Instructor: Dr. Katherine Ognyanova  
Email: katya.ognyanova@rutgers.edu  
Online Office Hours: Book your preferred time at ognyanova.youcanbook.me  
(e-mail me if none of the available times work for you)  
• Zoom video or audio call: bit.ly/ko-office-hours  
• Phone call: (609) 759-0896  
Course Time: Thursday, 4:30pm-7:10pm  
Course Zoom: bit.ly/zoom-670 (different from the office hours link!)  
• Meeting ID: 926 4446 8399  
• Password: 960759  
• Join by phone: +1 646 558 8656  
Course Website: canvas.rutgers.edu  

Course Description  
This course will explore major public policy issues and challenges facing American democracy that have been placed in stark relief by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic will be used as a case study for exploring important social issues related to politics, policy, and public opinion.  
The course will be taught virtually by faculty from three universities: Rutgers University, led by Dr. Katherine Ognyanova; Harvard University, led by Dr. Matthew Baum and Northeastern University, led by Dr. Jon Green. The class will combine theory with applied insights from The COVID States Project (covidstates.org)  

Learning Objectives  
At the end of the course, students will be able to critically review the theory, methodology, and findings of research examining key issues affecting Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic, including public trust, political polarization, socio-economic inequality, health policy and media.
Course Format

Our course will be conducted fully online using a synchronous format. We will meet weekly over Zoom using this link: bit.ly/zoom-670. Zoom is available for free to all Rutgers students - follow the instructions here to register for it.

Each week, the class will be conducted live across the three participating universities, with the host university rotating depending on which faculty member has the lead in a given week.

Class sessions will begin with a lecture (30-60 minutes) regarding a conceptual issue, followed by a class discussion of a mini case study related to the problem. Afterwards, we will conduct an Oxford-style debate in which two student teams will debate a pre-determined policy question arising from the topic at hand. At the end of each class, Rutgers students will also have a brief discussion of research methods.

Contact Information

Do not hesitate to contact me if you have questions, ideas, problems, or concerns related to this class. I encourage you to stop by for a chat during office hours at least once during the semester.

You can sign up for office hours meetings with me at ognyanova.youcanbook.me. If the times listed there do not work for you, e-mail me and we will find another convenient time to schedule an appointment. The office hours will be conducted over Zoom at bit.ly/ko-office-hours. Alternatively, you can call over the phone at (609) 759-0896 (direct number).

The most reliable way to reach me outside of office hours is over e-mail. Send your messages to katya.ognyanova@rutgers.edu. Please include “SCI 670” in the e-mail subject – that ensures your message will be tagged as high-priority mail and receive prompt attention. I will typically respond within a couple of days of receiving your email.

Required Readings

There is no required textbook for this class. All readings will be available on the course’s Canvas website (canvas.rutgers.edu). Log in using your Rutgers NetID, navigate to the course site, and browse the Modules page. The reading materials for each week of class are also listed in the Course Outline section of this syllabus.

If you encounter a problem with Canvas, you can contact the Rutgers Canvas help desk at help@oit.rutgers.edu or call them at 833-648-4357.

Course Attendance

You are expected to attend all classes. If you are unable to attend classes for longer than one week, you should contact a dean of students who can help verify your circumstances. University policy excuses absences due to religious observance or participation and permits students to make up work missed for that reason. You should notify me at least two weeks in advance if you are unable to come to class or take an exam due to religious observance.
Course Requirements and Evaluation

Participation (100 points)
In this course, we will work together to review and examine critical questions and themes related to communication and technology. Much of the class will be discussion-based, with limited lecturing on key points. Everyone is expected to be active in contributing to the conversations we will have in class. You should read all the required materials carefully and thoroughly, reflect critically on their strengths and weaknesses, identify their key points, and be prepared to discuss them.

Reading reflections (200 points)
Each week after you complete the required readings, you should write a brief reflection discussing two or more of them and share it with the class. Your writing should demonstrate original thinking rather than simply provide a summary of the readings.

The assignment should be submitted by the end of the day on Wednesday of each week. We will use the Canvas discussion feature to post the reading reflections. You can find that section under Discussions on the course site, or follow the links included in Course Materials.

