

American Political Thought

George Mason University, Government 420

Summer 2023

Mondays and Thursdays 5:00-6:30PM; Wednesdays asynchronous assignment

Professor R. Boyd

Office Hours: Thursdays before class and by appt

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Course Description:

The American political tradition is characterized by many paradoxes. For example, how is it that America is ostensibly a secular nation predicated on a strict separation between church and state, and yet its political culture was at the time of the Founding, and remains even today, deeply suffused by religious faith and imagery? How do Americans balance competing values such as liberty and equality, scientific progress and the preservation of tradition, or economic competition and philanthropic charity? Why do Americans cherish privacy, individuality, or civil disobedience on the one hand, even as they extol civic engagement, citizenship, patriotism, and voluntary association, on the other? How can historical injustices of racial exclusion be reconciled with the universal commitments of liberalism? Rather than novel questions, these tensions run more or less continuously from America's Puritan settlement in the seventeenth century to the present day.

This course seeks to illuminate these enduring puzzles of American political culture by returning to their sources in its earlier political tradition. We will read and discuss writings from several different epochs including Puritan New England, the American Revolution, the Founding Era, nineteenth-century critiques of democratic culture, controversies over slavery and race in the years leading up to the Civil War, and the contemporary legacy of these debates for the American political tradition.

Required Texts, available for purchase in inexpensive paperback editions at the George Mason Bookstore or by Amazon, etc.

Madison, Hamilton and Jay, *The Federalist* (Penguin)

Abraham Lincoln, *Selected Speeches and Writings* (Library of America)

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, translated by George Lawrence. (Harper Perennial Modern Classics)

Additional Short Documents and Excerpts, uploaded and accessible via Blackboard/Canvas

Week 1. Course Introduction and the Puritan Roots of the American Tradition (6/5 and 6/8)

#“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)

#Benjamin Franklin, “The Art of Virtue” (1784)

[Asynchronous PowerPoint lecture on Puritan Political Thought uploaded for 6/7]

Week 2. Rhetoric and Reason in the American Revolution (6/12 and 6/15)

#Samuel Adams, "The Rights of the Colonists" (1772)
#Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (1776)
#Jefferson, "Declaration of Independence"
[PowerPoint lecture on the American Revolution uploaded for 6/14]

Weeks 3 and 4. Crafting the American Constitution (6/22, 6/26, 6/29)

The Federalist, numbers 1, 2, 6, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 27, 28, 31, 35, 37, 47, 48, 49, 51, 55, 58, 70, 71, 72, 78, 84.

"Letter from Samuel Adams to Richard Henry Lee," December 3, 1787

"Letters from a Federal Farmer" (Melancton Smith?)

[Writing assignment #1 uploaded 6/21]

[Powerpoint lecture on Anti-Federalists uploaded 6/28]

Week 5. American Culture and the Critique of Democracy (7/3* and 7/6)

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, "Author's Introduction," Vol. I, Pt. 1. Chs. 2-5; Pt. 2, Ch. 2, 4, 6-9; Volume II, Pt. 1, Chs. 5-14; Pt. 2, Chs. 1-15; Pt. 3, Chs. 1-2, 8, 12, 14, 18-19.

[*PowerPoint lecture on Tocqueville uploaded 7/3]

[Writing Assignment #2, Tocqueville uploaded 7/5]

Weeks 6 and 7. Slavery and the Crisis of the Union (7/10, 7/13, and 7/17)

Abraham Lincoln, "Young Men's Lyceum," pp. 13-21.

Frederick Douglass, "Is it Right and Wise to Kill a Kidnapper?"

Lincoln, "Fragments on Government and Slavery," p. 91; "Speech on the Dred Scott Decision," pp. 117-128; "House Divided Speech," pp. 131-139; "Lecture on Discoveries," pp. 200-208; "Address at Cooper Institute," pp. 240-251; "Address at Gettysburg," p. 405; "Second Inaugural," pp. 449-450.

Douglass, "What the Black Man Wants"

[PowerPoint Lecture on Antebellum America and Slavery uploaded 7/14]

Week 8. Liberalism, Conservatism, and Radicalism in American Politics (7/20 and 7/24)

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "The Four Freedoms" (1941)

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (1963)

Barry Goldwater, "The Conscience of a Conservative" (1960)

Milton Friedman, "Social Responsibility of Business" (1970)

Barack Obama, "Speech on Race" (2008)

William Julius Wilson, "Declining Significance of Race" (2011)

Thomas Sowell, "Race, Culture, and Equality" (1998)

[PowerPoint Lecture on Modern Liberalism and Civil Rights uploaded 7/19]

TAKE-HOME FINAL EXAM DUE 7/27 TO BE SUBMITTED THROUGH BLACKBOARD

Course Requirements:

There are three formal course requirements for American Political Thought:

- 1) 2 short at-home writing assignments—25%.
- 2) Take-Home Final Exam—50%.
- 3) Prepared attendance and class participation, where appropriate—25%.

Students should note that class format is what I describe as “interactive lecture.” Without regular attendance and active engagement in the lectures and accompanying discussion, it will be very difficult for students to do well in this course. Students should come to class having done the readings for each session and prepared to answer questions about the material if called on. Attendance and Participation is also a graded component of the course, and you may take the following guidelines as an approximation of how A&P will be assessed:

- Absent in three or more sessions without medical documentation: 0-15/25 points
- Present in most sessions but distracted/ no significant contributions: 20-21 points
- Regularly present; occasional/ unproductive contributor: 22 points
- Regular, active, productive participant: 23-24 points
- Class leader: 25 points

Grading Scale:

A=100-93
A-=92.99-90
B+=89.99-87
B=86.99-83
B-=82.99-80
C+=79.99-77
C=76.99-73
C-=72.99-70

Grade cut-off's are absolute, and I don't usually “round up” final grades except under exceptional circumstances.