



Yeshiva University
THE ZAHAVA AND MOSHAEL STRAUS
CENTER FOR TORAH AND WESTERN THOUGHT

American Political Thought

Fall 2022

Stern College (MW 13:25-14:40, 245 Lex, 806)

Yeshiva College (MW 16:30-17:45, Belfer 511)

Prof. Neil Rogachevsky

neil.rogachevsky@yu.edu

Course Summary

This course aims to introduce students to the key debates and questions in American political thought from the time of the founding until around World War I. As has been frequently remarked, political writing and political debate have, in the United States, played the role that “national literature” has played in European countries. For the American political tradition has concerned itself not only with the evaluation of this or that policy or this or that candidate; it has frequently been the venue for the most important theoretical examinations of vital questions of statecraft, war and peace, morality, identity, and other matters. Through close study of essential essays, books, and speeches, students will begin to reflect on political-theoretical subjects such as the nature of rights and of equality, the purposes of government and the state, the nature of democracy and republicanism, and the role of religion. Concrete but also theoretical questions such as slavery and liberation, progress and the role of the Constitution, poverty, the role of “Old Europe,” and women’s rights and suffrage will also be addressed.

For Poli Sci majors: toward Political Theory distribution.

Expectations

The length of the readings in this class varies. Sometimes we will be discussing a few short speeches. In other sessions, we will cover an entire novel. However, *all* of the material in the class demands, and rewards, careful reading and intellectual analysis. Students will thus be expected to come to class having carefully read the material for that class and developed their own opinions about its arguments and potential problems.

Every student will be expected to give a solo presentation on a specific reading. This presentation should be treated much like an essay: the presenter will introduce the author, the reading, outline its main arguments, highlight some problems and difficulties, and raise questions for class discussion.

There will be an essay assignment (c. 6-7 pages) with possible questions assigned by the instructor.

There will also be a take home final exam covering all the themes and materials of the course.

Attendance

Active attendance and participation are essential for the functioning of the course and learning experience. Attendance will be taken at every class. All absences are to be cleared in advance with the instructor. Unexcused absences will result in a docked grade.

Office Hours

While there are no formal office hours for this course, the instructor is readily available in person, by zoom, or on the phone. In-person meetings are best arranged mornings before class sessions at Stern and afternoons before or after class sessions at Yeshiva College.

Grading

15%: Class Attendance and Participation

15%: Presentation

30%: Essay

40%: Final Exam

Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities who are enrolled in this course and who will be requesting documented disability-related accommodations should make an appointment with the Office of Disability Services, (646) 592-4280, akelsen@yu.edu during the first week of class. Once you have been approved for accommodations, please submit your accommodation letter to ensure the successful implementation of those accommodations.

Readings

Most of the material for the class is available online and has been linked to through this syllabus. Students should print the material and bring hard copies to class. Not having the material, whether digitally or a hard copy, will be considered poor participation. Additional material may be distributed. The following works should be purchased or acquired from a library.

Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*



Schedule

Week I – (Aug. 24) Introduction: “Political Thought and American Politics”

Week II – (Aug. 29 – 31) “The Stakes”

Readings

Martin Diamond, [“The Revolution of Sober Expectations”](#)

Jacques Derrida, “Declarations of Independence” [PDF in Canvas].

Harry V. Jaffa, [“Equality as a Conservative Principle”](#)

Week III/IV – (Sept. 7 – 12) “Declarations”

Readings

[The English Bill of Rights \(1689\)](#)

[The Virginia Declaration of Rights \(1776\)](#)

[Thomas Jefferson’s Rough Draft \(1776\)](#)

[The Declaration of Independence \(1776\)](#)

[The Declaration of the Rights of Man \(1789\)](#)

[Universal Declaration of Human Rights \(1948\)](#)

Mordechai Beham’s First Draft of Israel’s Declaration of Independence (1948) [JPGs in Canvas: 2 files]

Week IV/V – (Sept. 14, 19 – 21) “Federalists and Anti-Federalists”

Readings

[Constitution of the US](#)

The Federalist 1, 2, 3, 9, 10, 35, 36, 49, 51, 55, 57, 58, 63

The Anti-Federalist, Selections [To be distributed/posted].

Oct. 3: [ZOOM MEETING] “Interlude: American Exceptionalism?”

Readings

Seymour Martin Lipset, “American Exceptionalism Reaffirmed” [To be distributed]

Week V/VI (Oct. 24 – 26): “Rival Visions: Domestic Policy”

Readings

Alexander Hamilton: [“Opinion on the Constitutionality of a National Bank”](#) (1791)
Thomas Jefferson: [“Opinion on the Constitutionality of a National Bank”](#) (1791)
-- [“First Inaugural”](#) (1801)
-- [“Letter to Benjamin Austin”](#) (1816)

Week VII (Oct. 31 – Nov. 2): “Rival Visions: Foreign Policy”

Readings

[Pacifcus-Helvidius Debates](#) (Hamilton v. Madison 1794)

Week VIII (Nov. 7 – 9): “Individualism”

Readings (1830s)

Ralph Waldo Emerson: [“Plato”](#)

-- [“Self-Reliance”](#)

-- [“Napoleon”](#)

-- [“The American Scholar”](#)

Week IX (Nov. 14 – 16): “New Birth of Freedom: Abraham Lincoln’s Speeches”

Readings

Abraham Lincoln, [“The Lyceum Address”](#) (1838)

-- [“The House Divided”](#) (1858)

-- [“The First Inaugural”](#) (1861)

-- [“The Gettysburg Address”](#) (1863)

-- [“The Second Inaugural”](#) (1865)

Week X (Nov. 21 – 23): “Frederick Douglass”

Readings

-- *Autobiography of Frederick Douglass* (1845)

-- [“What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”](#) (1852)

-- [“Eulogy for Abraham Lincoln”](#) (1865)

Week XI (Nov. 28 – 30): “America & the Old World”

Readings

Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889)



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Week XII (Dec. 5 – 7): “In the Tenements”

Readings

Jacob Riis, [How the Other Half Lives](#) (1891)

Week XIII (Dec. 12 – 14): “Progressivism”

Readings

Speeches/Essays by Teddy Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Herbert Crowley, Mordechai Kaplan et. al
[To be distributed]

Week XIV (Dec. 19 – 21): “Women’s Suffrage” and Conclusion

Readings

[To be announced/distributed]