Each reading reflection should be at least 250 words long. If some of your classmates have shared their reading reflections before you submit yours, I encourage you to respond to the points they have made. Your post should conclude with at least one thoughtful question you have that was provoked by the readings. We will discuss those questions in class.

To get the full 200 points for this assignment, you need to submit at least 10 reading reflections (worth 20 points each) that show critical thinking about the theories and themes examined in this class. Posts will only contribute to the reading reflection grade if they are published on time.

Debates (200 points)
At some point during the semester, each student will participate in an Oxford-style debate. The debates will take about 20 minutes and will be conducted during class time. Each debating team will consist of 2-3 members. You will be assigned a debate topic and partners at the start of the term. Students will be evaluated on their contributions to the debate alongside their team’s overall preparation and integration of course material, not whether their team wins the debate.

The debates will employ modified Oxford rules. A proposition will be put forward and we’ll poll class members for their position on the issue. There will be one “pro” and one “con” team for each debate. Each side will have up to 4 minutes to make its argument, followed by a 2-minute rebuttal of the opposing argument. You will be “on the clock” during the debate presentations and will be stopped in mid-presentation if you overshoot your allotted time.

Each member of the team must present part of its argument and/or rebuttal, although the team can decide how to divide the time. A team might choose to split both the argument and rebuttal time between its two members. Or, a team might decide to have one member present the argument and the other handle the rebuttal. After the rebuttal round, the debate will be opened...
to the full class for questions and arguments. Following the full-class debate, we will re-vote the proposition.

**Research design outlines (2 x 100 points)**

During the semester, you will write two research design outlines. Each should be 3-5 pages long, excluding references. The outlines should describe the design of two research projects exploring the themes and/or the methods we will examine in class. Each outline should include: (1) a brief theoretical setup grounding your research in existing literature; (2) research questions or hypotheses; and (3) a proposed methodology. Each submission should outline a different project that you are interested in and could feasibly do.

Design outlines should be submitted through the *Assignment* section of the Canvas website for this course. The due dates are as follows:

- **March 6**       Research design outline I  
- **April 10**      Research design outline II

I will provide feedback on each outline you submit. At the end of the semester, you will select one of your three ideas and develop it into a detailed research proposal.

**Research proposal (300 points)**

For your final project, you will select one of your design outlines and develop it into a comprehensive research proposal. The project should examine one or more aspects of the topics addressed in this course. Your proposal should include an empirical data collection strategy (e.g. a survey, interviews, digital trace data collection, content analysis, an experiment, etc.). The proposed methodology should be realistic, describing a project that you can feasibly complete (e.g. you should not suggest that you will complete ten thousand interviews; or analyze all the data on the Internet).

The proposal should include:

- A literature review summarizing relevant previous research in the area;
- Research questions or hypotheses. You should provide an appropriate justification of the hypotheses, or an explanation of the importance and originality of the research questions;
- A detailed description of the data collection and analysis – including recruitment or sampling strategies where appropriate, as well as the instruments that will be used to collect the data (e.g. if you are using a survey, you should attach it as an appendix; if you are using interviews or focus groups, you should include a protocol for them; if you are using digital trace data, you should describe all the tools used to collect it and how you intend to employ those). Your methodology should also describe exactly how your collected data will be analyzed to examine your research questions or test your hypotheses.
- A bibliography containing the list of references cited in the paper.

The proposal should be 15-20 pages long and should include at least 20-25 references. The text should be double-spaced, using a 12-point font with a 1-inch margin on all sides. It should be
formatted in APA style (one resource about it is the Purdue Online Writing Lab). It is a good idea to use a citation manager to store and format your references (e.g. www.zotero.com).

Your writing should be clear and logically organized. The text should flow smoothly and demonstrate an excellent writing style. Be sure to carefully proofread the final draft and confirm that it is clearly written, grammatically correct, and free of spelling errors.

Assignments should be submitted through the Assignments section of Canvas by May 8. Your submission should be included as a single-file attachment in PDF or Word format. Papers submitted by e-mail will not be accepted. Late papers will be accepted up to 5 days after the deadline, but each day of delay will reduce your grade by 20 points.

