

COM 303.01 — CONTROVERSY AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

T/R 3:35-4:50 pm, Fell Hall 148

Spring 2026

Professor: Dr. Joseph Zompetti

Ofc Hours: M,W 2-3:30 pm; T, R 2-3:00 pm

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Office: Fell Hall 414

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COURSE DESCRIPTION:

In this course, we will examine the divisive rhetoric of contemporary U.S. politics. More specifically, we will focus our studies on so-called “wingnuts,” who are people “on the far-right wing or far-left wing of the political spectrum. They are the professional partisans and the unhinged activists, the hard-core haters and the paranoid conspiracy theorists” (Avlon, p. 2). Examples of wingnuts are Glenn Beck, Marjorie Taylor Greene, Steve Bannon and Ben Shapiro on the Right, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Maxine Waters, and Eric Swalwell on the Left (more examples can be found in the “Files” page on Canvas). We will examine their comments, images, speeches, and so on to identify common rhetorical techniques used to manipulate political messages. We will also discuss the impact wingnuts have on public discourse in contemporary America. In so doing, we will learn how to have more productive and meaningful political conversations in our own lives. The course will entail readings, discussions, and possibly videos concerning wingnuts. We will also explore various rhetorical theories to help us in our understanding of toxic political discourse. The course centers on class discussion, readings, and critical reflection.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

At the end of the course, students should be able to:

- know what a wingnut is and how they function in contemporary U.S. political culture.
- develop skills in using theory to analyze the texts of divisive rhetors.
- articulate ideas in both oral and written contexts concerning extremist political rhetoric.
- in a civilized manner, discuss issues pertaining to divisive political discourse.
- construct arguments about the significance of polarizing political rhetoric.

REMEMBER – I AM HERE TO HELP! I’ve been teaching for over 30 years, so I don’t do this for a power kick or for the paycheck! I am 100% sincere when I say I want to help you be the best versions of you that I can! My ultimate goal for me is to make the world around me a slightly better place, and that includes you! BUT, I can’t help you if a) I don’t know that you need help, b) if you aren’t focused or committed, or c) if you don’t help yourselves. Ergo, PLEASE don’t hesitate to ask questions (in class, via email, after class, or whenever!).

REQUIRED BOOK:

Zompetti, Joseph P. (2018). *Divisive Discourse: The Extreme Rhetoric of Contemporary American Politics* (2nd ed.). Cognella. ISBN: 978-1-63487-884-5. Available: <https://titles.cognella.com/divisive-discourse-9781634878838> [NOTE: It is *VITAL* you purchase the new, 2nd edition!]

Additional Readings:

These are listed in the tentative schedule with full citations at the end of the syllabus. They can be located on our class Canvas site under “Files.”

GRAD STUDENTS: As this course is cross-listed as 470 for graduate credit, any graduate student enrolling in this course must complete some requirements in addition to the undergraduate material listed in this syllabus. Please approach Dr. Zompetti the second week of class to discuss this and make arrangements.

****URGENT – IMPORTANT:** You need to acquire the 2nd edition of my book for class. If you are one of the students who thinks they can “get by” without purchasing a textbook, you need to rethink your position. First, our class is discussion-based, meaning that if you don’t do the readings, it will be painfully obvious. Second, if you cannot participate in a class discussion because you did not read the requisite material from one of the books you are supposed to obtain, then you will lose very important participation points. Third, the book will be required for the major assignments, which are worth a substantial amount of your overall course grade. Finally, I know that book prices can be outrageous, but the books I choose to use in my classes are not overly expensive. You should seriously consider the purchasing/renting of textbooks as part your overall investment in your education.

COURSE EXPECTATIONS

ATTENDANCE: Every class period is critical if you are to obtain the most of your education. But, you are adults and can obviously choose to attend or not. With every decision, however, there are consequences. You will not lose direct or designated points for missing class. But, not attending may have indirect repercussions. Issues that we discuss in class (which will frequently stray from the texts) will be necessary for your participation grade. If you miss class, you CANNOT make-up participation points – by definition, participation points require participating! If you notify me ahead of time (at least 12 hours), I will be much more likely to work with you regarding any missed information or experiences. If you have a legitimate, university-related excuse for missing class, then you will need to notify me well in advance so that we can discuss possibilities.

PUNCTUALITY: When attending class, please BE ON TIME. Like attendance, if you are frequently late to class or have other punctuality issues, then they may impact your overall semester course grade. If possible, please use the restroom before or after class to avoid distracting our conversations. Essentially, you are all adults, so you have choices – either attend the class late, budget your time better and arrive early/on time, or decide not to attend with the internal promise to yourself that you will do better for future classes. Tardiness, quite honestly, is distracting, disrespectful, and unprofessional. Additionally, you should be ready to begin class as soon as I greet everyone – this means put away your earbuds and phones, stop chatting with your neighbor, and have class materials out and ready to use. While you may arrive late in a way that does not impact your “participation” grade, *per se*, you definitely should keep in mind that if you want a high grade in the course, you need to “wow” and impress me.

LATE WORK: Assignments not turned in on-time will be penalized **one full-letter grade for each course day they are late**. Accepting any late work is strictly at the instructor’s discretion. If you are experiencing difficulties or have unforeseen circumstances emerge, send me an email out of courtesy, and it is possible we can strike an agreement or compromise about your late work. Like the discussion above regarding attendance, you should notify me at least 12 hours ahead of a deadline so that we can discuss *possible* remedies. I will try to be flexible with your work, but *only* if you discuss it with me ahead of time. Like most instructors, I am more understanding if you keep me informed. If you encounter problems, please let me know right away as I may be able to help.

ELECTRONIC DEVICES, DISTRACTIONS & PROFESSIONALISM: While our class is not the same environment as a workplace, some expectations for behavior are similar. In addition to attendance and tardiness, your general behavior in the class should be professional in nature. Professionalism includes respecting others’ opinions, not interrupting in class, being respectful to those who are speaking, and working together in a spirit of cooperation. This means treating others with respect (including me) by paying attention, listening closely, and using verbal and nonverbal communication that is not rude or disrespectful.

Out of courtesy for all participating in the learning experience, all cell phones, laptops, and other electronic devices should be silenced and put away. While you will undoubtedly be examining our readings and possibly conducting Google searches relevant to our discussions during class time, please minimize any and all distractions. Phones should never be visible. For laptops and other devices used for class readings, they should be on “rest mode” and/or the **lid shut** during class unless you are referencing one of the readings. For all devices, at all times, please “mute” or silence them (I should never hear a beep, ring tone, or any other noise emanating from your devices). Electronic devices are distracting to you and your peers. I also view this as a “respect” issue – since I have asked politely that these devices should be turned off or silenced, if they are not and go off during class, I will view that as a disrespectful act. Your participation points will suffer, even if you have participated meaningfully.

