Urgent Issues, Everyday Politics: Domestic and International Policy Issues in the Midst of National Elections

Overview: As we lurch toward another national election, there is a deficit of serious political discourse despite a surfeit of serious issues. Internationally, the Islamic State’s pivot toward the ‘far enemy’, the on-going bloodletting in Syria, an increasingly assertive China and Russia, the failure of the Arab awakening, and the inexorable advance of global climate change—all these issues speak to the dangerous times in which we live and the weakened capacity of the US to influence world affairs. Domestically, on-going partisan polarization makes it difficult for the nation to coalesce around even the most urgent political issues, including ever-widening inequality, an increasingly unresponsive political system, a less-and-less competitive education system, a lack of stable middle-class jobs, etc. Is it possible that the national elections will focus political attention on these serious issues, perhaps even generating the national will to address at least some of them? Or will our politics fall short of the urgency of the moment and continue instead the era of policy drift? In this course, we will examine policy issues at stake in a variety of urgent areas, surveying potential solutions but always with an eye on the question of the political viability of various approaches to addressing pressing problems.

Syllabus of Subjects to Be Covered:


Week 2: Precarious Lives in the New Gilded Age: the Decline of the Employment Model of Social Membership, Evictions, The Crisis of Affordability, and Middle Class Debt


Week 4: Declining Power in an Increasingly Complex World: Global Warming, the Islamic State, New Rivals, and Failed Revolutions

Readings to be determined closer to start of course, with a mix of selections from scholarly articles and books, and long-form journalism (e.g. New Yorker, Atlantic Monthly, New York Review, etc.)