

## **GU POLITICS FELLOW RON BONJEAN**

### **DISCUSSION GROUP OUTLINE**

## **IS POLITICS AT A TIPPING POINT?**

### **Discussion Group Synopsis**

The election of 2016 was a surprise to most election observers across the country. The media and the political establishment in Washington was turned upside down and Washington is still trying to make sense of the new electoral landscape. A new political playbook was created by the election of President Trump. Now that Trump is in office and the realities of campaigning seem very different than governing. Capitol Hill Republicans and Democrats are adjusting to this new environment and while compelling Trump to adjust to them.

In addition, the news media has been adjusting to covering a President who has chosen to make them the enemy. They must now cover a new President who frequently challenges the press corps and uses social media as his direct channel of communications to voters.

This discussion group will explore these themes at length to answer the following questions: Are politics and the media at a tipping point in our nation's history? Or will the standard laws of the gravity of governing begin to apply? In other words: Is this the new normal or will the old rules eventually apply?

### **Week 1 – Is Celebrity Politics Paying Off?**

The first nine months are now behind us. We will discuss the current political dynamics and where the White House, Congress and the media now stand during this historic first year of governing. Part of this discussion will include whether Trump and Republicans are living up to their promises and whether Democrats are providing an effective alternative choice to voters and whether the news media has adjusted and evolved to cover this new environment.

### **Week 2 – The White House Approach to Communications**

The White House has a philosophy of challenging the media coverage of President Trump and the communications office is on the front lines of this daily battle. Questions to explore during this session include: what is the strategy behind this approach? What is it like to be the President's press secretary when Trump is largely perceived as treating them like the enemy? How does the press secretary keep his credibility with the media?

### **Week 3 – How does the News Media Cover Washington in a Twitter Universe?**

Reporters are now covering a White House and Congress at a time where their credibility is being openly questioned. The news media is also changing the way it covers Washington institutions and is constantly

evolving to the new reading/viewing habits of voters. This discussion group will dive into the latest developments of the political landscape and how the media is covering the news.

#### **Week 4 – How do Politicians Navigate a Crisis?**

Elected officials always run the risk of running into some type of crisis that is magnified with voters because of social media as well as news media trying to break the news story. When a crisis happens, how does a politician survive it?

I would plan leading this discussion without a guest because of the large number of challenges that I have had during my political career working for Republican leaders and most recently handling communications for the Supreme Court Nominee, now Justice Neil Gorsuch. This would also include recent handling of crisis communications for former Rep. Aaron Schock and former Rep. Trey Radel.

#### **Week 5 – Polling for the Next Election**

Does polling still remain relevant after many pollsters failed to predict the 2016 election outcome? What are the new approaches and methods to making sure they aren't wrong again? This discussion group will also discuss the latest polling and trends going into an election year.

#### **Week 6 – Election Campaigns – Are Politicians Changing Their Approach?**

The results of the Virginia Gubernatorial election will be perceived by the media as an election year indicator for which party will lose or gain power. We will discuss the campaign strategies and tactics by both Republicans and Democrats going into an election year.

#### **Week 7 – Communicating from Capitol Hill**

Republicans and Democrats face challenges of getting their message out when the President has such a large megaphone and a commanding social media presence. What are the challenges that political parties face when their all House Members and a third of the Senate faces an election every two years?

#### **Week 8 – Supreme Court**

The Supreme Court nominations process has now turned into at least a two-month campaign that resembles a run for political office. How has the nominations process impacted American politics?