SPECIAL NEEDS/CONCERNS/ACCOMMODATIONS: Any student needing to arrange a reasonable accommodation for a documented disability and/or medical/mental health condition should contact Student Access and Accommodation Services at 350 Fell Hall, (309) 438-5853, or visit the website at StudentAccess.IllinoisState.edu.

MENTAL HEALTH: Life at college can get complicated. If you're feeling stressed, overwhelmed, lost, anxious, depressed or are struggling with personal issues, do not hesitate to call or visit Student Counseling Services (SCS). These services are free and completely confidential. SCS is located at 320 Student Services Building, (309) 438-3655.

CLASS DISCUSSION/PARTICIPATION: This course is designed to improve your ability to communicate, interact with different concepts, and enhance critical thinking skills. Given the inherent communicative nature of symbols and rhetorical forces and their influence on our lives, your participation in class discussions is critical in practicing, developing, and understanding communication skills and messages. Additionally, we all learn more if everyone contributes. I expect all of you, as you should expect from yourselves, to contribute to our educational experience. It is expected that each of the reading assignments will be completed by the time you come to class the day the assignment is due. To participate means you add to the overall learning environment with your ideas and critical, albeit respectful, comments. It is up to you to come to class prepared to participate as a citizen — to listen attentively to others, to engage critically and creatively to the perspectives of others, and to contribute meaningfully to discussions of the class topics. In short, come to class having read the material with questions and comments ready for discussion. *Students who interrupt discussions by frequently arriving to class late, who constantly interrupt others without meaningfully listening to their comments, or who constantly bring up questions that would more appropriately be answered by a glance at the syllabus or during office hours (e.g., "when is this due?" or "what do we have to read for the next class?") not only reflect poorly on their own class citizenship; they also actively cheapen the educational experience of everyone else.* Procedural questions about what is expected of you in the class should be saved for office hours if they are not answered after a re-reading of the syllabus or can be asked via email.

A. Read before class: The only way class discussion will be meaningful is if you read the material before class. I will not lead the class in a discussion over material when discussion should be occurring. As active participants in the class, it is up to you to read and participate in discussions. Ultimately, if you do not read and there is little to no class discussion, it will hurt your class performance and devalue your overall education. **DO NOT EXPECT TO READ MATERIAL WHILE IN CLASS!!!** Use your critical observations to help you if necessary.

B. When reading material for class: There will be times when some of you believe the readings are too difficult or confusing. As college students, I expect you to rise to the challenge and spend the time necessary to comprehend, reflect, and use the material in the books. You may have to read the material more than once, so budget your time carefully. You should also consult dictionaries for words or concepts that are unfamiliar to you. If you are having trouble with the readings, you may work with someone else in class. If you are not used to this type of material, you should try to understand the central argument of the piece along with other key arguments. You may ask me questions about conceptual material, but I will not respond to claims that the material is too confusing or difficult.

C. What to Expect from Our Discussions: We will, of course, discuss and describe the content of our readings. But, we will not stop there. You will be expected to engage critically with the readings by asking probing questions derived from the Socratic Method (see Thinknetic (2021)). We will explore this method at the beginning of the semester to prepare you to critically read our material for the rest of the course.

D. Google News: For **EACH** discussion day, I expect you to read through the relevant news of the day that pertains to our class. This is essential for our class discussions (and your knowledge of current events), and I expect you to come to class knowledgeable about the current news items. Failure to stay abreast of current news and failure to incorporate it into your discussions will severely hamper your participation grade.

Each reading day involves class discussion. Your participation will be based on the following rubric – a total of 10 possible points per class. This rubric will also be used for your overall course participation grade (in conjunction with your total points earned).

10	7	5	3	0
Full participation as a leader in class, providing well-developed responses, questions, comments, but does not dominate or prevent comments from others. Demonstrates “big picture thinking” tying course concepts to class, experiences, & discussion.	Above average participation as mostly a listener with some involvement in class discussions. Some questions and responses provided. Not always able to describe how concepts tie together in terms of the “big picture.”	Does what is expected: comes to class and completes reading assignments. Normally a listener in class discussion. Often does not ask or answer questions. Sometimes is distracted and not motivated to see the “big picture.”	Does not demonstrate a time commitment to the course (is tardy, misses some class, comes to class unprepared). Often does not participate. Not interested in how course concepts relate to the “big picture.”	Acts in a manner that disrupts the learning of self and others. Creates an uncomfortable environment for others (i.e., disrespect, incivility, comments unrelated to the readings, etc.). Often is tardy and/or misses class.

PERMISSION REQUIRED TO RECORD: Students must obtain written permission from the instructor if they wish to record lectures or discussions. This restriction includes visual materials that accompany the lecture/discussion, such as lecture slides, whiteboard notes, etc. Such recordings are to be used solely for the purposes of individual or group study with other students enrolled in the class. They may not be reproduced, shared in any way (including electronically or posting in any web environment) with those not in the class. This rule is in accordance with University policy and is intended to protect the privacy of the students and instructor. Students with disabilities who need to record classroom lectures or discussions must contact Student Access and Accommodation Services to register, request and be approved for an accommodation. Students who violate this policy may be subject to both legal sanctions for violations of copyright law and disciplinary action under the University’s Code of Student Conduct.

CAMPUS SAFETY: Illinois State University is committed to maintaining a safe environment for the University community. Please take a few moments to make sure you are signed up for ISU Emergency Alerts at [IllinoisState.edu/EmergencyAlert](https://illinoisstate.edu/EmergencyAlert). Also, note the information posted in each classroom about emergency shelters and evacuation assembly areas (both are indicated on stickers inside every classroom). Additional safety information is available on the Campus Safety and Security website, Security.IllinoisState.edu.

RIGOR AND ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS: Since this is a 300-level, upper class course, I expect that the quality of your work should reflect this level of education. Your definition of “300-level quality” may be different from mine. I have high standards and do not apologize for them. I want you to be as prepared as you can be for life after college, and challenging you to do your best is the core, primary responsibility of any teacher. By this point in your academic careers, your writing should be formal and relatively free from grammatical and mechanical problems. If you are still struggling with your writing at this point in your academic life, you **MUST** receive help. I will help you the best I can, but you may find you need additional support by way of tutors, mentors, the Visor Center, peers, etc. Seriously – all of you will be entering into careers that will demand quality writing skills and now is probably the last opportunity you will have to polish and fine-tune such skills.

While I will try to be understanding and flexible on a case-by-case basis (which means you need to communicate with me ahead of time if you’re experiencing difficulties), I will also expect all of you to perform your best in our class. This includes the way you engage in class discussions, the way you critically read the material, and the way you write your papers. Finally, I work hard to ensure my grading criteria are clear. You know on day-one what is expected this semester, so plan and prepare now, seek help when you need it, and do the work.

