

American Political Thought (GOVT 420)
George Mason University
Summer 2025

Professor Samuel Goldman

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Course Meeting Day + Time: Monday/Thursday | 6:30 – 8:00 PM
Location: Van Metre Hall, Room 121

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, 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? How can historical injustices of racial exclusion be reconciled with universal rights? Rather than novel questions, these tensions run more or less continuously from America's founding down to our own time.

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 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.

Grade Breakdown:

Pop Quiz 1: 10%
Pop Quiz 2: 10%
Pop Quiz 3: 10%
Midterm: 25%
Final: 25%
Participation: 20%

Course Materials

Most readings are linked in this syllabus. Other items will be provided on Blackboard (BB). The *Federalist* papers are easily available on many websites. But you are strongly encouraged to acquire your own hardcopy.

SCHEDULE

M 6/2	The Declaration of Independence
TR 6/4	The Declaration of Independence
M 6/9	John Locke, Second Treatise of Government , Chs. 2-4, 8-9
TR 6/12	John Locke, Second Treatise of Government , Ch. 19; Edmund Burke, “Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies” and excerpts from <i>Reflections on the Revolution in France</i> (BB)
M 6/16	Articles of Confederation ; <i>Federalist</i> 1, 10, 14-15, 23, 39-40, 51
TR 6/19	Letter of the Pennsylvania Minority ; Letter of Agrippa IV ; Federal Farmer 7 ; Cato 4 ; Carey McWilliams, “What the Anti-Federalists Were For” (BB)
M 6/23	Jefferson to Madison, 6 September 1789 ; Madison to Jefferson, 4 February 1790 ; Sanford Levinson, “Bring On a Constitutional Convention!”
TR 6/26	MIDTERM EXAM
M 6/30	Locke, Second Treatise of Government , Ch. 5; Benjamin Franklin, The Autobiography, Ch. 19 (read up to “I hope, therefore, that some of my descendants may follow the example and reap the benefit.”)
TR 7/3	Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia Query 19 ; Jefferson to Madison, 28 October 1785 ; Jefferson to John Jay, 23 August 1785 ; Alexander Hamilton, excerpts from the Report on Manufactures , Jefferson to Benjamin Austin, 9 January 1816 ;
M 7/7	Excerpts from Alexis de Tocqueville, <i>Democracy in America</i> (BB)
TR 7/10	Excerpts from Alexis de Tocqueville, <i>Democracy in America</i> (BB), Jefferson, Notes on Virginia, Query 17 ; Madison, Memorial and Remonstrance ; George Washington, Letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport
M 7/14	Jefferson, Notes on Virginia, Query 14 ; Slavery provisions in the U.S. Constitution (Art. 1 Sec. 2, Clause 3; Art. 1, Sec. 9, Clause 1; Art. 4, Sec. 2, Clause 3); Fed. 54; Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the 4 th of July” (BB)
TR 7/17	Excerpts from the Lincoln-Douglas Debates (BB); Lincoln, “The Gettysburg Address” , “Second Inaugural Address” ; Douglass, “Address on the Dedication of the Freedmen’s Memorial to Abraham Lincoln”
TR 7/21	FINAL EXAM

Academic Integrity

- The integrity of the University community is affected by the individual choices made by each of us. As a Mason student, you should follow these fundamental principles at all times, as noted by the Honor Code: (1) All work submitted should be your own, without the use inappropriate assistance or resources, as defined by the assignment or faculty member; (2) When you use the work, the words, the images, or the ideas of others--including fellow students, online sites or tools, or your own prior creations--you must give full credit through accurate citations; (3) In creating your work, you should not take materials you are not authorized to use, or falsely represent ideas or processes regarding your work. If you are uncertain about the ground rules or ethical expectations regarding the integrity of your work on a particular assignment or exam, you should ask your instructor for clarification. Support for you to complete your work is available; no grade is important enough to justify academic misconduct.*

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