

**POLS (Political Science) 3378-01—American Political Thought (3 credit hours)**

Spring 2018—MWF: 10.00-10.50; CHSS 232

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Office Hours: M, W: 2.00-3.00; T: 1.00-2.00; or by appointment.

**Course Description**

Political thought takes place on four different levels. First, there is the most common kind of political thinking, which is argument in the service of the practice of politics, and which is exemplified in the writings and speeches of statesmen and other political leaders. Second, there is the somewhat more ambiguous activity of formulating doctrines, which is manifested in the production of abstract principles or political blueprints. Third, there is the historical interpretation of political institutions, ideas, and practices from the past, which is concerned, not with recommending policies or elaborating doctrines, but with making these institutions and ideas intelligible. Finally, there is the investigation and elucidation of the presuppositions of political activity, which results in a philosophical explanation of the character of politics and practice.

In this course, we will examine a variety of ways of understanding the traditions of American political life. We will be reading the works of American scholars of American politics who have viewed American politics through a variety of epistemological lenses, including those practical, historical, and philosophical viewpoints mentioned above. On the one hand, the writers are concerned, like most serious scholars, with explanation, but, given that they are all American citizens, they all manifest a practical or commendatory interest, as well.

We shall be primarily concerned with two historical and theoretical questions. First, what do the various authors we shall be reading believe to be the character of the American state? Is it an ideological political community defined by its commitment to a single abstract purpose (e.g. liberty for all, equality for all, a fair distribution of resources for all, etc.)? Or is it better understood as an historical achievement of those who chance, circumstance, and shared practices brought together (that is to say, a group without a common purpose)?

Second, what do these authors believe to be the functions of the American government? Is the national government to be the manager of a grand enterprise or is it to be the custodian of the generally accepted practices of the political community?

These two questions in various guises animated much of the discussion about independence from Britain, about the ratification of the American Constitution, and about the proper definition of federalism, and they still inform many of the disagreements that define contemporary American politics.

We will also examine the various traditions or symbols associated with American political culture, including exceptionalism, republicanism, liberalism, etc. These traditions and practices raise as many practical and theoretical questions as they answer. For example, what is a tradition or practice?; what does it mean to be an American, as opposed to, say, a Bolivian?; does the term 'un-American' make any sense, as opposed to, say, 'un-Bolivian'?; how do we choose between traditions when they conflict?; should we care about what the leaders of the colonial and early America had to say about government?; etc.

### **Course Objectives**

Students will gain factual knowledge about the both the history of American political thought and contemporary issues in American political thought, develop the facility to think and write critically about the central concepts in the history of American political thought, and apply these concepts to various contemporary questions. They will also understand the distinction between historical explanation, philosophical elucidation, and practical recommendation; and be able to offer accounts of both the context and content of the political ideas of the writers we study. Goals include the development of critical thinking, the development of writing skills, and the cultivation of the study skills requisite for success in undergraduate classes. We will accomplish these objectives in the context of studying:

- different types of evidence and argument (e.g. historical, logical, theological, etc.)
- diverse conceptions of the political community (e.g. a large quasi-biological family, an artificial construct resulting from a contract between citizens, an historical artifact, etc.)
- various conceptions of the origins and character of political authority (wisdom, expertise, divine appointment, noble blood, common consent of the citizenry, squatter's rights, etc.)
- several distinct definitions and scales of political values (e.g. order v liberty, liberty v equality, justice v order, etc.)

### **Texts**

Willmoore Kendall and George Carey, *The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition*

Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*

John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*

William Galston, *Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice*

Bruce Ackerman, *The Decline and Fall of the American Republic*

Antonin Scalia, *A Matter of Interpretation: Federal Courts and the Law*

Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*

Claes Ryn, *America the Virtuous: The Crisis of Democracy and the Quest for Empire*

## **Course Requirements**

All members of the class are expected to attend all sessions of the class and to have completed the assigned readings during the week on which they are listed. Attendance is important because it is closely correlated with academic success. Having the readings done ahead of time is the only way you will be able to participate fully in the lectures and discussions that will take place during class time.

There will be three short paper assignments (3-4 pages) during the term. You only have to complete two of these, and I will only grade two assignments from each student. There will also be a comprehensive take-home final examination. I will hand out both the paper assignments and the final examination at least a week before they are due (they will also be placed on Blackboard). There will also be a take-home final exam due by 5.00 pm on Wednesday, 9 May 2018.

***Late papers will be penalized at one full grade deduction per late class period (e.g. a paper due on a Monday will receive a deduction of a full grade if turned in on Tuesday or Wednesday, and a deduction of two full grades if turned in on Thursday or Friday, etc.). Late final exam papers will not be accepted without prior permission from the instructor (that is, from me).***

## **Make-up policy**

See course requirements for make-up policy.

## **Evaluation**

The course requirements will contribute to the overall course grade in the following proportions:

Papers:	50%
Final:	50%

Plagiarism or unauthorized collaboration will not be tolerated, and will be reported to the appropriate honor board.