IN-CLASS LANGUAGE: If I accidentally use an incorrect gender pronoun when addressing you or if I accidentally say something objectionable or offensive, please feel free to let me know, preferably in private. Please do not hesitate to discuss (in a respectful and polite way) these sorts of issues with me so that I can make every effort to adjust. I consider myself a “work-in-progress” – I am not perfect and can make mistakes. But, I sincerely am working to improve – and I want to improve – but I may not realize if I say something inadvertently. This goes for everyone – if someone says something objectionable, let’s initially show them some grace and politely use it as a learning experience. If such behavior continues, come to me in private to discuss possible solutions.

ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT: Cheating and plagiarism will not be tolerated. This includes cutting and pasting from the Internet (even if such cutting/pasting have a reference), and generally any material that is not your own unless broken off with quotation marks and cited to the proper author. You **MUST** cite material **EACH** time it is used – NOT just at the end of a paragraph. Specifically for this class, intentional borrowing material from others without proper citation or falsification/fabrication of supporting material, will automatically result in a ZERO for that assignment and may result in additional action taken by the appropriate university officials. You are expected to be honest in all academic work, consistent with the academic integrity policy as outlined in the Code of Student Conduct. All work is to be appropriately cited when it is borrowed, directly or indirectly, from another source. Unauthorized and unacknowledged collaboration on any work, or the presentation of someone else’s work, is plagiarism. Students found to inadvertently commit acts of dishonesty will receive appropriate penalties specific to the assignment in question. In certain circumstances, I may be required to refer violations to the Office of Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution. If you are unsure about whether something may be plagiarism or another form of academic dishonesty, please reach out to me to discuss it as soon as possible.

Content generated by an Artificial Intelligence, third-party service, or site (AI-generated content) without proper attribution or authorization is another form of plagiarism. While students might use generative AI tools to support independent study practices (e.g., the brainstorming of ideas), content created in whole or **in part** by AI may not be incorporated into any assigned coursework without proper citation. And, since accurately citing AI work is virtually impossible (the answers to AI prompts change with each iteration), you should stay safe by just not using it at all.

In this course, the use of generative AI tools (such as ChatGPT or Adobe Firefly) is not permitted during the completion of any assigned work unless properly cited (“proper citing” can be done like I referred to using ChatGPT in the section on the previous page when I discuss how to attach a document to an email). Use of a generative AI tool to complete assigned work in whole or in part may be referred under the Code of Student Conduct academic dishonesty provisions for further action by the Dean of Students Office. Students may use generative AI tools to support their independent study of course topics (i.e., for “help” understanding something), but should do so with the understanding that generative AI tools may not be trustworthy and should **not** be used for the actual production of any written work authored by the student. In certain circumstances, I may be required to refer violations to the Office of Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution.

To clarify: if you ask an AI platform to provide research for you, and you do not properly cite the information or the AI program (which is difficult to do), then you will be committing plagiarism. If you use the AI platform to help you write parts of your paper – “help” that goes beyond a simple grammar or spell-check – then that can also be considered academic dishonesty. The best way to avoid this mess is to not use AI for your academic research or writing. However, if you absolutely need help with research, then I suggest you **not** use ChatGPT. As you know, it simply scours the internet and churns back what it finds — sort of like a Google on steroids. Instead, use Perplexity.ai. It is also free, but unlike ChatGPT, Perplexity will also provide you citations of where it located the information. Then, you can click on those sources and cite them in your paper! Of course, only use them and cite them if they are appropriate, relevant, and verified sources. In this way, Perplexity actually helps you do the research, instead of just giving you an answer that you can't verify and have no idea if it is really accurate or not.

As a practicing rule, ***if you are unsure about whether something may be plagiarism or another form of academic dishonesty, please reach out to me to discuss it as soon as possible***.

CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR: We want to build a classroom climate that is comfortable for all. It is important that we (1) display respect for all members of the classroom; (2) pay attention to and participate in all class sessions and activities; (3) avoid unnecessary disruption during class time (e.g., having private conversations, reading the newspaper, surfing the Internet, doing work for other classes, making/receiving phone calls, text messaging, arriving late, making noise when departing to use the restroom, etc.); and (4) avoid racist, sexist, homophobic, or other negative language that may unnecessarily exclude our peers. This is not an exhaustive list of behaviors; rather, it represents examples of the types of things that can have a dramatic impact on the class environment. If you continue to engage in objectionable behavior after it is brought to your attention, your overall participation grade may suffer as well as possible disciplinary action.

GRADE RECORDS: Always keep careful records of your progress, until you receive a final grade for the course. This is especially true for group assignments. ***It is your responsibility to keep track of your academic progress.*** They will **NOT** be posted on our Canvas site.

EXTRA CREDIT: I do not offer or grant extra credit. To be honest, I've never quite understood the concept except as a way to coerce students into doing something out of class. In my courses, you know on the very first day what is expected of you, the grade weight of all assignments, and how to earn the grades you want. Every student can receive an "A" in this course if they do what is expected according to everything described in this syllabus.

COMMUNICATION: We can communicate in a couple of different ways. First, you can always email me. You should email me directly at zompetti@ilstu.edu (email me directly from your email account; do NOT email me through the Canvas function). You should **always** use your ISU email address (@ilstu.edu) when emailing me. Do not use a personal email address. If you do, I will assume it is spam and delete it. Avoid that problem by emailing me from your ISU email address. Second, we can chat before and after class, provided that we adhere to social distancing. Finally, we can meet face-to-face on campus. My office (414 Fell Hall) is available for office hours.

There may be various times during the semester that require you to send me an email. Here are a few VITAL things to consider:

1. All emails should come from your ilstu school account.
2. All emails should have a subject description. These can be brief, but they should indicate broadly what the topic of the email concerns.
3. All emails should have text. DO NOT send an email with just an attachment, for example, that has no text. This is bad form and unprofessional. You should have a greeting, some sentences that describe the nature of the email, and then a valediction of some sort.
4. Some emails will require an attachment. Be sure to closely follow the directions as to if the attachment should be a Word document, an Adobe PDF, etc.
5. An attachment is NOT a hyperlink to some other page. An attachment is the actual document or item that is linked to the email. It is the actual document as it occurs on your computer that is then connected to the email for the recipient to open. If you do not know how to use attachments, here is the simple process (these steps were generated, in-part, by ChatGPT):

A. Attach the File:

- Look for the **paper clip icon** or an "Attach" button, usually located near the subject line or at the bottom of the email window.
- Click on the paper clip icon. This will open a file explorer window.
- Navigate to the location on your computer where the file you want to attach is stored.
- Select the file and click **Open**. The file will now be attached to your email.

