

U.S. Political Thought
Politics 287, Fall 2019 – SYLLABUS

Instructor: Alena Wolfink

Class: Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays 2:45-3:50, MI 207

Office Hours: Fridays 3:50-5pm or by appointment, MI 218

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This course is an introduction to U.S. political thought. We will become familiar with the relationships and occasional tensions between key categories and concepts in U.S. political identity including freedom, autonomy, association, and equality. However, because our emphasis will be on *political* thought, a significant part of our effort will be to come away with a broad array of perspectives on what constitutes U.S. political thought, and how to make sense of democratic aspirations in the face of conflicts over the boundaries of U.S. and American identities. We will read texts and authors such as the Federalist Papers, Tocqueville, and the Declaration of Independence. We will also read texts by native, black, feminist, anarchist, and Latinx thinkers who challenge some of the assumptions about justice, and sovereignty that are folded into ideas about progress and freedom. We will pay particular attention to the unprecedented creation of racialized enslavement and ongoing efforts to uproot it as an avenue into thinking about some of these problems. We will conclude by asking whether and how founding moments and ideals offer resources for rethinking democracy today.

Learning Objectives

My objectives for student learning in this course include both knowledge and skills. By the end of the quarter, you will:

- Be familiar with the arguments and ideas presented in the readings and in classroom discussions.
- Understand some main theoretical debates around U.S. and American identity and democracy and be familiar with examples from the political world to which the debates speak.
- Thoughtfully read complex texts and analyze arguments.
- Communicate your own ideas and arguments, verbally and in writing.

Requirements

I expect you to attend all class meetings, and to thoughtfully read all course materials. Your course grade will include the following components:

1. Attendance (minus 3 absences) – 10%
2. Participation – 15%
3. Four short papers – 40% (10% each)
4. Leading class discussion – 15% (5% each time)
5. Final paper – 20%

Extensions and incompletes are only for emergency cases. Contact me immediately – and in advance of any due dates – should urgent, unavoidable, and unforeseen circumstances interfere with your completion of the requirements.

Expectations

Readings:

The readings are the foundation of the course. Much of the reading is dense and difficult, and full of unfamiliar ideas. You must give sufficient time to actively **read and re-read** the materials slowly, carefully, and thoughtfully. ***You should plan to spend a number of hours a week reading and re-reading the course materials and preparing for class discussion.*** If you have taken these steps and are still having difficulty engaging in the course materials, arrange to see me in office hours.

Class Discussions:

Discussions provide an opportunity for more in-depth discussion and analysis of the material. Attendance and participation is required, and you are expected to be an active and consistent contributor. More specifically:

- You must come to class prepared to analyze and reflect on the readings—this means you must complete the assigned readings prior to class. Come to class on time, and bring a copy of the readings with you. If you are consistently late or frequently arrive without a copy of the assigned readings (or your notes), this will impact your participation grade.
- You will be expected to raise questions related to the material, share perspectives on and interpretations of the readings and discussion topics, and engage in respectful and thoughtful debate.
- Additionally, you will have the opportunity to collaborate with 2-3 other students to lead class discussions twice this semester. You will be expected to generate and share focused reading questions for our discussions, to facilitate said discussions using the questions that you have prepared, and to guide the class in any relevant small or large-group activities on those days. You will not be expected to give presentations on the readings; however, you should be particularly well-versed in the assigned material when you lead discussions.

Class discussion makes up a significant portion of your grade in this class. I will use these guidelines to rigorously evaluate your work in section:

A: Full attendance. Solid, consistent, outstanding contributions, active listener

B: Full attendance. Participated well most days with contributions and as an active listener; or someone who made solid contributions, but contributed too often or took over conversations

C: Full attendance but not much more- i.e. little to no participation, just showed up to class and breathed.

D: Did average work or less, or who was present/breathing but regularly came to class without the texts.

F: Not in attendance enough to judge participation

Writing:

Clear writing is an extremely difficult task that can only be mastered through practice. Virtually no one is a born writer. Virtually everyone can be a good – even outstanding – writer. Focused papers will help to develop your skills, but they will require significant time thinking, writing, and revising and reworking. I will also be available to meet with you to discuss your papers, however, these meetings must be conducted in person. I also encourage you to seek help from the Writing Center or friends to review papers for you. At the very least, proofread your own work.