On out last day of class, you will present your research proposal and get one more chance to receive peer and instructor feedback before submitting a final draft. Research presentations should be 15-20 minutes long (depending on the number of students in class).

**Grade Breakdown & Scale**

A and B grades in this course are reserved for outstanding work. To get a high grade, students need to participate actively in class, be thorough and careful in assignments, and demonstrate excellent understanding of the subject, research skills, critical thinking, and originality in their work. The grade breakdown is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class participation</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading reflections</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debate team</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research outlines</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research proposal</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1000</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The final grade will be awarded according to the following scale:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Points Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>900-1000 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>850-899 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>800-849 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>750-799 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>700-749 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>600-699 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Below 600 points</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Grade appeals

You can appeal individual assignment grades in writing up to 7 days after the grades are announced. In order to be reviewed, your appeal has to be submitted over e-mail. Once the course grades are announced, they are final and will only be changed in case of an error in the computation of the student’s score.

Academic Integrity

You are required to complete your own assignments and always acknowledge the sources of contributions, materials, quotes, and ideas that you did not develop yourself. The consequences of scholastic dishonesty in this class and at Rutgers University in general are very serious. For more details, consult the University’s academic integrity policy. Any violation will at a minimum result in no credit earned for the assignment in question. Serious violations of academic integrity may prevent students from completing the course or their academic program. If you have questions about issues related to plagiarism or academic integrity, do not hesitate to contact me.

Accommodation

This course will accommodate any student in need of assistance. Students with documented disabilities who need accommodations should contact the Rutgers Disabilities Services Office (see disabilityservices.rutgers.edu for details). You can also speak with a SC&I adviser by visiting the Office of Student Services in the SC&I Building, Room 214 or calling them at 848-932-7500 (dial 2 as your menu choice). Please contact me with information about the requested assistance and present your Letter of Accommodation as early in the semester as possible.

Additional Resources

The university offers a number of resources that you can access if needed:

- If you need a consultation on research materials and ways to find them, you can contact the Rutgers University subject specialist librarians.
- The SC&I IT Services can help you with various technological problems. You can find them in CI 120, by phone at 848-932-5555, or by email at help@comminfo.rutgers.edu.
- If you encounter a problem with Canvas, you can contact the Rutgers Canvas help desk at help@oit.rutgers.edu or call them at 833-648-4357.
- Student wellness services are available to you at Rutgers. You can contact CAPS for mental health support at rhscaps.rutgers.edu or by phone at 848-932-7884.
- The Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance provides confidential crisis intervention, counseling, and advocacy for victims of sexual and relationship violence. You can reach VPVA at vpva.rutgers.edu and 848-932-1181.
- The Office of Disability Services can be reached for help with accommodation and facilities for students with disabilities at ods.rutgers.edu, or by phone at 848-445-6800.
- On occasion, the university may have to cancel classes due to inclement weather. To check if classes are canceled, visit campusstatus.rutgers.edu or call 732-932-7799.
## Course summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Main topic</th>
<th>Lead instructor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>January 20</td>
<td>Introductions, syllabus review</td>
<td>Ognyanova</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>January 27</td>
<td>Overview and historical context</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>February 3</td>
<td>Executive power</td>
<td>Baum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>February 10</td>
<td>Partisanship and polarization</td>
<td>Green</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>February 17</td>
<td>Voting and elections</td>
<td>Green</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>February 24</td>
<td>Foreign policy and pandemic diplomacy</td>
<td>Baum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>March 3</td>
<td>Civil liberties and democratic values</td>
<td>Baum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>March 6</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**March 6**

*Research outline I due*

| 8    | March 10   | Democratic institutions                              | Ognyanova       |
| 9    | March 24   | Inequality and the pandemic                          | Green           |
| 10   | March 31   | Protests                                             | Green           |
| 11   | April 7    | Mental health                                        | All             |
| 12   | April 14   | Science communication                                | Ognyanova       |
| 13   | April 21   | Media coverage                                       | Ognyanova       |
| 14   | April 28   | Misinformation                                       | Baum            |
| 15   | May 5      |                                                      | Ognyanova       |

**April 10**

*Research outline II due*

| 15   | May 5      | Final Presentations                                  | Ognyanova       |
|      | May 8      | Research proposal due                                |                 |
Course Outline

The course schedule is subject to change: materials may be added or replaced during the semester. If that happens, the changes will be reflected on Canvas and announced in class/over email.