B. Review and Send:

- Make sure the attachment appears in the email (you should see the file name listed).
- Once everything looks good, click the **Send** button to send your email with the attachment.

TRIGGER WARNING: Please note that some course content may be deemed offensive by some students, although it is not my intention to offend anyone. In addition, some materials might be considered offensive, troubling, or difficult to review in terms of language or graphics. I will *not* provide trigger warnings for particular readings or material – you should consider this general warning applicable to everything in the course, AND you should be able to handle or cope with sensitive material by yourselves. You are in college and are close to entering the workforce on your own. This means, of course, that you need to develop skills now in terms of handling sensitive material on your own. If you need assistance, or if you find some material particularly objectionable, please come see me in private so we can discuss the material and possible ways of dealing with it.

FINAL NOTE: ISU remains committed to creating and maintaining a working, learning and living environment that is welcoming, supportive, respectful, inclusive, diverse and free from discrimination and harassment. The nature of this course requires reading and examining controversial issues. By their nature, controversial issues foster disagreement. Our efforts in this course are to analyze these issues, discuss them, and criticize the strengths and weaknesses of the rhetorical messages and strategies employed in political rhetoric. As such, respect and tolerance for the interrogation of other people's views in this course are imperative. At the same time, we should also be mindful of the sensitivities of others. If someone – including me – uses language that you find offensive or inappropriate, please kindly let them and/or the class know so that we can learn from each other and improve our climate of civility. Engaging in civil discourse is both a privilege and a responsibility of living in a democratic society. This class will provide both anticipated and unexpected opportunities to engage in this kind of conversation. Ultimately, everyone should remember that this is safe space to learn – if someone lacks knowledge in something, we have the opportunity to learn from each other. Keep this in mind if a disagreement occurs – we're all here to learn, we are all in the same boat, and none of us is the "enemy."

GRADING ISSUES

Failure to turn in any of the course requirements may result in failure of the overall course. I grade your work based on the final product, not your effort. The Grading Scale is an A (4) = 90-100, B (3) = 80-89, C (2) = 70-79, D (1) = 60-69, F (0) = 0-59. Here are the grading criteria I will use to holistically evaluate the quality of everyone's papers:

Superior (A) — Focused, well-written, thoughtful and well-organized argument in response to the assignment. The writer demonstrates the highest degree of intellectual engagement by competently using concepts, terms, and examples; plus the writer may address related issues of interest or further investigation to the assignment. The paper adheres to the expectations for the assignment, and the writer demonstrated maturity (i.e., style and tone) consistent with the expectations for college courses. The paper demonstrates competence in language use and manuscript preparation, and it is free or nearly free of grammatical, spelling, formatting and other errors. Research from external sources goes well beyond the minimum necessary for the assignment.

Very Good (B) — Discussion of concepts and terms related to the assignment is okay but needs more application through explanations, examples, or other devices to demonstrate understanding. Intellectual engagement with the assignment's topic is sufficient and may include additional points of interest related to the course's content. The writing suffers from some problems in grammar, spelling, mechanics, organization, etc., and the style or tone of the writing is ineffective in places.

Adequate (C) — Discussion reflects primarily on one's self, answering only the "what" part of the assignment and not the "why." Analysis is only at a surface level with limited, direct application of the course's concepts. The writing suffers from frequent problems in basic matters of grammar, spelling, mechanics, organization, etc., and the style and tone of the writing is ineffective and/or inappropriate in many places in the text.

Poor (D) — Discussion of concepts lacks depth, having no or nearly no application of the course's content for the assignment. Analysis presents little or no thoughtful reflection. Ideas are oversimplified and limited. The writing suffers from significant, numerous problems in multiple areas, including style and tone.

Failure (F) — The writer's work does not fulfill the assignment on any of the grounds for other letter grades, or the writer did not turn in the assignment. A "failed" paper also is replete with mistakes that violate the "grammar tips" at the end of this syllabus. An "F" paper is not college-level writing.

Also Note the following regarding my grading of grammar and mechanics: I will generally deduct one point for each grammatical/mechanical mistake when grading your written work. If there is a recurring grammar or mechanical error (e.g., frequent run-on sentences), I will stop deducting points after three errors – in other words, if you commit 16 run-on sentences, I will only deduct points for the first three. One final important note – since the grammar and mechanical issues are based on points deducted, the overall paper grade can mathematically reflect little value placed on the content if the mechanics outweigh or overwhelm the substantive portion of the paper. In other words, you can feasibly receive (for example) a 10 or a 5 or a zero on a paper due to poor writing even if the rest of the assignment is satisfied. Some of you may feel this is too draconian for an undergraduate class. I assure you that future employers expect strong communication skills from our graduates, including superior writing skills. You should also know that I will help you, if you ask. Even if you think you are a strong writer, each of you should begin by reviewing my "writing tips" (under "Files" on our course Canvas page) that you can use for this class and the rest of your writing careers. I will also try to provide class time to discuss writing assignments, if time allows. Finally, you should also know that you can always ask to meet me during office hours or appointments and I will be glad to help you. Having said that, I have relaxed my "grammar" standards substantially over the years. I have restructured this course to emphasize content over mechanics, including more rigorous discussions and more reflective and class-tailored writing assignments. Nevertheless, a graduate from this university should still know how to write well.

GRADE ALLOCATION

Participation (10 days x 10 pts)	100 pts.
Participation Log	25 pts.
Leading class discussion	50 pts.
SPAR debates (6 debates x 100)	600 pts.
Participation rationale paper	25 pts.
Foundation paper	50 pts.
Reflection (final) Paper	150 pts.
<hr/> Total	<hr/> 1000 pts

ASSIGNMENTS

All work should be presented to me as a hard copy (not email) with the following important considerations:

- All work should be written in Microsoft Word – you have free access to all basic Microsoft products by navigating to this page and using your ULID: <https://sso.illinoisstate.edu/idp/profile/SAML2/Redirect/SSO?execution=e1s2>
- All work should be in 12-point Times New Roman font

For **EVERY** class day, you need to bring a writing utensil (pen or pencil) and blank, lined or unlined, paper that is 8 ½” x 11.” Given the very limited use of electronic devices in our class, you should take hand-written notes. You should have your pen and paper on your desk as soon as class begins.