I take the responsibility of grading your work seriously, and will always strive to be fair and accurate in my evaluations. I will use the following standards for the evaluating written work in this course:

- A: Excellent work, with clear, challenging, original ideas supported by sufficient, appropriate, logically interpreted evidence. The essay should engage the reader in the inquiry, convincingly answer opposing views, be well organized, and free of significant flaws. An ‘A’ paper should be not just good but outstanding in ideas and presentation.
- B: Good to very good work, with a clear thesis supported by sufficient, appropriate evidence, organized and interpreted logically. The ‘B’ paper may have some outstanding qualities but be marked by significant flaws which keep it from being an ‘A’; or it may be all-around good work, free of major problems but lacking the deeper insight necessary for excellence.
- C: Satisfactory work, but not yet good. The ‘C’ paper meets the basic requirements of a thesis supported by interpretation of specific evidence, but it needs work in thinking and/or presentation. There may be a lack of clarity, the evidence may not always be sufficient and appropriate, or the interpretation may have logical flaws. The essay may have organizational or mechanical problems that keep it from being good. The ‘C’ paper may be good in some respects but poor in others, or it may simply be adequate but not noteworthy overall.
- D: Barely passing work that shows effort but is so marred by serious problems that it cannot be considered a satisfactory paper.
- F: Failing work—for example, a hasty, sloppy paper that shows little or no thought, effort, or familiarity with the text.

Some Classroom Practices and Policies

- Your curiosity and participation are essential to your learning success in this course. Please feel free to raise your hand if you have a question—every question brings something of value to the class.
- Bring your readings to every single class.
- I have a strict **no internet** policy in my classrooms (phones, computers, etc). The evidence is conclusive that use of electronics in the classroom, even for note-taking, inhibits student focus and learning, both for the student using the device and for others nearby.
- Be on time. Do not leave midway through class except during break or in case of emergency.
- I may post additional materials to Moodle; please be familiar with everything that’s there.
- It is imperative that you check your Beloit email account for class communications. I will always try to respond to your emails within 24-48 hours. However, *I do not respond to grade inquiries via email*—all specific questions about your grade in the course must be addressed in person.

- Any form of academic dishonesty or plagiarism will be met with a failing grade and referral to the college for further discipline.

Textbooks

There are two books that we will read in their entirety, and thus that you will be required to have in hand on the weeks that we discuss them. However, I am flexible about if and where you purchase them, and about editions. The texts are:

- Danielle Allen, *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality*
- James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

Schedule of Classes and Readings

August 26: Introduction to the Course Requirements and Themes

What is U.S. political thought?
Who is a U.S. political thinker?

August 28 & 30: Creating a Classroom Community

hooks, "Teaching to Transgress"

September 2: Foundations of Beloit College; US. Political Thought

"Preface to 2018 Commencement and other college functions"
"Preface to Theatre performances"
[Guide to Acknowledging First Peoples & Traditional Territory](#) (Canada).
[The Campus Mounds Sustainability and Advocacy Initiative](#) (CMSAI)

Dahl, *Empire of the People* Chapter 3

September 4 & 6: Foundations of U.S. Political Thought

Dahl, *Empire of the People* Chapters 4-5

September 9, 11: Federalist Papers

Brutus, Letter No. I
Hamilton, *Federalist Paper* No. 1
Brutus, Letter No. III
Madison and Hamilton, *Federalist Papers*, Nos. 9, 10, 11
Madison and Hamilton, *Federalist Papers*, Nos. 14, 15, 31, 35

September 13 & 16: Yeoman Freedom

Wood, "Republicanism," in *Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*
Appleby, Introduction (pp. 1-11) and "What is American in Jefferson's Political Philosophy?"
from *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination*

September 20 & 23: Civic Participation

Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (selections on Moodle)

September 25: White Democracy

Olson, *The Abolition of White Democracy*, Chapter 2

September 27: White Democracy

Olson, *The Abolition of White Democracy*, Chapter 3

September 30: White Democracy

Olson, *The Abolition of White Democracy*, Chapter 5

October 2: Black Reconstruction

Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction* Chapter 16

October 4 & 7: Black Identity and the Civil Rights Movement

Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

October 9 & 11: Anarchist Feminisms

Goldman, *Living My Life* Vol. 1, Chapters 1-12, 23-25, 30, 34, 38

October 21: Reclaiming Foundations

Allen, *Our Declaration*

No class on Wednesday, October 23rd and Friday, October 25th – I'm away at a conference.

October 28: Reclaiming Foundations

Allen, *Our Declaration*

Paper Proposals Due October 28th

October 30, November 1, 4, 6, & 8: Reclaiming Foundations

Allen, *Our Declaration*

November 11 & 13: Are Rights All We Have?

Warner, *The Trouble with Normal* Chapters 1 & 3

November 15, 18:

No class – individual meetings about final papers

November 22, 25, & 27: Recasting American Political Identity

Bernal, *Beyond Origins*

December 2 & 4: Borders

Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* pp. 23-113

December 6, 9: Final Papers

Discussions of Final Papers; Writing Workshop

December 11: Final Day of Class

Final paper due by email, Saturday, December 14th at noon