuasive manner. To get the most out of this exercise, you should come to class prepared to argue any viewpoint, and enter each debate with the goal of making the best possible case for your assigned position, expecting that your interlocutor will do the same. You are not limited to the assigned readings; you should do your own research to answer any questions you have about the issue.

It is nearly inevitable that you will be called upon to articulate and advocate for political views contrary to your own at some point this quarter. Indeed, you may find this the most intellectually rewarding aspect of the course. Your personal political orientation is of no consequence to me; anyone, even the politically apathetic, can be successful in this course. Our goal this quarter is to strengthen your analytical, argumentation, and presentation skills by understanding diverse viewpoints and the language with which they are communicated. These are the skills necessary to successfully advance your own agenda, whatever it may be.

Assignments and Grading

Course grades will be based on the categories below. Reaction papers and reflections will be due at 11:59 PM on the due date listed in the course schedule. They should be 1-2 pages, double-spaced, with 1-inch margins and 12-point font.

- **Participation (15%):** You are expected to attend class and contribute actively and respectfully to discussions and debates. This includes not allowing yourself to be distracted by technology.
- **Presentation (20%):** You will take part in one small-group presentation. On weeks during which we discuss substantive academic literature, the objective of the presentation is to set the stage by overviewing some of the readings, providing context, highlighting areas of confusion, and posing questions. On weeks during which we discuss a political issue, the objective of the presentation is to cover key background information, major perspectives, and important debates—not to advocate for any particular viewpoint. You will also be responsible for guiding the class discussion, so you should come prepared with provocative discussion questions.
- **Reaction papers (40%):** On weeks during which we discuss substantive academic literature, your reaction paper will take the form of a critical analysis. Do not just regurgitate the readings; respond to the prompt in the course schedule below. In addition, use this opportunity to express any points of confusion, lingering questions, or points on which you agree or disagree with the authors. A good response paper summarizes an argument, synthesizes knowledge, and contributes a new layer of analysis. You may reflect on one reading or any given set of them for a week. You may also connect the weeks with one another.

On weeks during which we discuss a political issue, your reaction paper will take the form of an opinion statement. Articulate *your own opinion* on the issue, following the prompt in the course schedule below. You may also go beyond this question to note points of confusion and lingering questions. “I don’t know” is a perfectly acceptable answer, as long as you explain why. Ambivalence is also acceptable. No matter where you stand on the issue, justify your position.

- **Reflections (25 %):** On weeks during which we discuss a political issue, you will also submit a reflection of that week’s activities *after* our class meeting. Respond to the prompt in the course schedule below and discuss any other thoughts or takeaways you have from the week. Note that as part of the prompt, you will always be asked to re-answer your question from that week’s reaction paper. Do this without regard for how you answered in your reaction paper. Instead, genuinely think about where your attitude stands on the topic after discussing it with your interlocutors in class.

A final percentage grade x will translate into letter grades as follows:

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| • $93 \leq x \rightarrow A$ | • $77 \leq x < 80 \rightarrow C+$ |
| • $90 \leq x < 93 \rightarrow A-$ | • $73 \leq x < 77 \rightarrow C$ |
| • $87 \leq x < 90 \rightarrow B+$ | • $70 \leq x < 73 \rightarrow C-$ |
| • $83 \leq x < 87 \rightarrow B$ | • $60 \leq x < 70 \rightarrow D$ |
| • $80 \leq x < 83 \rightarrow B-$ | • $x < 60 \rightarrow F$ |

Course Schedule

All readings will be provided on the course Canvas site. If you find any value in having physical copies or tend to get distracted by technology, I encourage you to print out the readings or purchase copies of the books.

Week 1 (1/5): Dialogue and Compromise in Democracy

Readings

- Talisse, Robert B. *Sustaining Democracy: What We Owe to the Other Side*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.
 - Introduction and Chapter 4
- Smith, Rachel Greenwald. *On Compromise: Art, Politics, and the Fate of An American Ideal*. Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2021.
 - Chapters 1 and 3

Week 2 (1/12): Deliberation and Political Talk in Modern America

Assignments

- Reaction paper (1/11): *How useful are deliberation and casual political talk for persuading citizens to change their political views?*

Readings

Deliberation and Political Talk

- Jacobs, Lawrence R., Fay Lomax Cook, and Michael X. Delli Carpini. *Talking Together: Public Deliberation and Political Participation in America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009.
 - Pages 1-20, Chapter 6
- Conover, Pamela Johnston and Patrick R. Miller. “Taking Everyday Political Talk Seriously.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy* edited by Andre Bächtiger, John S. Dryzek, Jane Mansbridge, and Mark Warren. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.
 - Pages 378-384