Make sure you proofread all of your work and they are emailed to yourself or saved in the cloud or on OneDrive. If you forget to proofread or if you misplace your work do not expect me to be sympathetic. Any late work will be automatically reduced one-letter grade for every class period that it is late (see above regarding my policy on late work). If you foresee problems, make sure you discuss them with me BEFORE the assignment is due. The assignments for this class are as follows (more detailed descriptions will come later if necessary):

1. Discussions/Participation: As I mention above, you need to attend each class prepared, which means you should have read the material for that day. For each reading day (beginning **Tuesday, February 10**), you will be expected to come to class prepared and ready to engage the readings and concepts in class discussion. If you do not meaningfully participate, it will become painfully clear to me that you either did not read or that you are unprepared. You should also remember that a substantial portion of your overall course grade is devoted to discussion/participation points. To this end, each of you will be required to produce 5 critical observations for EACH reading that is due for each discussion day. “Critical observations” may be critical questions or critical issues worthy of discussion. What do I mean by “critical”? I mean questions that probe higher levels of thinking – compare/contrast, deep analysis, etc. I **do not** mean questions such as “according to the author, what is the concept of rhetoric”? Instead, a better question would be “The author describes rhetoric as ____; how is this helpful when analyzing _____?” Additionally, for **each** observation, you should put the page number of the reading for which you question/comment pertains – in other words, reference the page where your question/comment relates. And, you should **bring with you** to class the actual readings so we can refer to the pages of the readings in our discussions. These should be typed, with your name, and handed to me at the conclusion of the class period. The course grade includes, by default, 100 points for discussion.

2. SPAR Debates: SPAR debates is an acronym for “spontaneous argumentation.” We will engage in these 6 (six) times during the semester – see the tentative schedule below for the dates. A complete description of this assignment is listed toward the end of this syllabus.

3. Leading Class Discussion: Each of you will lead the class in discussion about that particular day's reading material (these begin on **Tuesday, February 10**, and you can find the list from which to choose toward the end of this syllabus). You will carefully read through the material due for your discussion day, prepare a succinct, precise, and brief 5-minute overview of the topic material for that day, and generate a list of critical questions about the material. Your responsibility will be to provide a summary of the theory/material and stimulate discussion for that day. *At the conclusion of your presentation, you will need to submit to me your outline, the list of your questions, and a bibliography.* I will post the list of assigned presentation days, then you choose the one you want by notifying me, and I will then post the comprehensive sign-up sheet on our Canvas site. Since the assignment also asks you to do some **external research** (i.e., research beyond what is already scheduled for the class to read), you should find material that relates to the topic area but that is relatively recent (i.e., generally anything after August 2024). Since we will discuss each divisive topic issue during two days of class, **it is your responsibility to chat with the leader of the same topic on the other day to divide the labor – you should NOT repeat the same material.** I will be looking for the following when determining your grade:

- a. Do you have insightful questions about the reading material for the class to discuss?
- b. Do you keep the discussion going? Do you invite, engage, and involve other students?
- c. Are you flexible in your questions to ask new ones as they emerge from the discussion?
- d. Are you mindful of the time? (be sure to get through all of the material for that day)
- e. *Are you encouraging everyone to participate?* Are you respectful of others' comments?
- f. Are you prepared and energetic?
- g. Did you do outside reading to prepare you for leading class discussion? (This means that you should consult other sources to help inform you about the material to be discussed that day in class. You should use additional material to help you frame your questions, add to the discussion at key points, and help you with handling the overall discussion.) This material should also be recent to highlight something contemporary regarding the readings due for your presentation day (i.e., 2024 and after).
- h. Did you **succinctly** and accurately provide an overview of the theory/material? (this should NOT exceed 10 minutes and ideally should be around 5 minutes).
- i. IF IT IS NOT YOUR DAY TO PRESENT – you are still expected to read the material and participate each day of class.
- j. **Do you emphasize the Socratic Method when examining the day's readings?** (view the material about what constitutes the Socratic Method in the "Files" section on our Canvas page).
- k. Finally, do you emphasize the rhetorical techniques used related to the topic content of the day's readings?

*You will also receive participation points for 5 critical questions for each day of reading, as explained above under "class discussion." In other words, you do NOT need to submit additional observations – your discussion lead will count for those as well.

4. Foundation Paper: **This is due Thursday, Feb. 5.** You need to develop your own, scholarly/formal definition of the concept of "politics." It is important that this definition reflects YOUR understanding and definition of the concept, not my definition or anyone else's definition. However, you may use other materials to support your definition. In fact, any use or reflection or depiction or borrowing information from another source MUST be appropriately and accurately cited according to the latest APA, Chicago, or MLA style guidebooks. After stating your definition, you then need to explore the following, as they relate to your definition and to each other: 1) does politics just relate to aspects of government or governance, or are there other domains where "politics" occur? 2) how does the concept of "politics" relate to power? 3) is there just one, monolithic type of power, or are there different types of power? 4) define the concept of "rhetoric," according to your perspectives and experiences; 5) how do you define "ideology"? Why is understanding ideology important in "political communication" and significant in our daily lives? 6) Moreover, how are the concepts of politics, ideology, power, and rhetoric related, or are they? Finally, you need to address how you typically locate (or are exposed to) political issues, or do you? You should mention here if you receive political knowledge from social media platforms, legacy/mainstream news, or other sources. What are some of the implications on our overall political landscape regarding the increasing use of online – mostly social media – news sources?

For each of these prompts, you must address the "why" or "why not" aspect to the particular concept. Do not use lists or bullet points – answer the prompts in paragraph form so that your writing is fluid, with transitions between the main ideas. Pay attention to nuance and how these concepts relate to each other. Remember that EACH word you write in a scholarly essay should have a particular reason to exist; in other words, avoid fluff. In order to master this aspect of writing, you need to be succinct and use words with vibrant, rich, and descriptive meanings. For example, you could say "I traversed the hiking trails" instead of "I went along the trails." Or, you might say, "when visiting Rome, my senses were on overload as my nose smelled garlic from the many open-air cafes, my eyes attempted to capture the ancient and grandiose architecture, and my ears cherished the romantic energy emanating from the Italians scurrying about who were whistling and humming as they cherished "la dolce vita!" Instead, you could say something mundane, such as "walking around Rome was cool."

(Foundation paper, con't):

The most important parts of this assignment are for you to begin thinking more analytically about scholarly concepts, completing a writing assignment early in the semester so you can receive feedback that will help you with the other writing assignments, and to provide a “baseline” regarding your current experiences with and practices about rhetorical and political perspectives. To encourage you to think more strategically and succinctly about your formal writing, you must **not exceed five pages** (which includes references) in Times New Roman 12-point font that is double-spaced. Remember that this paper must concern your viewpoints and encounters with political rhetoric, although you may consult and/or use as supporting evidence and material from scholarly sources; but, if you do, you must reference them completely and accurately. Finally, you may use the first person “I” in your paper (but NEVER use the second person “you”), and your writing should follow a formal, academic style as outlined in “**Dr. Z’s Writing Tips**” (which you can find under “Files” on the class Canvas site). You should read carefully and abide by my writing tips. In other words, this paper should be written according to formal, academic standards. Each grammatical-type error will receive a .5-point deduction. Please also consult the section in the syllabus about the use of AI (artificial intelligence).

