

American Political Thought

Course Description

This course introduces students to American political philosophy and the core governing documents and dominant philosophical ideals in American politics. We will trace the development of American political thought from the initial European colonizers to the modern Era, with a particular focus on the framing of the U.S. Constitution and the American founding.

This course combines elements of political science, political philosophy, American history, and political economy to construct a holistic and ideologically diverse understanding of the role of government in American society. I owe much of this course's structure to Richard Boyd's profound American political thought course that introduced me to these topics. This course has no prerequisites but introductory classes in U.S. political systems and political philosophy may prove helpful for better contextualizing the material.

Course Objectives

1. Develop an understanding of American political philosophy
2. Become comfortable reading primary sources and philosophic texts
3. Learn how to connect American political thinking to empirical evidence
4. Describe modern political ideologies in terms of their historic development

Required Reading

I will make as much of the required reading as possible freely available to you, but we will be reading large portions of the following book that you may have to acquire:

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson's Essays* (Harper)
- Abraham Lincoln, *Selected Speeches and Writings* (Library of America)

All other course materials will be posted on Canvas.

Course Assignments

- **Term Paper (40% of the Final Grade)**
- **Reaction Papers (40% of the Final Grade)**
- **Discussion (20% of the Final Grade)**

Term Paper

- The capstone of this course is an original term paper where you will analyze an elected politician, political candidate, or political pundit's published memoir, autobiography, political treatise, or other book-length writing containing their political ideals in the framework of the class. I will discuss selection and format more in class but here is an overview:
- The term paper will consist of a **15 page** summary and analysis of a politically focused published work from an American political actor.
- Your paper should answer the following questions:
 - Who is the political actor?
 - How would you describe their ideology in contemporary terms?
 - What are some examples of their political positions?
 - What philosophical ideas or traditions do they reflect?
 - What are the core tenets of the philosophical tradition or ideal?
 - How do you connect the political actor to the American Political Tradition?
- The goal of the term paper is for you to select a school of thought in American political philosophy that interests you and connect it to a political figure that also interests you.
- The first half of the core format for the term paper can be completed even at the beginning of class, and I recommend that you work on this paper throughout the semester.
- The political actor can be a single person like a president, member of Congress, political commentator, activist, etc. or even an organization like the House Republicans in the 1990s that released the *Contract with America* outlining their policy proposals after taking power for the first time in decades. So, while the entire history of a party is too broad and diverse of an actor, you could certainly select a political document put out by an organization at one point in time like the *Contract with America*.
- Presidential candidates usually will always release books that are part memoir and part political treatise in a succinct volume with straight-forward writing. I recommend looking into presidential candidates you may be interested in.
- You should feel free to pursue paper topics that interest you even if they were not covered in class or push the boundaries of the material of the course. The only requirement is that you can find a written work to dissect.
- I am happy to answer any questions related to selection and format.

Reaction Papers

- For each course topic, you will prepare, in double-spaced 12 pt. Times New Roman font, a **3 page** reaction paper to the readings. Please keep this to **3 pages**. These reaction papers will be due at the beginning of the next course topic on the syllabus, so feel free to use classroom discussion to inform your papers. Exact dates will be given throughout the semester.
- Your reaction papers do not need to meet some predetermined template but should, instead, focus on critically evaluating the reading.
- Successful reaction papers will either focus on your opinion, backed up with reason, of a reading, or an analysis of how that course topic fits in with the larger tradition of American political philosophy.

Discussion

- Each course meeting will include some lecture and some discussion. The discussion period is when we will ask each other questions about the readings. From time-to-time, I will also propose broader discussion questions on course topics to the class. I hope that everyone will participate as much as possible.

Course Topics

The course topics sequentially lay out the development of political thought throughout American history but there is some overlap between topics. Certain topics also may be presented out of order so that the class has a better flow. Some topics will take several weeks and others only a single week or class session. I will provide exact due dates for reaction papers as we go.

This list is not meant to be an exhaustive account of all of the topics related to American political philosophy, but, rather, it is meant to cover major topics, famous works, and introduce the field from the perspective of political scientists. Mastery of these topics will prepare you for advanced study!

The Colonial Era & the Puritan Tradition

- “Mayflower Compact” (1620)
- John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630)
- John Winthrop, “The Little Speech on Liberty” (1639)
- Roger Williams, “The Bloody Tenent of Persecution” (1644)
- Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (1741)
- Samuel Adams, “The Rights of the Colonists” (1772)
- Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (1776)
- Thomas Jefferson, “Declaration of Independence” (1776)

The American Founding

- *The Federalist Papers*, numbers 1, 2, 6, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 27, 28, 31, 35, 37, 47-49, 51, 55-58, 69-74, 78, 84.
- *The Anti-Federalist Papers*
- Skim: U.S. Constitution, Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union, state constitutions, and colonial charters at the founding

The New Republic

- Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography*, selections
- Thomas Jefferson, *Selected Writings*, 79-149, selections
- Alexander Hamilton, "Report on Manufactures"

Early Critiques of American Democracy

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays*, "History," "Nature," "Self-Reliance," "Character," "Politics."
- Henry David Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*
- James Fenimore Cooper, *The American Democrat*, selections
- Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Address Delivered at Seneca Falls"
- Orestes Brownson, "The Laboring Classes"

Enslavement & A House Divided

- George Fitzhugh, "Cannibals All! Or Slaves Without Masters"
- John C. Calhoun, "The Goods of Slavery"
- Frederick Douglass, "Is it Right and Wise to Kill a Kidnapper?"
- Lincoln, "Young Men's Lyceum," pp. 13-21; "Fragments on Government and Slavery," p. 91; "Speech on the Dred Scott Decision," pp. 117-128; "House Divided Speech," pp. 131-139; "Lincoln-Douglas Debates," pp. 149-196; "Lecture on Discoveries," pp. 200-208; "Address at Cooper Institute," pp. 240-251; "First Inaugural Address," pp. 284-293; "Address on Colonization," pp. 338-342; "Address at Gettysburg," p. 405; "Address at the Sanitary Fair," pp. 422-424; "Second Inaugural," pp. 449-450.
- Frederick Douglass, "What the Black Man Wants"

Race in America

- WEB Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*
- Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery*
- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (1963)
- Barack Obama, "Speech on Race" (2008)
- Thomas Sowell, "Race, Culture, and Equality" (1998)
- Malcolm X & Alex Haley *Autobiography of Malcolm X*

The Role of Government in Modern Society

- Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*
- Bernie Sanders, *Our Revolution*

Background Reading

Some background reading that could prove helpful for preparing for this course includes *The Logic of American Politics* by Jacobson, Kernell, and Smith for an introduction to American government and politics and a skim of the prominent work of Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, and Montesquieu. Let me know if you are interested in this background reading and I will offer more guidance!

Academic Integrity and Courtesy

As a Jesuit, Catholic university, committed to the education of the whole person, Georgetown expects all members of the academic community, students and faculty, to strive for excellence in scholarship and in character. The University spells out the specific minimum standards for academic integrity in its Honor Code, as well as the procedures to be followed if academic dishonesty is suspected. Over and above the honor code, in this course we will seek to create an engaged and passionate learning environment, characterized by respect and courtesy in both our discourse and our ways of paying attention to one another.

Expectations

Please make sure to arrive on time for class. Attendance is extremely important! If you have a documented family or medical emergency and are unable to attend class, or need to submit an assignment late, please email me as soon as possible. All course materials will be posted, along with this syllabus, which is subject to change and may be updated during the semester.

Accommodations and Support

When it comes to issues around health and wellness, you may face challenges in your time at Georgetown and even in the course of one semester. It's important to be aware of the resources available to support you, myself included. Accommodations Requests: If you have a disability that may affect your academic work or well-being and for which accommodations may be necessary, I encourage you to approach me within the first two weeks of the course (or, in other circumstances, as soon as possible after accommodation becomes necessary) so that I can arrange for your needs to be met in this regard. You will also need to contact the Academic Resource Center (<http://academicsupport.georgetown.edu>), located in Leavey Center. Student Support: There are many resources on campus available to students for support throughout their time at Georgetown, covering physical and mental well-being. You can find a

comprehensive list of these resources at <https://studenthealth.georgetown.edu/student-outreach/campus-resources>.

Religious Holidays

As stated on Georgetown's Academic Standards page: Georgetown University promotes respect for all religions. Any student who is unable to attend classes or to participate in any examination, presentation, or assignment on a given day because of the observance of a major religious holiday (see below) or related travel shall be excused and provided with the opportunity to make up, without unreasonable burden, any work that has been missed for this reason and shall not in any other way be penalized for the absence or rescheduled work. Students will remain responsible for all assigned work. Students should notify professors in writing at the beginning of the semester of religious observances that conflict with their classes. The Office of the Provost, in consultation with Campus Ministry and the Registrar, will publish, before classes begin for a given term, a list of major religious holidays likely to affect Georgetown students. The Provost and the Main Campus Executive Faculty encourage faculty to accommodate students whose bona fide religious observances in other ways impede normal participation in a course. Students who cannot be accommodated should discuss the matter with an advising dean.

Equal Opportunity and Non-Discrimination

As stated in Georgetown's Faculty Handbook: Georgetown University provides educational opportunities without regard to, and does not discriminate on the basis of, age, color, disability, family responsibilities, familial status, gender identity or expression, genetic information, marital status, national origin, personal appearance, political affiliation, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, source of income, veterans status or any other factor prohibited by law in its educational programs and activities.

Title IX

Please know that as a faculty member I am committed to supporting survivors of sexual misconduct, including relationship violence and sexual assault. However, university policy also requires me to report any disclosures about sexual misconduct to the Title IX Coordinator, whose role is to coordinate the University's response to sexual misconduct. Georgetown has a number of fully confidential professional resources who can provide support and assistance to survivors of sexual assault and other forms of sexual misconduct. These professionals can be reached via sarp@georgetown.edu.