What’s the first thing you think of when you think about politics? For many of us, the answer to that question has to do with current and controversial issues—climate change, immigration, health care. While it is natural—particularly at the present time in our country’s history—that our opinions on these issues along with the intensity of our beliefs vary, one commonality for most of us is that we don’t spend much time engaging in discussion and dialog on these issues. In fact, if you think about it, the available forums and spaces to do so are surprisingly limited. The first aim of this course then is to deepen your understanding of these issues by providing a space to discuss some of the most important and controversial topics of the day.

But, think a little more carefully: what does it mean to “deepen your understanding” of issues. We will accomplish this aim in a number of ways. While there are no prerequisites to this course, we will review and build on your knowledge base from introductory courses including American politics and public policy to review, in a general way, the factors most important to an understanding of the policy process and the history/events that brought us to the current status quo with respect to particular policies. Mostly, though, this course is experiential; the main way we will go deeper is by engaging in a variety of active learning contexts: discussions, group activities, and in-class simulations. In the course of these activities, you will be asked to take the perspectives of specific players in the policy process, consider different forums where the policy process takes place and of course get a chance to articulate your own views.

Finally, we will go deeper in our understanding of issues by transitioning from the participatory activities we engage in class to more general discussions of the role of a citizen and citizen participation in a democracy. In what ways should and do individuals participate? Who participates and who doesn’t? And with what consequences? Can ordinary individuals make a difference? Thus, our issue debates will be placed in the broader context of political participation and citizenship, and the first weeks of class will highlight key debates about those concerns. Thereafter, we will intersperse our issue discussions with classes which augment our understanding of what it means to participate in politics as well as the larger society.
In sum, the learning objectives for this class are:
· To identify the debates and important factors underlying an understanding of some of the most current and controversial issues faced by modern day Americans.
· To explain key theories and debates about the role of citizen participation in a democracy.
· To engage in a mini-version of political participation by engaging in numerous individual and group activities.
· Taking other viewpoints into account, to locate yourself on a continuum: where do you stand on each of these important current controversies.

Notes:
*You need not feel particularly well informed with respect to current events or controversies; it is one purpose of the course to augment your level of information.
*For each of the issues we discuss, class sessions will consist of a combination of experiential activities, some background on the issue and some considerations of the main controversies informing the debate. Reading for most of these classes will be based on CQ Researchers (Blackboard).
*Remember especially in the modern day where disagreement on political issues can be intense, all arguments and positions deserve to be voiced and respected. In fact, a lot can be learned from understanding and coming to appreciate alternative viewpoints.

Required Readings
There is no single required text for the class. …But of course, there is reading! A collection of articles is available on Blackboard including:
-- Readings on specific policy issues mostly taken from issues of the CQ Researcher (also available under “Data Bases” from the University Library website).
-- Background readings on the issues or on citizen participation
-- For the most part you can expect at least one reading for each class.

Course Requirements
--Midterm, 3/9, 20% of your grade
--Final exam, 5/15, 10:30-12:30 (as scheduled by University), 25%
--Five approximately 2- page reaction papers, 20%. You get to choose which ones, but make sure you turn these in! Late papers will be downgraded half a grade per day and will not be accepted if they are more than 2 days late. Do at least 2 prior to the 3/9 midterm.*
--Attendance/participation (will include class preparation, short writing assignments or coming to class with specified material relevant to the class topic of the day), 20%
--Reading quizzes, 15%; some announced; some not so much; ranging from 5 to 20 minutes).

*The reaction papers should be approximately two pages. They will ask you to review some relevant background on the issue; provide pros and cons of one or two of the main controversies discussed in the reading; and finally develop the arguments for your own stand. You will be expected to reference specifics from the readings as well as detail your personal opinions and reactions. Cite sources as you use them, and include bibliography, even if only to CQ Researcher. Stick to the material covered in the reading; you need not include outside sources.
These papers are intended to be short and to get you thinking. They will be due the class after the last class we have discussed the issue you want to write about. They will be graded on a 1 to 10 scale. Papers should be turned in via e-mail (sfriedman2@albany.edu). Please turn in at least two reaction papers by the midterm on 3/9.

Course Policies

Attendance:
This course has a great deal of in class and collaborative work. You have to come to class. Attendance and accompanied in-class assignments, related quizzes and participation are worth 35% of your grade. Please let the professor know prior to class if there is an emergency circumstance preventing you from coming.

Plagiarism and Cheating:
“This one’s simple: don’t do it. Don’t even think about doing it.”—Julie Novkov, Department Chair

Plagiarism is the use of someone else's work, words, or ideas as if they were your own, without giving the original author credit by citing him or her. Be sure to cite sources—if only the material in our text—throughout your papers as you refer to specific arguments and details, and don’t hesitate to ask for clarification. Plagiarism violations will result in disciplinary action and a failing grade for the assignment and potentially for the course.

Additionally, it goes without saying that you are expected to meet the broader standards of academic honesty/integrity expected of students at a major university; see link on University policy: http://www.albany.edu/eas/104/penalty.htm

Students with Disabilities:
If you need any class accommodations due to a disability, please utilize University resources as needed, and please let me know well in advance of any assignments requiring accommodation(s). It is a function of the University to provide such accommodations as needed.

Reading Schedule:
*Schedule subject to change given progress, topic interest and the course of current events. Since the class includes simulations and participatory exercises, we will adjust our schedule accordingly. You will be given ample notice of any changes so be sure to check your email.
*Second half of course readings coming soon

Part I. Getting Started
1/24 Introduction
1/26. Marijuana Industry (CQ Researcher)
1/31. Food Policy Debates (CQ Researcher)
2/2. Guns (CQ Researcher)

Part II. Going Deeper: Controversies in Political Participation and Debates on the Trump Agenda
2/7. Who should participate and Are people participating enough?
Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox (2015), Running from Office; Ch. 1-2

2/9. How much do people know and from where do they get their info?
   Sunstein. *The Daily We*, Ch. 9 in Miroff et al, *Debating Democracy*

2/14. Wealth and Income Inequality (CQ Researcher)
2/16. Health Care (reading T.B.A)
2/21. U.S.-Mexico Relations (CQ Researcher)
2/23. Trade policy (CQ Researcher)
2/28. Millennials
3/2. Reading T.B.A.
3/7. Review and Reading T.B.A.
3/9. Midterm

More to come!
Final Exam, 5/15, 10:30-12:30, as scheduled by the University