Pluralism and Conformity

- Mutz, Diana C. *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
 - Chapters 1 and 3
- Sunstein, Cass. R. *Why Societies Need Dissent*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.
 - Introduction

Week 3 (1/19): NO CLASS

Week 4 (1/26): The Value of Disagreement and Debate

Assignments

- Reaction paper (1/25): *Do citizens have the cognitive skills necessary to change their mind through political debate?*

Readings

Barriers to Good Reasoning

- Taber, Charles S. and Milton Lodge. “Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs.” *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 3 (July 2006): 755-769.
- Aikin, Scott F. and Robert B. Talisse. *Why We Argue (And How We Should): A Guide to Political Disagreement in an Age of Unreason*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2019.
 - Chapter 15

Reasoning through Debate

- Mercier, Hugo and Hélène Landemore. “Reasoning Is for Arguing: Understanding the Successes and Failures of Deliberation.” *Political Psychology* 33, no. 2 (April 2012): 243-258.
- Mercier, Hugo. “The Argumentative Theory: Predictions and Empirical Evidence.” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 20, no. 9 (September 2016): 689-700.

Week 5 (2/2): Institutional Neutrality

Assignments

- Reaction paper (2/1): *Should American universities adopt policies of institutional neutrality toward political issues?*
- Reflection (2/3): *What did you learn about institutional neutrality? What did you learn about yourself? Should American universities adopt policies of institutional neutrality toward political issues?*

Readings

- Kalven Jr., Harry, John Hope Franklin, Gwin J. Kolb, George Stigler, Jacob Getzels, Julian Goldsmith, and Gilbert F. White. *Kalven Committee: Report on the University’s Role in Political and Social Action*. The University of Chicago, 1967.
- Stone, Geoffrey R., Marianne Bertrand, Angela Olinto, Mark Siegler, David A. Strauss, Kenneth W. Warren, and Amanda Woodward. *Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression*. The University of Chicago, 2015.
- American Association of University Professors. *On Institutional Neutrality*. American Association of University Professors, 2025.
- Beltramini, Kyle and Steven McGuire. *Institutional Neutrality in the Higher Education Compact*. American Enterprise Institute, 2025.
- Wood, Peter. *The Illusion of Institutional Neutrality*. National Association of Scholars, 2024.

Week 6 (2/9): How to Argue Better

Assignments

- Reaction paper (2/8): *How should we appeal to people with whom we disagree?*

Readings

The Psychology of Political Differences

- Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: Vintage Books, 2012.
 - Chapter 7, Pages 180-194
- Hetherington, Marc J., Andrew M. Engelhardt, and Isaac D. Mehlhaff. “More Than a Partisan Pandemic: Worldview and COVID-19 Response in the United States.” *Advances in Political Psychology* (forthcoming).

Framing and Rhetorical Strategy

- Sniderman, Paul M. *The Democratic Faith: Essays on Democratic Citizenship*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017.
 - Pages 25-41
- Lin, Hause, Gabriela Czarnek, Benjamin Lewis, Joshua P. White, Adam J. Berinsky, Thomas Costello, Gordon Pennycook, and David G. Rand. “Persuading Voters using Human-Artificial Intelligence Dialogues.” *Nature* 648, no. 8093 (December 2025): 394-401.

Week 7 (2/16): Immigration

Assignments

- Reaction paper (2/15): *How should the United States’ immigration system be changed?*
- Reflection (2/17): *What did you learn about immigration? What did you learn about yourself? How should the United States’ immigration system be changed?*

Readings

- Escobari, Marcela and Alex Brockwehl. *Managing Migration under Pressure: Lessons from the Biden Presidency to Build a Migration Policy in the National Interest*. The Brookings Institution, 2025.
- Orrenius, Pia M., Alan D. Viard, and Madeline Zavodny. *The Fiscal Impact of Immigration: An Update*. American Enterprise Institute, 2025.
- Landgrave, Michelangelo and Alex Nowrasteh. *Illegal Immigrant Incarceration Rates, 2010-2023*. Cato Institute, Policy Analysis no. 994 (April 2025).

- Ries, Lora. *Rising from the Ashes: Principles and Policies for a New American Immigration System*. The Heritage Foundation, Background no. 3848 (December 2024).
- Niskanen Center Immigration Team. *Immigration Beyond the Extremes: A Blueprint that Actually Works*. Niskanen Center, 2025.

