

**PHIL 30409: American Political Thought  
from the Declaration of Independence to the Present (2024)**

Instructor: Paul Weithman

Teaching Assistants: [María Arévalo](#), [Anita Pillai](#)

**MW 140 DeBartolo**

**Discussion Sections**

Friday 9:25 DeBartolo 347 -

Friday 2:00 DeBartolo 143 -

Friday 10:30 DeBartolo 335 -

Friday 2:00 DeBartolo 347 -

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This course traces the history of American Political Thought from the Declaration of Independence (and its antecedents) to the present. Topics treated include: the philosophical origins of the Declaration of Independence, the meaning of the Declaration in the debate over independence, the Constitution and its legacy, the political meaning of the civil war, the legacy of slavery and segregation, the nature of political obligation in twentieth century U.S. history including during wartime and the contemporary crisis.

The course is listed in Philosophy but not History. The course can be counted toward various University, College and departmental requirements, including the Philosophy requirement and the History requirement. It also counts as an Integration Course.

**The History goals** of the course include placing events in context, charting change over time, developing empathy for those distant from ourselves, assessing primary and secondary sources, distilling and evaluating arguments made by professional historians. **The Philosophy goals** include analyzing the various and contested conceptions of freedom and equality found in American political thought. We will learn to locate those conceptions in political documents, speeches and court cases. We will also study their more explicit development and analysis in philosophers -- both American and English -- whose works have been seminal to the development of American political thinking.

**Reading Assignments and Discussion Sections** are mandatory and important. This class meets Mondays and Wednesdays for lecture and Fridays for small-group discussion. The reading assignment for each week is listed on the syllabus. **I ask that you come to class each Monday having done the reading for that week.** To the best of my ability the class will be a collaborative experience and we anticipate using the readings as part of lectures. Students should expect to be called on in class whether or not their hands are raised.

**Grading**

~35% Papers (to be explained below)

15% Participation in class and in sections

25% Mid-Term

25% Non-Cumulative exam, paper or podcast

## Written Assignments and Assessments

### *Papers*

There are four discussion sections associated with the course, 01-04. By class-time each Monday -- beginning Monday, January 29 -- students in each section will submit short papers -- one page, single-spaced or two sides, double-spaced -- on something they found interesting or puzzling in reading for the week. Just half the students from each section will write. The division of labor will be explained in more detail in the sections of Friday, January 26.

The papers are not to be expository. Rather, they must develop an argument which criticizes the target reading or explains what is puzzling to you and why. For example, you might argue that Locke is mistaken to claim that human beings are naturally equal, or explain that you're are puzzled by what Locke says about people's right to punish one another in a state of nature because that seems to be at odds with something else Locke says. Papers are to be submitted to your TA using the Canvas files that have been set up.

There will not be any papers due in the first two weeks of class, the week of the mid-term, Easter week or the last week of class. That leaves weeks 3,4,5,6,8 before the break and weeks 9,10,12,13 and 14 -- ten weeks in which papers will be circulated. Since each student will write a short paper every other week, each of you will write five short papers, each worth 7% of the final grade. There will be an option to write an additional longer paper in place of the final.

### *Brief Q's and A's*

In many weeks a question will be sent to you via Google Form. You will be notified when it is posted and should be provided a dialogue box in which to type a short -- two-three sentence -- answer. Answers should be submitted by midnight of Tuesday-going-into-Wednesday. The answers will be graded "P-F". Once papers begin, answers will be due only from those who do not have to write papers for the week.

**Handouts** on many of the readings will be made available in advance on Canvas. Some of them are quite detailed, but you should not be daunted by that. The handouts are intended to help you make your way through the readings, identify what is important and pick out important questions. They should also help you remember what you have read when you have to return to the readings for the mid-term and final.

**Mental Health** Care and Wellness Consultants at Notre Dame provide support and resources to students who are experiencing stressful or difficult situations that may be interfering with academic progress. Through Care and Wellness Consultants, students can be referred to The University Counseling Center (for cost-free and confidential psychological and psychiatric services from licensed professionals), University Health Services (which provides primary care, psychiatric services, case management, and a pharmacy), and The McDonald Center for Student Well Being (for problems with sleep, stress, and substance use). Visit [care.nd.edu](http://care.nd.edu).

