

Right Wing Populism Since the 1980s

Spring 2026
Wednesday, 3:00PM-5:30PM
Gilman 219
Course # AS.100.345 (01)
January 20th-April 27th



Figure 1. Ronald Reagan gives a press conference at his Santa Barbara Ranch in 1981.

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This seminar will explore the development of right-wing populism in the United States since the 1980s, beginning with Ronald Reagan's election and ending in the present day. A key focus will be the relationship between populist visions of American government, identity politics, and changing economic conditions. We will learn some of the methods and approaches of political history, economic history, and intellectual history.

Learning objectives:

- To historicize contemporary conservative populism by studying its roots, ideas, aims, and changes over time.

- To understand the relationship between populism, changing economic conditions, and discontent with liberalism and neoliberalism.
- To learn about methods, approaches, and scholarly debates in American political history, economic history, and intellectual history.

Readings:

There are no books required for this course. All readings are available through Canvas, either as scanned PDFs or online links (including electronic books through JHU libraries).

Assignments and Grades:

Attendance and Participation	20 points
Reading Journals	30
Midterm Paper	20
Final exam	30

Attendance and Participation (20 points): This is a qualitative grade. This course is a seminar, which means it primarily takes the form of discussion. But don't forget that we are here to learn how to engage in discussion of scholarly texts and primary sources, so if you feel uncomfortable with extended discussion, it's something you can improve over the course of the semester.

If you prepare for class by reading and taking notes, they can be the basis of your participation in class. To do well in this course, you will need to participate actively every single class. Respond to your peers and offer thoughts, questions, confusions, and other interventions in the moment, as well. Our classroom is a space where we are free to think out loud and explore ideas without knowing where they are leading, and without being sure we agree with them or even believe in them. You do not have to be sure of something to talk about it and we are all allowed to make mistakes. Since we are learning political history, it's important that we try not to conflate the analysis of ideas with personal beliefs. You are welcome to share your own beliefs, of course; but the course itself does not endorse any politics, and the point of classroom discussion is not to evaluate each other's beliefs.

Reading Journals (10 x 3 points each, for 30 points total): For three weeks this semester, you will write a short journal entry reflecting on one of the readings we have done. The journals are due on Wednesday. This is a "journal" in the sense that you are exploring your reactions and assessments of the text, as well as organizing your thoughts, creating questions, and digesting ideas. It is not analytic or evaluative writing. There is no need to summarize what you have read, unless you are recapping a point to explore it. I will provide you with a small prompt on Canvas to guide your reflection.

Each journal entry should be 2-3 paragraphs of original written reflection. Submitting an entry on

time automatically earns you full credit; there is no qualitative grading on these assignments. The professor will read your responses to better prepare for class discussion and may prompt people to weigh-in on something they submitted in their journal.

Each journal entry should be 2-3 paragraphs. Submitting an entry on time automatically earns you full credit; there is no qualitative grading. I will read your journals each week to help prepare for classroom discussion. If a journal is submitted late for an unexcused reason, I will deduct two points per week of lateness. Because the journal is reflective writing, not a summary, do not use Large Language Models (aka generate AI) to complete any part of them.

Due dates: Submit on Canvas by 3:00pm (the start of class). (Dates are listed in the course schedule below.)

Midterm Paper (20 points): During Week 7, you will write a short paper analyzing the right-wing populist critique of neoliberal economics. Drawing on our readings so far this semester, and using the readings for Week 7 as your primary sources, you will write a 2–3-page paper (double spaced) that answers the following question: *To what extent has the populist New Right broken with the conservative establishment economically?*

In your answer, aim to address the following sub-questions: what is the populist critique of neoliberal economics and wealth inequality? What role does the New Right see for government in managing the economy? And how have intellectuals in the New Right assessed the track record of Republicans on the economy since 2016?

Your analysis should focus on the writing and the speech assigned for Week 7, but you should also draw on other readings we have done for context and to support your analysis. Be sure to cite quotations and references using Chicago style footnotes (a works cited page is not necessary).

Your paper is due on Canvas on Friday, March 6, by 1:00PM.

Final Exam (30 points): During the last week of class, we will hold an in-class writing exercise. This is not a cumulative evaluation of the whole semester's content, but rather an opportunity for reflection and old-fashioned, pen-and-paper writing. You will be given two questions in advance so that you can think about your answers and organize your thoughts. You will pick one of the two essay prompts and write your response in-class (in a blue book). I will grade your answers on the assumption that in-class writing is not going to be at the same level as an assignment you completed on your own time, or by computer. I do not expect polished, revised work; I'm interested in your ideas, analysis, and reflection.

Policies

Illnesses and absences: if you are feeling unwell, please do not come to class. Absences for illness and other important reasons are always excused (family emergencies, religious holidays, other academic or work obligations, etc.) You do not have to email me to tell me why you are not able to come to class and I will not deduct points for missing class. I will assume the absence is legitimate. If you are missing several weeks in a row, however, it would be a good idea to be in touch. If you miss an assignment due to illness or other legitimate absence, I will be happy to accommodate you.

Academic integrity and AI: In this course, you are expected to be honest and truthful in all academic work. Ethical violations include cheating on exams; plagiarism; reuse of assignments; unauthorized collaboration; improper use of the internet, generative AI tools, or electronic devices; alteration of graded assignments; forgery or falsification; lying; facilitating academic dishonesty; and unfair competition.

Generative AI would not be that helpful in this course, except for background informational research (looking up historical events, names, etc.) to make sense of readings and classroom discussion. I ask only that you not use AI to work on your assignments.