Week 8 (2/23): Criminal Justice Reform

Assignments

- Reaction paper (2/22): *Should criminal justice reform prioritize community-based solutions and rehabilitation or improvements to prisons and incarceration-based treatment programs?*
- Reflection (2/24): *What did you learn about criminal justice reform? What did you learn about yourself? Should criminal justice reform prioritize community-based solutions and rehabilitation or improvements to prisons and incarceration-based treatment programs?*

Readings

- Nellis, Ashley. *Mass Incarceration Trends*. The Sentencing Project, 2024.
- James, Nathan. *The Federal Prison Population Buildup: Options for Congress*. Congressional Research Service, no. 7-5700 (May 2016).
- Johnson, Ben. *Do Criminal Laws Deter Crime? Deterrence Theory in Criminal Justice Policy: A Primer*. Minnesota House Research, 2019.
- Widra, Emily. “Addicted to Punishment: Jails and Prisons Punish Drug Use Far More than they Treat It.” Prison Policy Initiative (January 2024).
- Lappas, Carly and Jessica Smith. “Research on the Effectiveness of Reentry Treatments.” UNC School of Government, Criminal Justice Innovation Lab (August 2022).
- A target article and two responses from a symposium—skim for additional perspectives:
 - Tonry, Michael. “Remodeling American Sentencing: A Ten-Step Blueprint for Moving Past Mass Incarceration.” *Criminology & Public Policy* 13, no. 4 (November 2014): 503-533.
 - Lynch, Gerard E. “Ending Mass Incarceration: Some Observations and Responses to Professor Tonry.” *Criminology & Public Policy* 13, no. 4 (November 2014): 561-566.
 - Raphael, Steven. “How Do We Reduce Incarceration Rates While Maintaining Public Safety?” *Criminology & Public Policy* 13, no. 4 (November 2014): 579-597.

Week 9 (3/2): Bodily Autonomy vs. Public Health

Assignments

- Reaction paper (3/1): *Under what conditions should policies related to abortion and/or vaccine mandates override individual bodily autonomy?*
- Reflection (3/3): *What did you learn about bodily autonomy in the context of public health? What did you learn about yourself? Under what conditions should policies related to abortion and/or vaccine mandates override individual bodily autonomy?*

Readings

- Wilkenfeld, Daniel A. and Christa M. Johnson. “In Defense of Vaccine Mandates: An Argument from Consent Rights.” *Public Health Ethics* 15, no. 1 (April 2022): 27-40.
- Steinhoff, Uwe. “The Case Against Compulsory Vaccination: The Failed Arguments from Risk Imposition, Tax Evasion, ‘Social Liberty,’ and the Priority of Life.” *Journal of Medical Ethics* (forthcoming).
- Center for Reproductive Rights. *The Constitutional Right to Reproductive Autonomy: Realizing the Promise of the 14th Amendment*. Center for Reproductive Rights, 2022.
- Working Group on the Issue of Discrimination against Women in Law and in Practice. *Women’s Autonomy, Equality, and Reproductive Health in International Human Rights: Between Recognition, Backlash, and Regressive Trends*. United Nations Human Rights Special Procedures, 2017.
- Marquis, Don. “Why Abortion is Immoral.” *The Journal of Philosophy* 86, no. 4 (April 1989): 183-202.

Communication

I am always happy to meet with you during my scheduled office hours or outside those hours if they do not work with your schedule. My office hours are generally first-come, first-served, and I encourage you to attend with classmates if you have similar questions. If you prefer a one-on-one meeting, the best option is to sign up for a time slot using the link at the top of this document. Learning is a collaborative endeavor, and we all bring unique backgrounds and experiences to the course material. Treat your classmates how you want to be treated.

Academic Integrity

Familiarize yourself with the university’s policies on academic dishonesty and plagiarism: <https://studentmanual.uchicago.edu/academic-policies/academic-honesty-plagiarism/>. As always, you should give credit to others when you use their language, materials, or findings. There could be serious consequences for committing plagiarism, including failing the course and being asked to leave the university.

Generative Artificial Intelligence

Generative artificial intelligence (AI)—such as OpenAI’s ChatGPT or Google’s Gemini—is gradually reshaping human-computer interaction. These tools can be helpful for summarizing information and brainstorming ideas. However, given the collaborative and reflective nature of this course, use of generative AI is not permitted on any graded work.

Attendance, Late Work, and Accommodations

You are expected to come to class and complete assignments on time. If you need to be absent from class or extenuating circumstances prevent you from completing assignments, please alert me ahead of time. I will not accept late assignments unless you have a compelling reason why you could not complete it on time, and that reason is communicated prior to the due date.

Please reach out to me directly if you would like to request accommodations for the course to better facilitate your learning. Student Disability Services (disabilities.uchicago.edu) is also available to provide resources and support, and may provide approval for specific academic accommodations. Informing me in a timely manner will help me to ensure accommodations are met and I am able to implement an appropriate assessment of your learning.