“...ideas... both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas...

...soon or late, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil.”

- John Maynard Keynes¹

OVERVIEW

Do ideas matter to politics? How so? This course examines American Political Thought, a subject that bridges the subfields of American Politics and political theory. Political thought involves the articulation and contestation of fundamental ideas about politics. Ideas are, in essence, the raw materials of politics, providing the frameworks and resources by which political actors understand politics, seek power and policy achievements, forge uneasy compromises, and constantly interrogate the state of society as a whole. As this course will demonstrate, political ideas have had a profound impact on the development of the American polity over time.

Topics covered in this course include political ideas, political ideologies, conceptions of citizenship, political power, the organization of government, group identity, what it means for an idea to “win” versus “lose,” and how political thought is connected to political outcomes. The course is organized mostly chronologically. It is not meant to be a history course, but it does consider many of the key flashpoints and distinct eras in American history. The vast majority of the readings in this course are primary sources and are drawn from a variety of political thinkers, from presidents to political activists. Secondary scholarship, when used, is meant to both give greater context for some of the primary source readings and address some of the bigger questions of the course. Why do political ideas matter? How does political thought influence political outcomes? What does it mean for a political idea to “win” or “lose”?

* In drafting this syllabus, I have partly drawn upon Justin Craig Peck’s “American Political Thought” syllabus from the Spring 2018 semester at Wesleyan.

More broadly, the lectures, discussions, primary source readings, and scholarly readings will help us achieve a few course goals. First, we will gain an improved ability to understand what issues have been fundamental to American politics over time. Second, we will compare arguments and theories offered by political thinkers in context, critically evaluating their arguments and why they may have put forward the ideas they championed. Third, we will place the ideas of political thinkers from the readings into the context of present-day current events in politics, considering what about today’s politics reflects some of the periods and ideas from America’s past. Finally, as a more general goal for the course, I hope that we all can take a step forward toward becoming more politically critical, informed, and engaged citizens. Politics can be maddening, but it becomes more interesting and fun when you can make some sense of what is going on.

Our activities in class may take a number of formats. While we will often have lectures, depending on the topic there may also be discussions, debates, and/or small group work. Political concepts and topics often may reveal differences of opinion – this is particular true around election years! So even as some of us may have strong views and potentially disagree, I ask that we listen to each other’s viewpoints while working to ensure that civility and respect for each other are always present in our conversations.

ASSIGNMENTS & GRADING

Students are expected to complete the readings, come to lecture, and participate in class. Three times during the semester, students will be expected to complete short papers critically analyzing one or more weeks of readings. The papers should be 5 pages double-spaced. There will also be a final exam for the course. Alternatively, students may elect to do a research paper in place of the exam. Topics for this should be discussed with me and approved by Week 5. The grade breakdown is as follows:

- Participation – 15%
- 3 Response Papers – 30%
- Final Assessment
  - Final Exam – 55%
  - Alternative Research Paper – 55%

COURSE OUTLINE

I. THE CONCEPT

Week 1-2: Why Does Political Thought Matter?

Rogers M. Smith, Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), Introduction, Ch. 1

George Thomas, “Political Thought and Political Development,” American Political Thought 3, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 114-125
Jeffrey K. Tulis and Nicole Mellow, *Legacies of Losing in American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), Ch. 1


**II. THE FOUNDING AND RISE OF PARTIES**

**Week 2: The Revolution**

John Winthrop, “The City Upon a Hill” sermon (1630)

John Locke, *Two Treaties of Government* (1689), selections

Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (1776)

Declaration of Independence (1776)

Articles of Confederation (1777)


**Week 3: The Constitution, Federalists, and Anti-federalists**

Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* (1750), selections

Constitution (1787)

Bill of Rights (1789)

*The Federalist* # 10, 16, 17, 39, 45, 46, 51, 70 (1787-1788)

*The Anti-federalist* # 3 (1787)

Thomas Jefferson, “First Inaugural Address” (1801)

“Report and Resolutions of the Hartford Convention” (1815)


Elvin Lim, “Political Thought, Political Development, and America’s Two Foundings,” *American Political Thought* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 146-156.

Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), Ch. 5-7

IV. JACKSONIAN AND ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

Week 4: Jackson, the Bank War, and Nullification
Daniel Webster, “Liberty and Union” speech (1830)
John C. Calhoun, “Fort Hill Address” (1831)
Andrew Jackson, “Veto Message [of the Reauthorization of Bank of the United States]” (1832)
Henry Clay, “In Defense of the American System” (1832)
Andrew Jackson, “Proclamation to the People of South Carolina” (1832)
John C. Calhoun, A Disquisition on Government (1848), selections

Week 5: Antebellum America
Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America (1835), selections
Abraham Lincoln, “Address to the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield” (1838)
Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Man the Reformer” (1841)
“Declaration of Rights” at Seneca Falls Convention (1848)
James K. Polk, “Fourth Annual Message” (1848)
Abraham Lincoln, “Speech on the War with Mexico” (1848)

V. THE CIVIL WAR AND SLAVERY

Week 6: The Specter of Disunion
Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” (1852)
George Fitzhugh, Sociology for the South (1854), selections
William Lloyd Garrison, “On the Dissolution of the Union” (1855)
Abraham Lincoln, “A House Divided” (1858)
Lincoln-Douglas Debates (1858)
Henry David Thoreau, “A Plea for Captain John Brown” (1859)
William Seward, “Irrepressible Conflict” speech (1860)
Week 7: Civil War
Abraham Lincoln, “First Inaugural” (1861)
Alexander Stephens, “Cornerstone Address” (1861)
Abraham Lincoln, “Address at a Sanitary Fair” (1864)
Abraham Lincoln, “Second Inaugural Address” (1865)
Karl Marx, “Address of the International Working Men's Association to Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States of America” (1865)
Frederick Douglass, “Oration on the Unveiling of the Freedmen’s Monument in Memory of Abraham Lincoln” (1876)
Jeffrey K. Tulis and Nicole Mellow, Legacies of Losing in American Politics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), Ch. 3.

VI. THE GILDED AGE

Week 8: Inequality, Wealth and Race
Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today (1873), selections
Henry George, Progress and Poverty (1879), selections
Jane Addams, “The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements” (1892)
Booker T. Washington, “Atlanta Compromise” speech (1895)
W. E. B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk (1903), selections
Rogers M. Smith, Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), Ch. 11.

VI. THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

Week 9: Reform Politics and World War I
Ida B. Wells, “Lynch Law in America” (1900)
Jane Addams, Democracy and Social Ethics (1902), selections
Herbert Croly, The Promise of American Life (1909), selections
Theodore Roosevelt, “The New Nationalism” (1910)
Woodrow Wilson, *The New Freedom* (1913), selections
Woodrow Wilson, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress on Tariff Reform” (1913)
Carrie Chapman Catt, “Speech before Congress” (1917)
Woodrow Wilson, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress on the Conditions of Peace [the Fourteen Points]” (1918)

**VIII. LIBERALISM AND THE NEW DEAL**

**Week 10: The Roaring Twenties, Great Depression, and World War II**
F. Scott Fitzgerald, “May Day” (1920)
Calvin Coolidge, “Address to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Washington, D.C.” (1925)
Howard Lee McBain, *The Living Constitution* (1927), selections
Kellogg-Briand Pact (1928)
Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), selections
Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago” (1932)
Franklin D. Roosevelt, “First Inaugural Address” (1933)
Huey P. Long, “Every Man a King” (1934)
Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Annual Message to Congress on the State of the Union [Four Freedoms speech]” (1941)
Franklin D. Roosevelt, “State of the Union Message to Congress [Second Bill of Rights]” (1944)
UN Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

**IX. MID-CENTURY AND CIVIL RIGHTS**

**Week 11: The Illusion of Consensus**
American Political Science Association, “Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System,” supplement to *American Political Science Review* 44, no. 3 (September 1950), pp. 1-14
C. Wright Mills, “Letter to the New Left” (1960)
Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963)
Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), ?
Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet” (1964)
Lyndon B. Johnson, “Remarks at the University of Michigan [The Great Society]” (1964)
Lyndon B. Johnson, “Special Message to the Congress: The American Promise” (1965)
Dolores Huerta, “Delano Grape Strike March” speech (1965)
Stokely Carmichael, “Black Power” (1966)
Martin Luther King, Jr., “Beyond Vietnam” (1967)
Harvey Milk, “Hope” speech (1978)

**X. CONSERVATISM**

**Week 12: The Revolt against Liberalism**

William F. Buckley, Jr., *God and Man at Yale* (1951), selections
Ronald Reagan, “A Time for Choosing” (1964)
Phyllis Schlafly, *A Choice Not an Echo* (1964), Selections
Ronald Reagan, “First Inaugural Address” (1981)

**XI. CONTEMPORARY POLITICS AND CHALLENGES**

**Week 13: Where are We Heading?**

Sarah Jaffe, “Trickle-Down Feminism” (2013)
“The Flight 93 Election” (2016)
Donald J. Trump, “Inaugural Address” (2017)


Samuel P. Huntington, American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony (1981), Ch. 3-5


**FINAL EXAM**

- Identifications – Choose 10 of 15 – 40%
- Long Essays – Choice two of three questions – 60%