

PLPT 8020: Methods in Political Theory

Seminar time: Monday 9-11.30am

Seminar venue: Nau 101

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Office hours: Mon, Wed 12-1pm, or by appt.

How should societies be governed, given conflicting interests and values?

How do we assess whether any given society is just?

Can we point to one value that should be privileged over others in society?

Should we think of our political loyalties as essential local or global?

None of these questions can be comprehensively or accurately answered without an appreciation for the theoretical assumptions underlying our responses. Understanding the methodological approaches of any given theory is imperative to assessing the strength of that theory.

This course explores a range of theoretical methodologies, allowing us to engage with some of the major debates in contemporary political theory, including exploring the ‘analytical’ versus ‘continental’ political theory divide, the value of a ‘history of ideas’ versus a ‘conceptual history’ approach, the value of ideal theory compared with non-ideal theory, and recent discussions about the role of empirics in political theorizing.

Who should take this course?

Political Theory encourages students to challenge the status quo. It asks people to stop and reflect on their institutions, their political culture, their hopes for the future, and to critically assess alternative possibilities. Political theory also requires students to:

- read carefully and critically
- accurately summarize and analyze key arguments
- learn the difference between refutable claims and evidence-based arguments
- think critically, and apply this knowledge to real world scenarios
- engage in robust, respectful and reflective debate both within and outside the class

These are all invaluable skills that you have likely been developing throughout your college career, and will continue to develop throughout your life.

Because of the general applicability of political theory knowledge and skills, this is a course that is relevant to anyone with an interest in the social sciences and humanities, and especially relevant to those who wish to major or minor in political science or philosophy. Although this is a course designed with political theorists in mind, it is not necessary for you to have studied political theory before, or to have familiarity with the theoretical literature or methods – I have constructed the course to allow you to develop the key skills and access the important ideas needed to succeed in this course.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

In this course, you will learn to identify and select appropriate methodologies for exploring questions of political, social, and moral significance.

More specifically, this course encourages you to:

1. *identify* the methodological assumptions in works of political science
2. *examine* these assumptions and *assess* their relative strengths and weaknesses
3. *critically reflect* on the influence of these methodologies in political theory and more broadly in the social sciences and society
4. *communicate* ideas concisely and accurately in both writing and discussion
5. *respectfully engage* with others within and outside the course on questions of political and social importance during semester and into the future
6. *take responsibility* for your learning and professionalization within the discipline

ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

1. Research Essay (50%)

You will write a 6000 word research essay on a topic of your choice related to the course.

This involves:

a. Creating a grading rubric

Individually you will create a grading rubric for the essay. In section you will share your work and we will aggregate ideas to design a fair rubric by which your essay proposal and essay will be assessed. This will help you examine what constitutes a good essay in the abstract.

b. Essay proposal (10%)

No more than 4 pages (single-spaced). I will give you a handout explaining the essential components of an essay proposal in Week 3. In essence, the proposal should present a clear research question, explain the importance of this question, and provide a tentative outline of the essay alongside an annotated bibliography. This exercise will ensure you have a feasible, valuable research question and to help you organize and refine your ideas. It will also serve as good practice for grant writing.

c. Essay draft (10%)

This draft should be between 4000-6000 words. It is an opportunity to get external feedback on your essay before you submit your final copy. Please note, the better your first draft, the more helpful feedback you are likely to get from your peers!

d. Feedback on two essays (5%)

You will read and comment on two other students' essay drafts using the rubric we created together in class. This allows you to offer your peers helpful feedback on their essay, to reflect on your own essay, and to learn about two other areas of research.

e. Final essay + 'revise and resubmit' response (25%)

Your final essay should be **no more than** 6000 words (not counting footnotes or bibliography). This is an opportunity for you to clearly communicate your critical engagement with a key question that is important to you. It may form the basis of your Masters thesis, a dissertation chapter, or a standalone publishable article. In addition to the essay, please include a 1-2 page

(single-spaced) response to the feedback you received from your peers. This explanation should simulate the reply you would write for a ‘revise and resubmit’ request from an academic journal.