**Honor Code** Notre Dame students are expected to abide by the Academic Code of Honor. We take this seriously and so should you. All students should familiarize themselves with the honor code. All graded work for this class should be your own and you must clearly acknowledge the sources you have used in written work. If you have questions, understandably, feel free to ask. Any incidence of plagiarism or other academic dishonesty will be reported to the Office of the Provost. ***Do not use ChatGPT!***

*Readings*

**Many articles and short readings are on the web and can be reached via the links provided on syllabus  
The following readings are on Canvas.**

Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the 4<sup>th</sup> of July?” (1852)

Abraham Lincoln “The Lyceum Address” (1838); “House Divided” (1858); Gettysburg Address (1863);  
Second Inaugural (1864)

Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, pp. 149-64, 167-82

John Rawls, “Justice as Fairness”; “Political Obligation and the Duty of Fair Play”

Judith Jarvis Thomson, “In Defense of Abortion”

Michael Walzer, “The Obligation to Die for the State,”

**Books** Available for purchase at Notre Dame Bookstore.

David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

Drew Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism* (Baton Rouge, 1995)

Robert Westbrook, *Why We Fought* (Washington, 2004)

Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (New York, 1992),

Nancy Woloch, *Muller v. Oregon: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, 1996)

## ***Class Schedule (2024)***

### ***Week 1***

**Reading:**, Locke, [Second Treatise](#), chapters 1-4, 7-9, 19.

Wednesday, January 17: Introduction of the course; Legal Challenges facing President Trump (see handout)

Friday, January 19: Locke, *Second Treatise*, chapters 1-4, 7-9 (see handouts #01.1,2 and 3 on Locke)

### ***Week 2***

**Readings:** Locke, [Second Treatise](#), chapters 7-9, 19, [Declaration of Independence](#); Armitage, [The Declaration of Independence: A Global History](#), chapters 1,2 and conclusion.

Monday, January 22: Locke, chapter, 7-9, 19 and the right revolt (see handout #01.3 and 4 on Locke)

Wednesday, January 24: - The run-up to the Declaration, the Declaration and Armitage (see handout #02.1 on Armitage)

Friday, January 26 - discussion sections

### ***Week 3***

**Readings:** [The Constitution of the United States](#); [Federalist Papers](#), numbers 1,2, 10, 39; [Alexander Hamilton](#), ["Conjectures about the New Constitution, Sept. 1787"](#); [George Mason](#), ["Objections to the Constitution," Nov. 22, 1787](#); [Patrick Henry](#), ["A Wrong Step Now and the Republic Will be Lost Forever," June 4, 1788](#); [James Wilson on the Slave-Trade Clause, December 3, 1787](#).

Monday, January 29: The end of the Revolution, the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution

Wednesday, January 31: Federalist Papers (see handout #03.1 on the Constitution and the Federalist Papers) **(Zoom)**

Friday, February 2: discussion sections

### ***Week 4***

**Readings:** Calhoun, ["Exposition and Protest"](#), Lincoln, ["The Lyceum Address"](#); Frederick Douglass, ["What, to a Slave, Is the Fourth of July?"](#), Lincoln, ["The 'House Divided' Speech"](#) and ["Speech on Dred Scott"](#); Drew Gilpin Faust, [The Creation of Confederate Nationalism](#)

Monday, February 5: Union to Nation, Part I (see handout #04.1 on the Chronology of Slavery)

Wednesday, February 7: Douglass and Lincoln (see handout #04.2 on Douglass and #04.3 on Faust)

Friday, February 9: discussion sections

### ***Week 5***

**Readings:** Lincoln, ["Gettysburg Address"](#); ["Second Inaugural"](#); Garry Wills, [Lincoln at Gettysburg, Prologue; Chapters 3 and 4, Epilogue](#); Drew Gilpin Faust, [The Creation of Confederate Nationalism](#)

Monday, February 12: Rebellion and Lincoln's addresses (see handouts #05.1 on Lincoln and #05.2 on Wills)

Wednesday, February 14: The Political Economy of War and the Beginning of Reconstruction

Friday, February 16: discussion sections

**Week 6**

**Readings:** [Plessy v. Ferguson](#); Booker T. Washington "Atlanta Exposition Speech," (1895); W.E.B. DuBois, "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," (1903). From the Muller v. Oregon reader: Lochner v. New York (1905), pp. 99-104; "The Right to Leisure" by Florence Kelly, 105-107; skim "The Dangers of Long Hours" or Brandeis., pp. 109-133; Muller v. Oregon (1908), pp. 144-150; Adkins V. Children's Hospital (1923), 157-165.