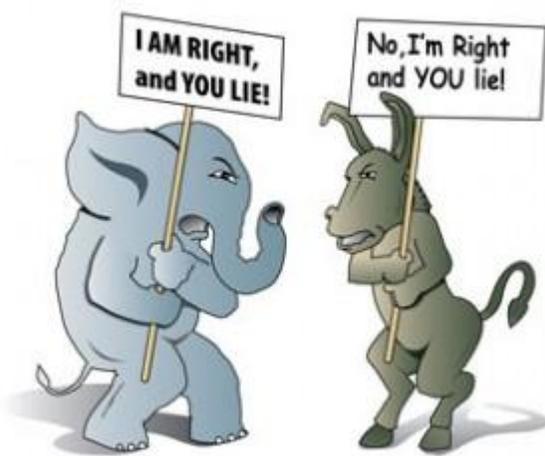
5. Participation Log & Participation Rationale Paper: The purpose of this assignment is to provide you with a mechanism to carefully track your participation over the semester. To accomplish this goal, you will construct a log of your participation efforts including, but not limited to, the following activities: level of preparedness for class (e.g., completing readings, coming to class prepared to engage in discussion), engagement in class discussion (e.g., oral contributions to class discussion, participation in class activities), outside of class involvement (e.g., readings not assigned for the class related to course content, participation in on-campus activities related to course content, talking with others about course content), and number of absences. An example of a participation log (at end of the syllabus) and an example of the participation rationale paper can be found in our “Files” section of our Canvas page. On **Monday, May 4**, you will submit your participation log along with a 1-2 page rationale paper – this paper should be structured as an argument (your claim/contention that is supported with reasoning and evidence). Using your participation log and any other evidence you can use as support (e.g., examples), the paper should document and explain your involvement in the course to justify the point total you believe you have earned in the course. Your rationale in this paper will be used – in addition to the instructor's notes and assessments – to determine your final participation grade.

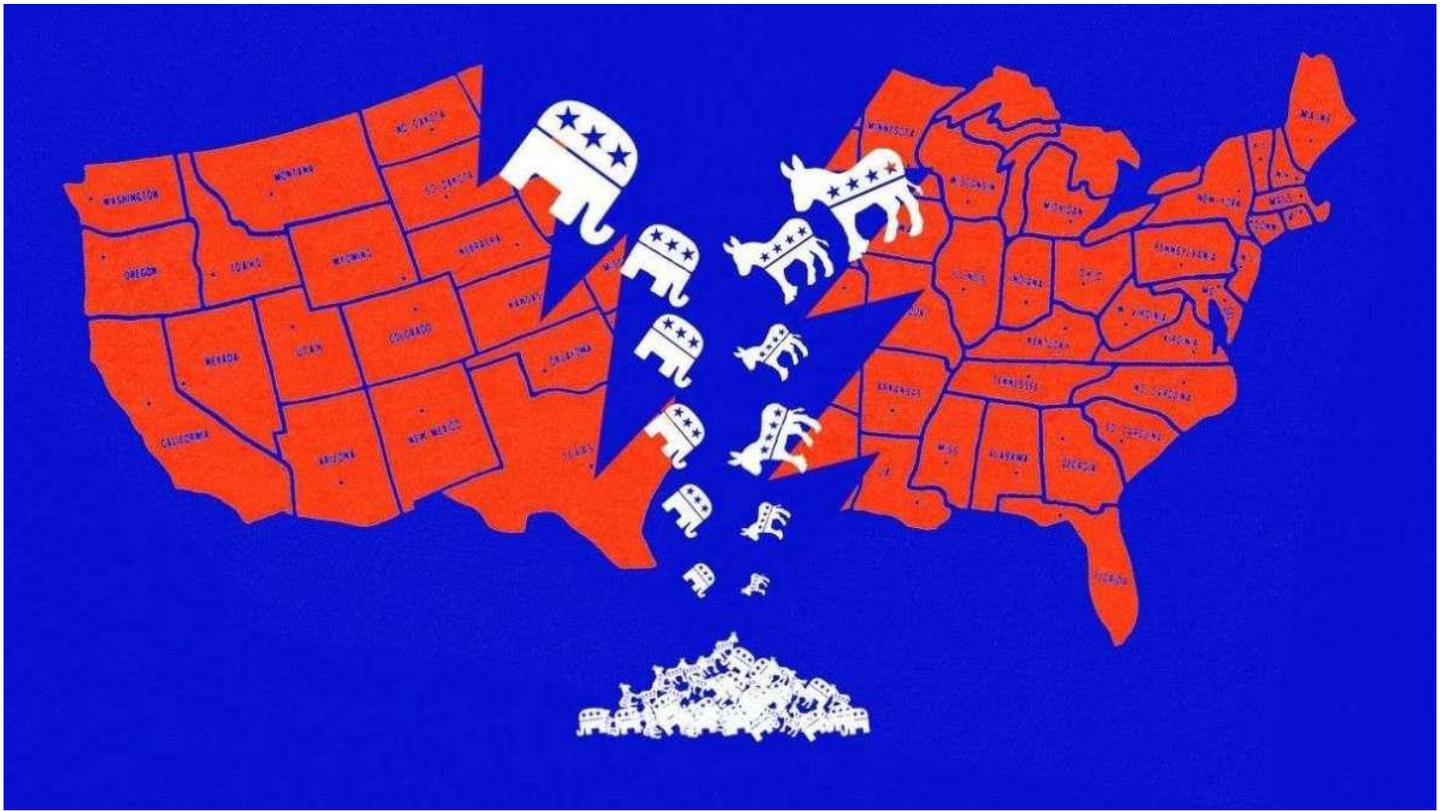
6. Reflection (final) Paper: **This is due Monday, May 4.** You need to take a deep dive into your own use of language regarding politics. Essentially, this paper allows you to express how you use language when discussing politics and how others use language when they discuss politics. You need to identify and explain the use of fallacies and other rhetorical techniques when you and others discuss politics. You **MUST** use concepts from the textbook – and when you do, you need to reference specific page numbers (you may quote or paraphrase from the book, but you need to cite it either way). While reflecting on divisive, political language in these ways, you should consider answering the following questions, although you are not limited to just these: a) what ideologies do you use to frame and make sense of political issues? b) how have you developed your ideologies and points of view? c) what are the main ways you learn about politics and develop your political perspectives – do you use social media, are you influenced by your family or peers, etc.? d) after taking this course, how will you negotiate your strong beliefs about particular issues while trying to encourage a climate of civility and respect? e) what sorts of techniques do you think you will use (or continue to use) when discussing with others who disagree with you? f) in what ways do you think you can help improve the tenor and effectiveness of political conversations, or do you think you have no role to play or do you think you are unable to meaningfully contribute to improving our societies’ political discourse (be sure to explain why or why not)? Again, you may write about more than these, but you need to at least start with these. Do **NOT** just bullet point or section these off – integrate them together into paragraphs with transitions.