2. Reading Matrices (10%)

For each reading you will complete a short matrix (I will hand this out in class) in which you explain the main thesis, identify the key evidence or logic that was used, and devise at least two questions for class discussion. The point of this assignment is to encourage you to practice *efficient*, *effective*, and *critical* reading. These responses should not be time-intensive—in fact, they are designed to improve the speed and quality of your academic reading—and they will be posted to your individual Wordpress site before class, which should allow for more productive class discussion. Each week I will randomly choose five student matrices to assess, evaluating a total of 10 matrices for each student over the course of the semester. They will be graded as either ‘satisfactory’ or ‘unsatisfactory’ (i.e. pass/fail).

3. Response Papers (30%)

You will write **three** 500-600 word response papers bringing the readings of any given week into conversation with each other. You will choose the three weeks/themes for which you produce responses. These papers may take the form of a critique or defense of an argument or explore a particular aspect of any given methodology across the week’s readings. These response papers encourage you to critically reflect on and synthesize or juxtapose ideas from a range of articles. They also allow you to practice concise and accurate writing. It is fine for your research essay to overlap with the theme of **one** (but not more) of these response papers.

4. Class Participation (10%)

As a graduate student, you are part of an academic community whose scholarship thrives on discussion, peer-review and reflection. It is essential that you participate in discussions in order to:

- clarify your ideas about the material we are exploring
- practice clearly and precisely communicating complex ideas in a discussion-based forum
- gain exposure to and consider different perspectives on the course material
- learn how to listen and constructively respond to your colleagues

My main objective in assessing your participation is to incentivize you to engage fully and respectfully with your peers and the material and to prepare you for professional workshops, colloquia, and conferences, which all require active, considered, and considerate participation.

To assess participation, I will use the rubric that I have put on the class website. In formulating your participation grade, I will also take into account the self- and peer-assessment responses you will produce in a short class exercise in Week 15.

HOW TO SUCCEED IN THIS COURSE

Read carefully and completely

Engaging thoughtfully with the course materials is essential for your success, and I have designed assignments to help you learn how to become a more efficient and effective reader. If you are uncertain about your understanding of any particular text or material, please ask me or your peers for clarification as soon as possible. It is also important that you read assignments and the course schedule carefully—don’t undermine your good understanding of the material by not following the particular instructions for an assignment or by not submitting an assignment on time.

Participate in class discussion actively and constructively

Engaging in productive political discourse (whether in the public or private sphere) is important for good citizenship, and it is imperative for political science graduate students. As a consequence, modeling engaged, reflective debate is one of the key objectives of this course. Participating in class requires you to not only attend all classes, but to actively contribute to discussion. Considering diverse perspectives is also essential to good conversation and decision-making, and as such it is also important that you encourage your classmates to make contributions and to listen thoughtfully and respectfully to what they say.

Think ahead

Please tell me in advance if there are impediments to your learning and participation so that we can work together preemptively to address potential problems. I aim to respond to emails promptly (within one business day of receipt), turn back assignments in a timely fashion (within a week of the due date), and treat students fairly by applying standardized grading templates (which you will be given in advance of assignments). I also relish the opportunity to talk with you about the course and your work in office hours or by appointment, and welcome any feedback you might have on the course or my teaching. However, please don't email me at midnight before an assignment is due to ask for help. Think ahead about your schedule and come see me in advance so that we can discuss strategies for successfully completing the different activities.

COURSE MATERIALS

All course readings, supplementary material, and resources will be available on Collab.