Monday, February 20: Reconstruction's end, Jim Crow and Plessy (see handout #06.1 on Plessy)

Wednesday, February 22: Lochner/Muller (see handout #06.2 on the road to Lochner)

Friday, February 24: discussion sections

**Week 7**

**Reading:** John Maynard Keynes, *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (Prefaces, Introduction and Concluding Thoughts); Alan Brinkley, "The Late New Deal and the Idea of the State" from Brinkley, *Liberalism and Its Discontents*

Monday, February 27: Great Depression, its origins and what it meant for American liberalism

Wednesday, March 1: Keynes's attack on classical liberalism (or "free labor") and the Keynesian alternative (see handout #7.2 and 3 on Keynes)

Friday, March 3: Mid-term exam

**Week 8**

**Readings:** Michael Walzer, "The Obligation to Die for the State"; Robert Westbrook, *Why We Fought*, essays 1-3;

Monday, March 5 - Walzer (see handout #08.1 on Walzer)

Wednesday, March 7 - Guest lecturer on Westbrook, Mobilization for World War II (see handout #08.2 on Westbrook)

Friday, March 10: discussion sections

**Spring Break****Week 9**

**Reading:** John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness", watch Weithman zoom on Rawls's second principle (in the "Handouts" folder for Week 9)

Monday, March 20: Rawls on Justice as Fairness (see handout #09.1 on Rawls)

Wednesday, March 22: Rawls on Justice as Fairness (see handout #09.1 on Rawls)

Friday, March 24: discussion sections

**Week 10**

**Readings:** Martin Luther King "Letter from Birmingham Jail"; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [Ia-IIae, 94](#) and [Ia-IIae, 95](#) on natural and human law, also *Summa Theologiae* [Ia-IIae, 96,4](#) on the force of human law.

Monday, March 27: The civil rights movement and Black power

Wednesday, March 29: - Martin Luther King "Letter from Birmingham Jail" + Aquinas [Ia-IIae, 94](#) and [Ia-IIae, 95](#) on natural and human law (see handout #10.1 on King)

Friday, March 31 - **No Class - Good Friday**

**Week 11**

**Readings:** Ronald Dworkin, "What the Constitution Says"; recommended Dworkin "The Moral Reading of the Constitution"; [Roe v. Wade](#); John McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom*, chapter 9; for section: Judith Jarvis Thomson, "In Defense of Abortion" (see handout #12.2 on Thomson)

Monday, April 1 - **No Class - Easter Monday**

Wednesday, April 3 - Dworkin

Friday April 5 - discussion sections on Thomson (see handout #12.2 on Thomson)

**Week 12**

**Readings:** Locke, *Second Treatise*, chapter V on property; "Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, pp. 149-64, 167-82.

Monday, April 8 - Locke and Nozick (see handouts ##11.1 and 11.2 on Locke and Nozick)

Wednesday, April 10 - Nozick on Liberty, Patterns and Taxation

Friday, April 12 - discussion sections

**Week 13**

**Readings:** Friedman, "The Relation Between Economic Freedom and Political Freedom", Deaton, "Misreading Adam Smith": T.M. Scanlon "The Diversity of Objections to Inequality"

Monday, April 15 - The rise and fall of neo-liberalism or from Nozick and Friedman to the crisis of 2008

Wednesday, April 17 - Some data on economic inequality; Scanlon on the diversity of objections to inequality

Friday, April 19 - discussion sections

**Week 14**

**Readings (tentative):** Michael Sandel, *Tyranny of Merit*, pp. 113-95; Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized*, chapter 1; [Ezra Klein and Jill LePore Podcast](#)

Monday, April 22: American Populism

Wednesday, April 24: Class discussion on polarization (Klein and LePore)

Friday, April 26: Discussion Sections

**Week 15**

**Reading (tentative):** Executive Summary of the Final Report of the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6 Attack on the US Capitol, pp 1-131

Monday, April 29: The State of American Democracy

Wednesday, May 1: Wrap-Up and Valedictory