You need to be as specific as possible and explain – in-depth – your reflections. Use brief examples when appropriate. A good way to gauge if you are answering the prompts well and to see if you are sufficiently explaining the ideas, ask the “how” and “why” questions – “how” are ideologies affecting our politics, and “why” are certain rhetorical techniques more toxic than others? Consistently asking “how” and “why” to the content of your writing should help you. These questions are not always going to work 100% of the time, but they are a good barometer to see if you’re on the right track. The length of the paper will probably vary depending on the person, so do not ask me how long it should be. The key is to sufficiently and adequately answer the prompts and carefully reflect on your relationship with language in as much detail as possible. Remember that **EACH** word you write in a scholarly essay should have a particular reason to exist; in other words, avoid fluff. In order to master this aspect of writing, you need to be succinct and use words with vibrant, rich, and descriptive meanings. Use a **THESAURUS** to use special words with detailed meanings. Finally, you should not forget to ground your answers in the course material. You may also use additional material and do additional research if you would like, but that is not an expectation. However, if you refer to a concept or issue – whether it is from class materials or from elsewhere – you must cite and reference sources accurately and appropriately. Review my writing tips (under “Files” on Canvas) and abide by the section in this syllabus labeled “Writing Assignments – general info.” And, remember it should be in Times New Roman 12-point font and submitted as a hard copy on Monday, May 4.

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS (general info):

All papers and written assignments must be typed, double-spaced, in paragraph form, and in 12-point Times New Roman font. For your own benefit, you should **NEVER USE YOUR PHONE** to write and/or proofread course work. There are many reasons why, and I'll be happy to discuss them with you if you are interested. The quality of your written work (grammar, punctuation, format, spelling, etc.) will be included in grading evaluations. The content of your work is necessarily implicated and impacted by the mechanics of the paper. Make sure you proofread all of your work and that it is saved to the Cloud or on a jumpdrive. If you forget to proofread or if you misplace your work, do not expect me to be sympathetic. I reserve the right to choose whether or not to accept any late work. Any accepted late work will be automatically reduced one-letter grade for every class period that it is late. If you foresee problems, make sure you discuss them with me BEFORE the assignment is due. In addition, make an argument!!!! Don't simply provide opinion. Support your reasons with sufficient evidence (including quotes, references, examples, etc.) that demonstrate, justify or prove your over-arching argument. All the written work asks you to analyze the rhetorical implications of something. The paper should also demonstrate your working vocabulary of the ideas expressed in the literature indicative of rhetoric and social movements or activist campaigns. **You should research your area thoroughly.** ANY AND ALL ARGUMENTS, IDEAS, WORDS, CONCEPTS, MATERIAL THAT IS NOT YOUR OWN MUST BE APPROPRIATELY FOOTNOTED AND CITED IN A BIBLIOGRAPHY PAGE. Any and all work or ideas taken from another person or entity must be appropriately cited. This means that **material MUST be cited EACH time it is used** in your written work (not a simple reference at the end of a paragraph or end of your paper), AND it must have an appropriate full reference in a footnote or works cited page. You should also avoid doing whatever is minimally necessary to meet the assignment. If you set your sights that low, the best you will receive will be a C for your work; after all, a C is average and reflects minimal work. To receive a high B or an A, you should go well beyond what is expected of you – surprise and impress me. **I will not accept emailed work – all written work must be printed and submitted to me as a hard copy.**





TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

WEEK ONE

T, 1/13 Class Begins – General overview of the course + book/reading requirements
R, 1/15 Introductions – What does polarization mean? What do politics mean to us?

WEEK TWO

T, 1/20 Lecture: The Nature of American Politics; read (skim) Doherty et al. (2021)
R, 1/22 Lecture: The Role of Ideology in Polarized Discourse

WEEK THREE

T, 1/27 Lecture: Power and Identity
R, 1/29 Lecture: Power and Identity

WEEK FOUR

T, 2/3 Lecture: Argumentation & fallacies; read: Zompetti (2018), preface & chp 1
R, 2/5 Remaining lecture – how to do SPAR debates (**foundation paper due**)

WEEK FIVE

T, 2/10 Topic 1: Disinformation & Fake News; read Rhodes (2022); read Zompetti, (2019); **leading class discussion & critical observations begin**
R, 2/12 Topic 1: Disinformation & Fake News; read Molla (2020); read U.S. National Archives (n.d.)

WEEK SIX

T, 2/17 Topic 1: SPAR debates
R, 2/19 Topic 1: SPAR debates

WEEK SEVEN

T, 2/24 Topic 2: Rhetoric of Immigration; read: Zompetti, chp. 6
R, 2/26 Topic 2: Rhetoric of Immigration; read: Zompetti, chp. 6

WEEK EIGHT

T, 3/3 Topic 2: SPAR debates
R, 3/5 Topic 2: SPAR debates

WEEK NINE

T, 3/10 Spring Break
R, 3/12 Spring Break

WEEK TEN

T, 3/17 Topic 3: Rhetoric of the Second Amendment; read: Zompetti, chp. 2
R, 3/19 Topic 3: Rhetoric of the Second Amendment; read: Zompetti, chp. 2

WEEK ELEVEN

T, 3/24 Topic 3: SPAR debates
R, 3/26 Topic 3: SPAR debates

WEEK TWELVE

T, 3/31 Topic 4: Rhetoric of Race; read: Zompetti, chp. 7
R, 4/2 Topic 4: Rhetoric of Race; read: Zompetti, chp. 7

WEEK THIRTEEN

T, 4/7 Topic 5: SPAR debates
R, 4/9 Topic 5: SPAR debates

WEEK FOURTEEN

T, 4/14 Topic 6: Climate Change; read Falkenberg et al. (2022); read Coulson (2023)
R, 4/16 Topic 6: Climate Change; read Falkenberg et al. (2022); read Coulson (2023)

WEEK FIFTEEN

T, 4/21 Topic 6: SPAR debates
R, 4/23 Topic 6: SPAR debates

WEEK SIXTEEN

T, 4/28 Conclusions: What Is To Be Done? Read Spitalniak (2025); read Stone et al. (2023); read Zompetti, the conclusion chapter
R, 4/30 Review day (if necessary)
M, 5/4 **Reflection Paper, participation rationale paper, & participation logs due** (hard copy only; due in Dr. Zompetti's office 2-5 pm)

LEADING CLASS DISCUSSION DATES:

WEEK FIVE

T, 2/10 (disinfo)

R, 2/12 (disinfo)

WEEK SEVEN

T, 2/24 (immigration)

R, 2/26 (immigration)

WEEK TEN

T, 3/17 (guns)

R, 3/19 (guns)

WEEK TWELVE

T, 3/31 (race)

R, 4/2 (race)

WEEK FOURTEEN

T, 4/14 (climate)

R, 4/16 (climate)

Extra Course Readings

Climate

Falkenberg, Max, Alessandro Galeazzi, Maddalena Torricelli, Niccoló Di Marco, Francesca Larosa, Madalina Sas, Amin Mekacher, Warren Pearce, Fabiana Zollo, Walter Quattrociocchi, & Andrea Baronchelli (2022). Growing Polarization around Climate Change on Social Media. *Nature Climate Change*, 12, 1114-1121. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-022-01527-x>

Coulson, Ella (2023, April 7). The Polarizing of Climate Change. *The Climate Change Review*. <https://www.theclimatechangereview.com/post/the-polarization-of-climate-change>

Conclusion: What Is To Be Done?

