

Exploring United States Government: Political Theory and Practice



Above: Around the turn of the twentieth century, a mixed group of neatly dressed young people – perhaps under the direction of their schoolmaster or chaperone, on the right – respectfully consider Horatio Greenough’s 1840 sculpture “Enthroned Washington,” then on display on the east lawn of the United States’ Capitol building. (Today it can be found indoors on the second floor of the Smithsonian American History museum.) What did these young people think of this remarkable object, c. 1900? Did they unquestionably believe George Washington to be the Zeus-like incarnation of American civic virtue, truly worthy of such an artistic apotheosis? (Or were they silently snickering a bit at the sight of a topless George, stiff-lipped and with finger pointing toward heaven?) Did they really accept the sculptor’s hint here that American governance could be traced back to Athens and Rome? (Or was that a stretch, a notion to be put aside in the age of steamships, dynamos, and radio-telegraphy?) What did they imagine their “social contract” to be, between each other? Or between themselves and Washington and the other “Founding Fathers” of American history? Were they confident that the American system – that a Federal Democratic Republic – was the best of all possible systems? What do we think of these questions today?

What do we discover when we consider United States government in the context of political theory and historical examples, from antiquity to the present?

Course description from the catalog:

“An exploration of United States government, with particular reference to past and present political theory. Students will be exposed to a wide variety of thinkers and ideas, as both the sources of American law and government and as comparative examples. Connections will be made between theory and practice, and students will be encouraged to think creatively about the nature, history, and present course of American government and politics. Critical thinking and productive civil discourse will be consistently emphasized.”

Best contact: email tfarnold@bsu.edu at any time with any questions or concerns.

“Office hours” MWF 9:00-9:30 and TR 10:00-12:00 + 2:00-3:00 or by appointment, if these times don’t work for your schedule. Significant time during scheduled in-person class meetings will be available to go over and clarify general questions about readings, assignment instructions, evaluation criteria and policies, etc.

Course goals:

An introduction to the basic structures and principles of United States government.

Exposure to influential political theorists and past historical examples that have significantly shaped governance and politics in the United States.

Experience in thinking critically about politics, and forming independent responses to important political questions.

Practice writing (and speaking) clearly, critically, and convincingly.

Class policies:

The course Canvas site is the essential organizing hub for this class, including announcements and other instructions. Students should regularly and routinely check the course Canvas site.

Attendance will be taken for all in-person sessions according to the policies explained in the student handbook. Please promptly contact the instructor with any questions regarding the application of those policies.

Students are free to use a laptop, tablet, or phone for class purposes at any time. Most discussion readings will be online or distributed as a pdf document, always available from the course Canvas site. Students may read these on a device, or print them out as hard copies, as they see fit. Some readings may be distributed as hard copies in class. In any case, students are expected to be able to refer to any text under discussion.

Students are expected to read all discussion readings carefully and thoughtfully by the indicated dates in the course calendar of readings and threaded discussion dates (see below), as confirmed or amended on the course Canvas site. Students are encouraged to take notes on all readings, and during any class sessions, as they see fit. Students are not expected to have mastered any reading before the class session in which that text is discussed. However, if students find that they do not understand the basic ideas and examples in a text, even after in-class conversation, then they have a responsibility to further work on that text – with their fellow students as well as with the instructor – to be able to contribute to the online threaded discussion (and respond to any written essay question). Students are strongly encouraged to bring any questions regarding a given reading to office hours, either before or after that reading is officially scheduled for class discussion.

A generous time allowance will be provided for for all written essays (“papers”). If you need extra time, please ask. Reasonable accommodations will be provided should circumstances warrant. If an essay is not turned in by the last possible scheduled or arranged due date, a temporary grade of 0% may be entered in PowerSchool (the online gradebook). Any 0% grade may be replaced upon submission of late work, with an appropriate grade penalty for lateness, and after discussion with the instructor to determine acceptance and any appropriate penalty.

Grades will be posted to PowerSchool following a reasonable time for evaluation. Discussion grades will normally be posted within a few days of the last class session pertaining to a given topic or week. Essays will normally be evaluated and the grades posted within a week of submission. Students will be informed in circumstances of delay. Students should regularly and routinely check their grades on PowerSchool, share those grades with parents or guardians, and promptly contact the instructor with any questions or concerns.

Academic dishonesty and plagiarism will not be tolerated. Please review the student handbook for a full discussion of the relevant policies.

There may be provision for extra credit or additional or replacement assignments. Such opportunities, if any, will be announced during the semester.

If circumstances warrant, alternate assignments, extended due dates, and other exceptions to stated policies can be arranged on a case-by-case basis after consultation with the instructor. All reasonable accommodation will be made.

Any student with a disability will be accorded appropriate accommodation, as arranged in advance.

As the semester develops, course topics and readings may be amended as the instructor sees fit. Therefore, be alert to all announcements and any revisions to the below calendar of readings and topics.

This syllabus may be amended by the instructor at any time. Students will always receive timely prior notification of any changes.

Required statement regarding unexcused absences:

1. Ball State diversity and inclusion statement:

Ball State University aspires to be a university that attracts and retains a diverse faculty, staff, and student body. We are committed to ensuring that all members of the community are welcome, through valuing the various experiences and worldviews represented at Ball State and among those we serve. We promote a culture of respect and civil discourse as expressed in our Beneficence Pledge and through university resources found at <http://cms.bsu.edu/campuslife/multiculturalcenter>.

