Course Overview

Contemporary debates in American politics often revolve around a few basic questions: What are the greatest problems facing America? What does it mean to be an American? What are the principles of American politics? Americans often answer these questions by drawing upon seminal texts in American political thought. The aim of this course is to study several of these texts so that we may participate more thoughtfully and effectively in contemporary politics.

We begin with The Declaration of Independence (1776), Thomas Jefferson’s statement of America’s founding ideals. Then, we read The Federalist, the 1787-88 essays penned by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay to outline the principles of the United States Constitution. Subsequently, we consider Alexis de Tocqueville’s epochal account of American individualism and civil society in Democracy in America (1835, 1840). Afterwards, we look at W.E.B. Du Bois’s The Souls of Black Folk (1903), a book that portrays the “double consciousness” of virtually all Americans. Next, we examine Anarchism (1917), a classic of American radicalism written by the anarchist-feminist Emma Goldman. Then, we study Milton Friedman’s Capitalism and Freedom, a libertarian manifesto that has inspired Republicans such as Ted Cruz and Paul Ryan. Subsequently, we turn to A Theory of Justice (1971), John Rawls’s great work of Anglo-American liberal theory that has profoundly influenced the modern Democratic Party. We conclude with Donald Trump’s Great Again (2016) to learn the plans of the new president.

Throughout the course, we test each author’s ideas by how well they help us grasp contemporary issues in American politics, including presidential elections, Social Security reform, property rights, immigration policy, the war in Iraq, the role of religion in politics, and sports and entertainment. Students are encouraged to follow current events in American politics by reading the New York Times, Washington Post, Financial Times, Economist, and other journals and newspapers.

Texts

Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, James Madison, The Federalist (Liberty Fund) 9780865972896
Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America (University of Chicago Press) 0226805360
Course Requirements

(1-2). Students have a chance to write and present a research paper on one of the authors we discuss this semester. Early in the semester, I will assign students to a group. On the day your group leads discussion, each student will turn in to me, and present to the class, a 2000 word research project on how the author helps us grasp contemporary politics. For the Donald Trump group, each presenter will make a prediction of something that the president will do based upon evidence in his book.

Focus on one aspect of the author’s thinking and read at least scholarly 4 books or articles on that topic. For example, if you present on Tocqueville, conjecture what he would say about the future of the Republican or Democratic Party, national healthcare, Fordham service organizations, or why evangelicals voted for Trump. Cite relevant passages from Democracy in America as well as recent scholarship on your topic from reputable periodicals (e.g., New York Times, Financial Times) and academic books and journals (e.g., The American Political Science Review, The Journal of Politics). I will meet with the presenting group at the end of class one week before their presentations.

For class presentations, I recommend that you:
• Dress professionally
• Practice your talk beforehand, to yourself or with friends
• Speak from an outline
• Use Powerpoint (Please send me at least 10 minutes before class.)
• Engage the entire classroom
• Solicit questions
• Have fun!

(3) The midterm is on Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison, Tocqueville, and DuBois. A week beforehand, I will distribute 6 essay questions, and on the day of the exam we will roll a die to determine 2 questions. Well-written essays should incorporate material from the lectures, readings, presentations, and your own thoughts. You may study in groups, but the exam is close-booked. The exam is 1 hour.

(4) The final has the same format as the midterm, and is on Goldman, Rawls, Friedman, and Trump.

(5) Class participation. Students are expected to come to class on time prepared to discuss the readings. I employ the Socratic method in the classroom, which means that I will often call on you
even if your hands are down; be ready! Students are expected to read, listen, observe, and think actively rather than passively.

Grade Distribution

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research paper</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research presentation</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Midterm</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final exam</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class participation</td>
<td>10</td>
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Class Schedule

I. The Founders on Power and Liberty

II. Tocqueville on American Mores
6. February 3: Democracy in America: Vol. I, Part II, Ch. 9
7. February 7: Democracy in America: Vol. I, Part II, Ch. 10
8. February 10: Student Presentations
9. February 13 – No class. I’m at a conference in India.
10. February 16 - No class. I’m at a conference in India.

III. Dubois on Double-Consciousness
12. March 3: The Souls of Black Folk, Chapters IV-VI
13. March 7: Student Presentations

14. March 10: Midterm

IV. Goldman on Anarchism
15. March 21: Anarchism and Other Essays, “Anarchism”
16. March 24: Anarchism and Other Essays, “Patriotism”
17. March 28: Student Presentations

V. Friedman on Capitalism and Freedom
19. April 4: Capitalism and Freedom, II, III
20. April 7: Capitalism and Freedom, V, VI
21. April 11: Student Presentations

VI. Rawls on Liberalism
22. April 18: A Theory of Justice, Chapter I, §§1-4; Chapter IV §40
23. April 21: A Theory of Justice, Chapter II, §§11-17
25. April 28: Student Presentations

VII. Donald Trump on Making America Great Again
26. May 2: Great Again Student Presentations

Final Exam: Tuesday, May 09, 9:30 am