When reading the texts and preparing your papers, it will be helpful to consider some of the following questions:

1. What is the character of the argument? Is the author concerned to describe and analyze existing political arrangements and social conditions or to recommend changing those arrangements? What sorts of evidence does the author appeal to for answers (history/fact; logic/reason; divine will/revelation)?
2. What understanding of the nature of political community is implicit or explicit in the text? How does the theorist envisage the relationship between the individual and the community? Is the community merely an association of independent individuals or is it a supra-individual organism? Does the political community provide the necessary conditions for achieving the 'good life' or does it merely restrain human nature? Is the political community a good in itself or is it merely a necessary evil?
3. What is the nature of political authority? On what basis does the claim to political authority rest: inheritance, superior knowledge/wisdom, divine will, conquest/power, contract, consent? What is the scope of political authority: are there any spheres of human activity excluded from the ruler's exercise of authority; are there any other restraints on what a ruler might legitimately do; are there any legitimate appeals against authority; is there a right of resistance?
4. What are the political 'values' implicit or explicit in the text? How does the theorist define and rank concepts like justice, freedom, and equality?

## Course Outline

Weeks 1-4—Introduction: The Traditions of American Political Life, at Home and Abroad

- Week 2—Multiple Symbols, Multiple Traditions: *Basic Symbols*, 3-95
- Week 3—The Derailment of Traditions?: *Basic Symbols*, 96-154
- Week 3—The US and the Rest of the World: *Irony*, 1-88
- Week 4—The American Future Seen from the American Past: *Irony*, 89-174

*First Paper Assignment*

Weeks 5-8—Political Philosophy, Teleocracy, and Nomocracy

- Week 5—What is Justice?: *Justice as Fairness*, 1-134
- Week 6—Practical Questions: *Justice as Fairness*, 135-202
- Week 7—What is Pluralism?: *Liberal Pluralism*, 3-78
- Week 8—Practical Questions: *Liberal Pluralism*, 81-132

*Second Paper Assignment*

Weeks 9-12—Institutional Crises—The Presidency and the Federal Courts

- Week 9—The Imperial Presidency Redux: *Decline and Fall*, 1-116
- Week 10—Fixing the Presidency: *Decline and Fall*, 119-187
- Week 10—The Problem with the Courts: *Interpretation*, 3-63
- Weeks 11-12—Are The Courts Really a Problem?: *Interpretation*, 65-149

*Third Paper Assignment*

Weeks 13-15 —America from the Left and from the Right

- Week 13—The Problem with the Left, from the Left: *Achieving*, 1-107
- Weeks 14, 15—The Problem with the Right, from the Right: *Virtuous*, 1-42, 97-211

***Take-home final exam due by 5.00 pm on Wednesday, 9 May 2018.***

### **Academic Dishonesty**

Plagiarism or unauthorized collaboration (e.g. copying answers on an exam, using ‘cheat sheets’, gaining access to an exam prior to its administration, using computers or other electronic devices to access answers) will not be tolerated, and will be reported to the appropriate honor board. Such academic dishonesty will result in immediate disciplinary action by the professor, which could involve failing the examination alone or the whole course. Students who are caught cheating are also subject to further disciplinary action from the university which could lead to academic probation, suspension, or expulsion.

The following are links to university policies and/or statements regarding academic dishonesty:

<https://www.shsu.edu/dotAsset/728eec25-f780-4dcf-932c-03d68cade002.pdf>

<http://www.shsulibraryguides.org/plagiarism>

<http://www.shsu.edu/academics/english/graduate/of-professional-interest/academic-honesty.html>

### **Classroom Conduct**

Students are expected to treat each other and the professor with respect and courtesy. Cell phones and other electronic or distracting items should not be visible or audible (keep in pockets, purses, or bags and on silent).

If you are bothered or distracted by other students during class, inform me and I will address the problem.

### **Students with Disabilities Policy**

It is the policy of Sam Houston State University that individuals otherwise qualified shall not be excluded, solely by reason of their disability, from participation in any academic program of the university. Further, they shall not be denied the benefits of these programs nor shall they be subjected to discrimination. Students with disabilities that might affect their academic performance are expected to visit with the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities located in the Counseling Center. They should then make arrangements with their individual instructors so that appropriate strategies can be considered and helpful procedures can be developed to ensure that participation and achievement opportunities are not impaired. SHSU

adheres to all applicable federal, state, and local laws, regulations, and guidelines with respect to providing reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. If you have a disability that may affect adversely your work in this class, then I encourage you to register with the SHSU Counseling Center and to talk with me about how I can best help you. All disclosures of disabilities will be kept strictly confidential.

***NOTE: No accommodation can be made until you register with the Counseling Center. Requests for accommodations must be initiated by the student. A student seeking accommodations should go to the Counseling Center and Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) in a timely manner.***

## **Religious Holidays**

Section 51.911(b) of the Texas Education Code requires that an institution of higher education excuse a student from attending classes or other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day, including travel for that purpose. Section 51.911 (a) (2) defines a religious holy day as: “a holy day observed by a religion whose places of worship are exempt from property taxation under Section 11.20....” A student whose absence is excused under this subsection may not be penalized for that absence and shall be allowed to take an examination or complete an assignment from which the student is excused within a reasonable time after the absence. University policy 861001 provides the procedures to be followed by the student and instructor. A student desiring to absent himself/herself from a scheduled class in order to observe (a) religious holy day(s) shall present to each instructor involved a written statement concerning the religious holy day(s). The instructor will complete a form notifying the student of a reasonable timeframe in which the missed assignments and/or examinations are to be completed.

## **Caveat Emptor**

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

[www.shsu.edu/syllabus](http://www.shsu.edu/syllabus)