Students with Disabilities - Accommodations and Accessibility: Johns Hopkins University is committed to providing welcoming, equitable, and accessible educational experiences for all students. If disability accommodations are needed for this course, students should request accommodations through Student Disability Services (SDS) as early as possible to provide time for effective communication and arrangements. For further information about this process, please refer to the SDS Website or email SDS Homewood: studentdisabilityservices@jhu.edu .

Inclusivity: Johns Hopkins University is committed to creating a classroom environment that values the diversity of experiences and perspectives that each student brings. Everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. Fostering an inclusive climate is important because research and experience show that students who interact with peers who are different from themselves learn new things and experience tangible educational outcomes. We invite you to help create a welcoming, vibrant and intellectually engaging classroom climate. Note that you should expect to be challenged intellectually by the instructor, the TAs, and your peers, and at times this may feel uncomfortable. Indeed, growth often requires being pushed beyond your comfort zone. However, at no time in this learning process should someone be singled out or treated unequally based on any aspect of their identity (visible or invisible). If you ever have concerns in this course about harassment, discrimination, or any unequal treatment, or if you seek accommodations or resources, please reach out to your instructor or the TAs, who will take your communication seriously and seek mutually acceptable resolutions and accommodations. Reporting will never impact your course grade. You may also share concerns with the department chair, the Director of Undergraduate Studies, the WSE Associate Dean of Outreach and Belonging (Darlene Saporu, dsaporu@jhu.edu), the KSAS Assistant Dean for Diversity and Inclusion (Araceli Frias, afrias3@jhu.edu) or the Office of Institutional Equity (oiie@jhu.edu). In handling reports, people will protect your privacy as much as possible, but faculty and staff are required to officially report information for some cases (e.g., sexual harassment).

Course Schedule

(January 20th-April 27th, 2026)

<p style="text-align: center;">Week 1 (Jan 21) Class Introduction</p> <p>We will read and discuss <i>in class</i> (you don't need to read in advance):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- "Against the Dead Consensus," <i>First Things</i> (2019)
<p style="text-align: center;">Week 2 (Jan 28) What is Populism?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Michael Kazin, <i>The Populist Persuasion: An American History</i> (1995): introduction (pp 1-7), chapter 10.- Jeff Roche, <i>The Conservative Frontier: Texas and the Origins of the New Right</i> (2025), chapter 12.- Kristin Kobez Du Mez, <i>Jesus and John Wayne</i> (2021), chapter 6.
<p style="text-align: center;">Week 3 (Feb 4) The World the 1990s Built</p> <p style="text-align: center;">**Note: class does not meet in person this week. Do the reading and complete reading journal #1.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Christopher Lasch, <i>The Revolt of the Elites</i> (1995), introduction, chapter 2.
<p style="text-align: center;">Week 4 (Feb 11) The Claremont Institute</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Laura K. Field, <i>Furious Minds: The Making of the MAGA New Right</i>, chapter, chapter 3.
<p style="text-align: center;">Week 5 (Feb 18) Postliberalism (I)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">**Note: class does not meet in person this week. Do the reading and complete reading journal #2.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Patrick Deneen, <i>Why Liberalism Failed</i> (2018), preface to the paperback, preface, and introduction.

<p style="text-align: center;">Week 6 (Feb 25) Postliberalism (II)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">**Note: class does not meet in person this week. Do the reading and complete reading journal #3.</p> <p>- Deneen, <i>Why Liberalism Failed</i>, chapter 3 and chapter 6.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Week 7 (Mar 4) The Right-Wing Critique of Neoliberal Economics</p> <p>- Plautus, "Notes on the Origin and Future of Trumpism" (2016) - Manlius Capitolonus, "Trading on One's Strengths" (2016) - Watch: Julius Krein, "A Strategy for National Development" (2019) (19:58) - Gladden Pappin, "Requiem for the Realignment," <i>American Affairs</i> (2023)</p> <p>*Midterm Paper due on Friday, March 6, by 1:00PM</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Week 8 (Mar 11) Christian Political Transformations</p> <p>- Du Mez, <i>Jesus and John Wayne</i>, introduction, chapter 5, chapter 9,</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Week 9 (Mar 18) Spring Break—No Class</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Week 10 (Mar 25) The Critique of Woke Ideology</p> <p>- Field, <i>Furious Minds</i>, chapter 12. - Ryan T. Anderson, "Transgender Ideology is Riddled with Contradictions," The Heritage Foundation (2018). - The White House, "Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government," January 20, 2025. - Joe Rogan, interview with JD Vance (2024): watch from 22:56 to 43:29.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Week 11 (April 1) Institutions and Government</p> <p>- Field, <i>Furious Minds</i>, chapter 9. - Kevin D. Roberts, "A Promise to America," foreword to <i>The Conservative's Promise: 2025 Presidential Transition Project</i> (2023).</p>

Week 12 (Apr 8)
Silicon Valley

- Peter Thiel, "[The Education of a Libertarian](#)" (2009)
- Peter Thiel, *Zero to One: Notes on Startups, or How to Build the Future* (2014), chapter 4, chapter 6, chapter 14
- Tanner Greer, "The Making of a Techno-Nationalist Elite," *American Affairs* (2025).

Week 13 (Apr 15)
Working Class Voters

- Daniel Martinez HoSang, "[Inside the Rise of the Multi-Racial Right](#)," *New York Times*, July 24, 2025.
- Arlie Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (2016), chapters 2, 9, 15.

Week 14 (Apr 22)

In-class writing exercise.