Spitalniak, Laura (2025, January 27). Polarization Is Battering Campuses. Here Is How College Leaders Are Fighting Back. *Higher Ed Dive*. <https://www.highereddive.com/news/polarization-campus-civil-discourse-dialogue-aacu-2025/738426/>

Stone, Douglas, Bruce Patton & Sheila Heen (2023). *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. NY: Penguin.

Disinformation

Molla, Rani (2020, November 10). Social Media Is Making a Bad Political Situation Worse. *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/recode/21534345/polarization-election-social-media-filter-bubble>

Rhodes, Samuel C. (2022). Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Fake News: How Social Media Conditions Individuals to be Less Critical of Political Misinformation. *Political Communication*, 39(1), 1-22.

U.S. National Archives (n.d.). How To Read the News. *The Situation Room Experience*. <https://situationroom.archives.gov/sites/default/files/file/SRE%20-%20How%20to%20Read%20the%20News.pdf>

Zompetti, Joseph P. (2019). The Fallacy of Fake News: Exploring Commonsensical Argument Appeals of Fake News Rhetoric through a Gramscian Lens. *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*, 9(3/4), 139-159.

Nature of American Politics

Doherty, Carroll, Jocelyn Kiley, Nida Asheer & Calvin Jordan (2021). *Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2021/11/PP_2021.11.09_political-typology_REPORT.pdf

SPAR DEBATES

Each student will debate once per topic (for a total of 6 debates); as such, each person will affirm 3 times and then negate 3 different topics. The pairings will be unannounced and random, so each student needs to be prepared to affirm and negate each topic. Preparing for both sides even though you will only debate one side per topic requires you to carefully and deeply think about the arguments on both sides of the debate. While this may be frustrating since you will be doing work for a side of each topic you ultimately will not use in the in-class debates, this type of preparation will enhance your critical thinking skills and should strengthen whichever position you actually discuss in the SPAR debate since you should know what arguments your opponent will most likely articulate. In addition to being prepared for either side, you must also be prepared to debate on either day that is scheduled. Each topic debate has 2 days allotted in the schedule, and we MUST fit all of the debates in those two days. You will not know which day you will be debating, so you need to be prepared to go on the first day even if you don't actually engage until the second day. This will also ensure that everyone is in attendance to hear all of the debates, even if they do not participate that day. By listening to others, you can notice weak spots that you want to avoid making and/or you can identify particularly strong points that you want to articulate as well. However, none of you should repeat exactly what others in the class are saying – you may discuss the same issues, but your debate should be in your own words, and you should try to use different forms of evidence to illustrate you have prepared your own work instead of copying from your peers. In order for this to run smoothly and for us to have time for everyone to engage in their debates, you MUST be ready to argue instantly, and you must arrive to class on-time. If a student is late to class, they forfeit their debate for that topic (and their opponent will automatically receive full credit). Similarly, if a student is not prepared to engage immediately, they will forfeit. When preparing your arguments, you MUST use the textbook for at least two of your three core arguments (when doing so, you can quickly say, “according to the Zompetti book, blah, blah.” Of course, you may conduct additional research (especially if you need more recent evidence since the book was published) if you desire or feel like your position will be more compelling if you do so. However, at a minimum, you must use the text for the majority of your arguments.

Each debate will be structured like this:

1st Affirmative: 2 minutes – make at least 3 arguments supporting the motion, which also means using evidence to support each point.

1st Negative: 2 minutes – quickly answer the Affirmative's arguments and then make at least 3 arguments opposing the motion, which also means using evidence to support each point; if answering the Aff's points are taken care of or subsumed by the 3 core Neg arguments, the Negative side need only articulate one – in other words, avoid repetition if advancing an argument and opposing their argument are functionally the same.

2nd Affirmative: 1 minute – quickly answer the Neg's arguments, then extend your initial points, then quickly answer the “so what” question – why is your side the better side? (e.g., your side might be better because it is best for the most people; it might be better if you have stronger evidence; it might be better if it supports/strengthens democracy, etc.)

2nd Negative: 1 minute – quickly answer the Aff's arguments, then extend your initial points, then quickly answer the “so what” question – why is your side the better side? (e.g., your side might be better because it is best for the most people; it might be better if you have stronger evidence; it might be better if it supports/strengthens democracy, etc.)

Each side may ask questions of the other side if they so choose for clarification purposes, but they are not required to do so. In the event a side asks questions, the duration of that cross-examination period shall not exceed 1 minute (for both parties total – meaning no more than 2 minutes for cross-examination will be allowed). Additionally, each side may use up to 1 minute of preparation time at any point in the debate, totaling no more than 2 minutes for both parties for the duration of the debate.

Ergo, total actual debate time: **6 minutes**. Total time if both cross-examination and prep time are used: **10 minutes**.

Since we have two days scheduled for each topic area, we will need to have 5 debates each day. Thus, again, please be on-time and ready to rumble once class begins. This also means that we need to have smooth, quick transitions between each debate. The overall purposes of these debates are: 1) they allow you to demonstrate your knowledge of the topic areas, 2) they allow you to illustrate how you have read and understood the material from the book and our conversations, 3) they provide an extra evaluation assignment to measure your knowledge acquisition instead of just writing and in-class discussions, 4) they accentuate communication skills and processes that are relatively insulated from AI use, and 5) they should bolster your critical thinking skills. Finally, while these are “debates,” they are NOT competitions. No one will “win” or “lose.” These are solely intended to succinctly highlight the key ideas and arguments involving current issues of controversy so that, as a class, we can see the merits and drawbacks to various positions with current, contentious problems in our society. Fundamentally, at the end of the semester, these SPAR debates should also reveal how we can have conversations about polarizing issues in a way that is civil, respectful, and meaningful in order to gain knowledge and an understanding of different points of view.