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Week 1 – January 20

Introductions, syllabus review

Read the course syllabus.

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Week 2 – January 27

Overview and historical context


https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-021-03686-x

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Week 3 – February 3

Executive power


OPTIONAL:
Reports available at covidstates.org/reports:

- Executive Approval Reports:
  Report #5 (July 2020), Report #6: (July 2020), Report #12 (September 2020),
  Report #22 (October 2020), Report #46 (March 2021), Report #66 (October 2021),
- Report #15: Public Support for a COVID-19 Relief Package (September 2020)
- Report #19: Public Health and Trump Support (October 2020)
- Report #20: Public Opinion on Government Reaction to COVID-19 (October 2020)

DEBATE TOPIC:
It is unconstitutional executive overreach for the President to require that certain groups of Americans (e.g., healthcare workers, teachers, first responders) get the COVID vaccine.

Week 4 – February 10
Partisanship and polarization


DEBATE TOPIC:
The COVID-19 pandemic exposed fundamental flaws with the United States’ political institutions and system of government.

Week 5 – February 17
Voting and elections


DEBATE TOPIC:
The COVID-19 pandemic hurt Donald Trump’s chances of re-election.

Week 6 – February 24
Foreign policy and pandemic diplomacy


**DEBATE TOPIC:**

When it comes to sharing COVID vaccines with the world, America should first make sure that its own citizens are vaccinated before prioritizing help for other countries.

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**Week 7 – March 3**

**Civil liberties and democratic values**


**OPTIONAL:**

Reports available at covidstates.org/reports:

- Report #13: Trust in Institutions (September 2020)
DEBATE TOPIC:
Lockdowns and mandates for wearing masks and getting vaccinated are an unconstitutional violation of Americans’ civil liberties.

Week 8 – March 10
Democratic institutions


OPTIONAL:

DEBATE TOPIC:
In the early days of the pandemic, CDC could gain more public trust by emphasizing that scientists did not yet know enough about COVID-19, rather than issuing controversial policy recommendations.
Week 9 – March 24

Inequality and the pandemic


Jagannathan, M. (2021). People of color face multiple barriers to vaccine access—including “skepticism of a system that has treated them poorly.” MarketWatch. www.marketwatch.com/story/people-of-color-face-multiple-barriers-to-vaccine-access-including-skepticism-of-a-system-that-has-treated-them-poorly-11619444206

DEBATE TOPIC:

Pandemic-related economic relief should be means-tested, not universal.

Week 10 – March 31

Protests


**OPTIONAL:**
Watch video: *United in Anger* www.youtube.com/watch?v=MrAzU79PBVM

**DEBATE TOPIC:**
50 years from now we will consider the summer of 2020 to have fundamentally altered the course of U.S. politics.

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**Week 11 – April 7**

**Mental health**


DEBATE TOPIC:
Absent strict regulatory oversight, the proliferation of virtual mental health care (“teletherapy”) during the COVID-19 pandemic will likely do more harm than good for patients facing mental health challenges.

Week 12 – April 14
Science communication


OPTIONAL:


DEBATE TOPIC:
Medical experts should provide relevant information and advice, but they should not be on TV publicly advocating for specific government policies.

Week 13 – April 21
Media coverage


**DEBATE TOPIC:**

The consistent focus on negative developments in most US mainstream news coverage of COVID-19 did more harm than good to public health.

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**Week 14 – April 28**

**Misinformation and misperception**


OPTIONAL:
Reports available at covidstates.org/reports:

- Report #14: Misinformation and Vaccine Acceptance (September 2020)
- Report #18: Covid Fake News on Twitter (October 2020)
- Report #60: COVID-19 Vaccine Misinformation (August 2021)

DEBATE TOPIC:
Public health-related misinformation is a primary cause of vaccine hesitancy in the United States.

Week 15 – May 5
Final presentations