COURSE SCHEDULE

	Reading	Class Activities	Before Next Class	Due Dates*
Week 1: Introduction				
	Relevant news article (in class)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Foreword• Introductions• Discuss article: think-pair-share	Reading Matrices 1 & 2	
Week 2: Analytical Political Theory				
	(1) Tully, 'Political Theory as a Critical Activity' (2) Pettit, 'The Contribution of Analytical Philosophy' + Sample essays	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Peer-assess reading matrices 1 & 2	Design grading rubric Reading Matrices 3 & 4	Bring grading rubric to class
Week 3: Historians of Ideas				
	(3) Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas' (4) Skinner, 'A Reply to My Critics'	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create grading rubric together• Essay proposal information/hand out	Reading Matrices 5 & 6	
Week 4: Hermeneutics				
	(5) Bevir, 'On Meaning' (6) Taylor, 'The	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Designing a research question	Reading Matrices 7, 8 & 9	

	Hermeneutics of Conflict'			
Week 5: Conceptual History (Begriffsgeschichte)				
	(7) Bevir, 'Begriffsgeschichte' (8) Hampsher-Monk, 'Speech Acts, Languages, or Conceptual History' (9) Richter, 'Begriffsgeschichte in Theory and Practice'	·	Reading Matrices 10 & 11	
Week 6: Ideology and Political Theory				
	(10) Freeden, 'Ideology and Political Theory' (11) Freeden, 'Thinking Politically and Thinking About Politics'	· Formative course and teaching evaluation	Reading Matrices 12 & 13	
Week 7: Science and Pseudo-Science				
	(12) Lakatos, LSE Transcript (13) Popper, Karl, 'A Survey of Some Fundamental Problems'	· Peer assess reading matrices 12 & 13 · 5 minute self-reflection on matrices	Reading Matrices 14, 15 & 16	Essay Proposal (Friday, 5pm)
Week 8: Rational Choice Theory				
	(14) Elster, 'Introduction' (15) Sen, 'Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioural Foundations of Economic Theory' (16) Heap et al., 'Social Choice'	· Return essay proposal & sign up for feedback meeting	Reading Matrices 17, 18, 19 & 20 Proposal meeting with Claire	
Week 9: Spring Break – No Class				
Week 10: Deliberative Democracy				
	(17) Thompson, 'Deliberative Democratic Theory and Empirical Political Science' (18) Honig, 'Between Decision and Deliberation' (19) Goodin, 'Democratic Deliberation Within' (20) Cohen, 'Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy'		Reading Matrices 21, 22, 23 & 24	
Week 11: Ideal v. Non-Ideal Theory				
	(21) Farrelly, 'Justice in Ideal Theory: A Refutation'	· Class debate: ideal v. non-ideal	Reading Matrices 25, 26 & 27	

	(22) Mills, “‘Ideal Theory’ as Ideology” (23) Stemplowska, ‘What’s Ideal About Ideal Theory?’ (24) Swift, ‘The Value of Philosophy in Nonideal Circumstances’	theory		
Week 12: Reflective Equilibrium				
	(25) Daniels, ‘Reflective Equilibrium and Justice as Political’ (26) Dworkin, ‘Integrity’ (27) Scanlon, ‘Rawls on Justification’		Reading Matrices 28, 29 & 30	
Week 13: Public Reason				
	(28) Rawls, ‘The Idea of Public Reason Revisited’ (29) O’Neill, <i>Towards Justice and Virtue</i> (30) Sunstein, ‘Incompletely Theorized Agreements’	· Essay feedback instructions	Reading Matrix 31 Essay feedback	Essay Draft (Friday, 5pm)
Week 14: Critical Methodologies				
	(31) Smith, <i>Decolonizing Methodologies</i> + Two student essays		Reading Matrices 32, 33 & 34 Revise essay	Essay Feedback (due in class)
Week 15: Comparative Political Theory				
	(32) Dallmayr, ‘Beyond Monologue’ (33) March, ‘What is Political Theory?’ (34) Godrej, ‘Response to ‘What is Political Theory?’’	· Self and peer-assessment of participation		
Week 16: Conclusion:				
		· Concept map – class themes, essays, blog entries		Final Essay due in exam period