2. Indiana Academy History Department content statement:

As with many history classes, the lectures, readings, and discussions [in this course] will include a range of topics that may be triggering, emotionally distressing, and difficult for some students. Engaging with topics such as slavery and human suffering is essential to this discipline. History seeks to understand the experiences and thought processes of former generations, whether for good or ill. Sometimes the language and word choices used by people in the past may be insensitive or politically incorrect today. Nevertheless, the goal of history is to understand the past within its own context and time. If a reading, image shown in class, or discussion is truly troubling to anyone, please do not hesitate to talk to your instructor. In some circumstances, an alternative reading can be assigned.

Evaluation overview:

16 weekly discussion grades @ 25 points each	400
4 written essays @ 100 points each	400
total	800 points + any extra credit

Grading scale:

Percentage	Grade
.940-1000	A
.900-939	A-
.870-899	B+
.830-869	B
.800-829	B-
.770-799	C+
.730-769	C
.700-729	C-
Below 700	D*

Discussions:

Students will receive a discussion grade for each of the first sixteen weeks of the semester, Week 1 through Week 16. Evaluation will principally be based on spoken participation in any in-class or virtual sessions. Students should feel free at any time to contact the instructor with any questions or concerns regarding discussion evaluation.

Essays:

Students are required to write four essays, one for each of the four parts of the class (see course calendar below). There will be new prompts most weeks (shared with the class on Friday), so students have more than one option (and due date) for writing each essay. These essays are not research papers – the questions will always pertain to the discussion readings and other source materials.

Unless otherwise indicated, essays are due in one week, on the following Friday. The exact due date time is always 5:00 pm on the given day. Completed essays may be turned in during class time, or may be placed in Dr. Arnold's faculty mailbox by 5:00 pm on the due date. Students must always provide a hard copy, if at all possible (contact Dr. Arnold if an exception is warranted).

Further instructions and evaluation criteria will be provided with each specific essay option assignment. Students should feel free to contact the instructor with any questions or concerns regarding these essays, including student evaluation.

Book and readings:

There is no hard copy book for this class.

Discussion readings will be provided by the instructor, in most cases as a pdf document or link to online material, and always posted to the course Canvas site. Some materials may be distributed as hard copies in class.

The below course schedule and calendar will be confirmed and amended on a weekly basis on the course Canvas site. Be in the habit of checking that site regularly.

Course calendar of topics and readings:

Given readings and dates may change over the course of the semester. Be alert to all announcements in class and amendments on the course Canvas site.

Introduction: What is Government?

Week 1

M Aug 15	Welcome session
W Aug 17	BBC nature documentary, "The Empire of the Ants"
F Aug 19	Bernard Mandeville, "The Gumbling Hive" from <i>The Fable of the Bees</i>

Part 1, The School of Athens: What is Democracy?

Given readings and dates may change over the course of the semester. Be alert to any and all changes.

Week 2

- M Aug 22 Introduction to the Athenian democratic constitution
W Aug 24 Plato, Socrates' *Apology*
F Aug 26 Martin Luther King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail"

Week 3

- M Aug 29 Plato, Socrates' "Allegory of the Cave"
W Aug 31 Thucydides, Pericles' "Funeral Oration"
F Sept 2 Thucydides, "Melian Dialog"

Week 4

- M Sept 5 Labor day, no class
W Sept 7 Plato, *Republic*
F Sept 9 Plato, *Republic*

Week 5

- M Sept 12 Aristotle, *Politics*
W Sept 14 Aristotle, *Politics*
F Sept 16 No new content

Course calendar of readings and topics, continued:

Given readings and dates may change over the course of the semester. Be alert to any and all changes.

Part 2, SPQR: What is a Republic?

Week 6

- M Sept 19 Introduction to the Roman Republican constitution
- W Sept 21 Polybius, “Roman Political Virtue” and Livy, “Horatio” and “Cincinnatus”
- F Sept 23 Polybius, “The Balanced Constitution”

Week 7

- M Sept 26 Introduction to the Roman Imperial constitution
- W Sept 28 Suetonius, “Life of Augustus”
- F Sept 30 Suetonius, “Life of Nero”

Week 8

- M Oct 3 Introduction to Christian Rome
- W Oct 5 Augustine, *City of God*
- F Oct 7 Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*

Week 9

- M Oct 10 Fall break, no class
- W Oct 12 Petrarch, “Letter to Livy” and “Letter to Colonna,” and Machiavelli, “Letter to Francesco Vettori”
- F Oct 14 Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Course calendar of readings and topics, continued:

Given readings and dates may change over the course of the semester. Be alert to any and all changes.

Part 3: The Social Contract

Week 10

M Oct 17 Introduction to 17th and 18th c. revolutionary politics

W Oct 19 Hobbes, *Leviathan*

F Oct 21 Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*

Week 11

M Oct 24 United States Declaration of Independence

W Oct 26 Rousseau, *Origins of Inequality*

F Oct 28 Rousseau, *The Social Contract*

Week 12

M Oct 31 United States Constitution and Bill of Rights

W Nov 2 French Revolutionary Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen

F Nov 4 Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Economic Bill of Rights

Week 13

M Nov 7 Marie-Olympe de Gouges, *Rights of Women*

W Nov 9 Douglass, *What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?*

F Nov 11 No new content

Course calendar of readings and topics, continued:

Part 4: Contemporary Concerns and Alternative Perspectives

Week 14

M Nov 14 No new content

W Nov 16 Confucius, *Analects*

F Nov 18 Confucius, *Analects*

Thanksgiving Break

Week 15

M Nov 28 No new content

W Nov 30 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*

F Dec 2 John Rawls, "Distributive Justice"

Week 16

M Dec 5 No new content

W Dec 7 Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*

F Dec 9 Nussbaum, *Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism*