

Political Science 2004, Spring Semester 2011

Survey of Western Political Thought

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(Office hours: Ketchum 134B, Mo-Wed 11-12, and by appt.)

Freedom, Citizenship and Constitutional Government

We know that freedom in the form of *Personal Freedom* is highly valued in America today. The conditions and prerequisites for such individual freedoms are many. One crucial prerequisite is that individual democratic citizens are aware of their mutual dependence upon a free society protected by constitutional government. As citizens, they must act responsibly in order to solve the problems confronting their country. In fact, the basic theme of this course is the claim that both *personal freedom* as well as *good government* (one that serves the public good and protects constitutionally guaranteed freedoms) ultimately also crucially depend on *active citizenship*.

Thus, although the expansion of personal freedoms is a major accomplishment of modern democracies, it is equally important to understand what good and responsible citizenship entails, and what kind of government is required by, or results from, active citizenship.

We will examine these issues by studying some major political thinkers, both modern and ancient, who have analyzed the '*basic nature of politics and government*' far more carefully than is usually the case among practicing politicians and their publics. Together these most prominent political thinkers constitute what is referred to as the "Western tradition" of political thought. Some major thinkers have in fact claimed that the slow emergence of political and personal freedoms constitutes the very core of this 'tradition' of Western political theory, not found elsewhere in this form.

We will also emphasize citizenship because in today's America and other democracies, many observers and politicians worry about a 'decline of active citizenship,' and a growing 'privatization' of life in our 'consumer' societies. We will examine this problem and try to determine not only to what extent this criticism of today's democracies is valid, but to what extent this will affect freedom and democracy. Democratic freedoms depend on two things: constitutionally guaranteed individual rights as the foundation of personal liberty, as well as self-government by a 'sovereign' people, the foundation of citizenship. The balance or degree of harmony between these two elements of democracy, personal freedom and the political freedom of active citizens, decides the fate of democracy, and that balance ultimately depends upon the quality of its citizenry.

To this end, we will study a few prominent political thinkers' contributions to the broad subject of '*government by free citizens.*' You will find that certain key aspects of political life have remained fairly constant over time and were first and most clearly discussed a long time ago. Although today's governments act in a vastly more complex, interdependent world with problems differing drastically from those of the past, some basic interests like the need for security, political unity, different freedoms, good government promoting justice and 'the general welfare' have remained the same. It turns out that major thinkers of the past still teach us a lot about problems we face today.

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Required Readings

(Listed in the order in which they will be assigned. The precise selection of readings from each will be listed on the semester schedule below.)

1. U.S. Constitutional Government: James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay: *The Federalist Papers*
2. The Origins of Human Rights: John Locke: *Second Treatise of Government*

3. The Individual is Prior to Government: Henry David Thoreau: *Civil Disobedience*
4. Individual freedom from social pressure: John Stuart Mill: *On Liberty*
5. Is Politics the struggle for Power, with its own ethics? Thucydides: *The Peloponnesian War* (Pericles' Funeral Oration, and Pericles' Speech after the Plague)
6. Does political leadership require its own ethics ? Machiavelli: *The Prince*
7. Does Personal freedom undermine political freedom? Alexis de Tocqueville: *Democracy in America*
8. Is there a decline of active, responsible citizenship today? Michael Sandel: *Democracy's Discontent*
9. What should be the 'virtues,' the ethical standards and the character traits of a 'politically active citizen'? Aristotle: *Nichomachean Ethics*

(The chapters assigned from these readings are listed on the Semester weekly calendar below)

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A SHORT STUDY GUIDE

Today's Citizens do not only face specific 'practical' questions like 'how to fight terrorism,' or 'how government can create more jobs,' or 'how government can lower the federal debt,' etc. They also face some questions concerning the very basis of democratic government and individual freedom. These are questions like 'does Congress really represent the majority of the people today,' or 'are special interests undermining the self-government of the people as a whole?' Also, 'How actively should the federal government intervene in the life of its citizens?' Can the various freedoms, including personal, social, economic and political freedoms exist without conflict?

1. *In the U.S., trust in government, especially Congress, is at an all-time low; the country faces 'deadlocked' government; rigid ideological politicians block political 'compromises'; 'special interests' have increasing influence over*

legislation at the expense of the 'average citizen;' economic crisis of the 'free market' addressed by government stimulus bills attacked as 'socialism' by opponents; both government and private debt threaten the country's future welfare; the economic power of the U.S. democracy is challenged by undemocratic countries like China, which finances U.S. debt.

The *Federalist Papers* is the first thorough analysis of the American Constitution by some of its major architects. How do the authors envision a free society of free individuals? What are the main problems such a free society will encounter, and how should it deal with these problems? What do thinkers like Madison and Hamilton understand by a free citizen and the responsibilities of citizenship? What kind of government in their view will support both the sovereignty of the people, individual freedom and a constitutional system maintaining the rule of law? *How well is this system able to deal with today's problems, and how?*

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2. Modern democracies pride themselves of their constitutionally guaranteed individual rights. Equal 'unalienable rights' (the Bill of Rights) are central to the American system of constitutional law. Indeed, 'human rights' are declared to be universal by the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as the European Charter of Human Rights. The Foreign Policy of the U.S. is said by many administrations to be guided mainly by the defense of human rights. Various governmental and non-governmental organizations monitor the constant breach of such rights or their blatant denial. But what is the source and foundation of these human rights?

According to the American Revolutionaries, the English political thinker John Locke provided the main political theory explaining the origins of individual rights. How does John Locke's system of individual 'natural rights' and 'perfect freedom' define those rights? *Does his theory of 'natural rights' stand the test of time?* What are the characteristics required of free citizens, and what kind of government secures individual rights? To what extent can natural rights said to be universally applicable to all human beings?

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3. In the U.S. one of the main political divisions is over the 'size of government' and its role in free society. Some influential political groups blame all of America's problems on 'big government' in Washington. The 'national debt' is seen as the ultimate sign of illegitimate governing. Taxes are always the potential beginnings of encroaching 'socialism,' the ultimate perversion of government. Even during economic crises, a 'free market' economy is to be protected against government 'regulation.' Any 'compromise' on these 'basic principles' is frowned upon.

But upon reading Thoreau's famous 1849 essay on 'civil disobedience' it seems that the slogan 'that government is best which governs least' is not exactly a new one in American life. In fact, Thoreau goes so far as to say that he 'also believes' that government to be best 'which governs not at all.'

What does H.D. Thoreau's essay on civil disobedience say about individual rights and the citizen's relation to government? How does his view compare to Locke's theory of rights and the Federalist view of a free society? How does it compare to the Constitutional Founders like Madison and Hamilton? *And how in the light of Thoreau's arguments are we to evaluate today's attacks on 'big government?'*

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4. Although the US Constitution protects certain individual rights, those rights often conflict with 'public opinion,' or majority life styles and beliefs at the local, state or national level. Gay rights, right to 'gay marriage,' religious beliefs, rights of minorities etc. often cause 'social' conflicts. The beliefs and standards of 'society' are by many said to trump individual beliefs and ways of life. But public opinion can also change over time. What is the relation between individual and social opinions, beliefs, and conduct? How does a free society deal with 'diversity' and tolerance?

In the middle of the 19th century, J.S. Mill addresses 'social freedom' as a topic separate from political freedom. What are the conditions for social freedom, what kind of government does it require, and what does it have to say about citizenship in a free society? Does it add certain characteristics and traits to

citizens not addressed by the other authors we have read up to this point? What do his detailed arguments teach us about contemporary freedoms in modern democracy?

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5. Is political conduct and government guided by ethical standards different from private morality? Does especially the conduct of foreign policy, including various forms of warfare, require norms of their own which would not be allowed in the conduct of citizens, much less most religious commandments? Does the code of 'power politics' or the competition between nations override all other 'ethics'? What about the relation between power politics and human rights? For example, does the fight against terrorists justify the use of torture and the disregard of international legal treatise? These questions must be confronted by responsible democratic citizens.

The Athenians in Thucydides' history of the war between Athens and Sparta are famous for apparently defending an ethics of 'power politics' and of a competition for political greatness. But what are the main aspirations of Pericles' citizens? What do they understand their freedoms to be? What view of government does it require or entail? How does it relate to the 'modern' view found in the American Federalist? Does it include Mill's 'social freedoms?' Do modern states, including democracy, still value national greatness, fame and a kind of 'immortality?'

6. Machiavelli is even more famous today for defending a set of political virtues based on the 'power politics' he presumably admired in Thucydides' history of the ancient Greek city state and especially in the history of the Roman republic. For Machiavelli, one central concern is the difference between the virtues of private citizens (or 'subjects') and those required of the 'prince,' or political leader. Are Machiavellian virtues compatible with free citizenship? Is his claim for a unique set of political virtues compatible with free government? *Finally, does his view still have any relevance for us as democratic citizens today?*

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7. Finally, we turn to the contemporary issue of the 'decline of citizenship' in most democracies today, but especially our own. Many political observers and scholars have pointed out that active citizenship engages fewer and fewer Americans, whose lives are entirely consumed by 'private life,' leaving little if any room for public affairs, much less active political participation at any level, local or national. Civic education has been disappearing in public schooling. One result has been to further enhance the influence of 'special interests' and smaller groups of activists out of tune with majority interests. What are the political consequences of such developments, if they are indeed happening? Are the new social media on the internet creating new ways of 'participating' and informing citizens?

Again, the problem is not an entirely new one, although it has gained more prominence of late. In the 1830s, the French aristocrat Tocqueville wrote the first comprehensive treatise on American democratic society, still regarded as a 'classic' today. In it, he warns of the growth of private at the expense of public freedoms. Already, he was critical of what has become the pride of modern American democracy, its 'individualism.' What does T. understand by his term, and why does he argue that it undermines free citizenship? T. also argues that privatization of individual lives is quite supportive of centralized, benevolent 'welfare' government. Why is he apprehensive of the future development of government in the U.S.? What does he have to say about individual rights, and the self-government of the American republic? Which social forces and ideas are of fundamental importance to T.'s view of the democratic future? How do his views compare to those of Mill's vision of a free society, or that of Madison in Federalist n.10?

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8. Last, we study the contemporary theory of democracy's 'discontent' by M. Sandel. His main worry is the 'decline of citizenship' and political community, and the inordinate attention paid in contemporary America to private individual rights. How does he define citizenship and its relation to republican government? Is he correctly identifying the nature of today's 'democratic discontent?' What to S. should be the relationship between individual freedom, citizenship and government appropriate to maintaining the harmony between them necessary for a truly free democracy?

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9. You may be surprised to learn that the ancient Greek thinker Aristotle and his theory of 'ethics' can be read as one of the most comprehensive and detailed account of the ethics for citizens of a political community. It is in a sense a kind of 'handbook' for training or habituating 'virtuous' citizens. How does he envision such citizens? What are their main virtues? Why does he devote so much attention to 'friendship' among citizens? What kind of government is most supportive of a virtuous citizenry? *Most importantly, does Aristotle's prescription for good citizenship offer us any guidance today? Why, or why not? If not, what is required of democratic citizens today?*

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Course Requirements

Your performance in the 'lecture' part of the course will constitute 2/3 of your final grade. The other 1/3 will be made up of your work in the weekly recitation section, where you will be assigned some additional short papers.

- a. Midterm examination: 40 %
- b. Final Examination: 60%

The midterm examination (50min.) will consist of multiple choice, true/false, and short text identification questions to test mainly your memory and basic understanding of the material. *Note: the test will heavily rely upon material introduced in the lectures. Attendance at the lectures is crucial!!*

The Final examination (approximately 2hrs) will consist mainly of short identification and short answer questions, as well as somewhat longer essay questions. The test will primarily challenge your ability to compare different ideas, relate what we have learned from the past to our present situation, and critically examine some of the notions of citizenship and freedom we have studied. *Again, the test will heavily rely upon material covered in the lecture part of the course. Attendance at the lectures is crucial!!*

Each examination will be preceded by a review session, for which you will receive review questions intended as a study guide.

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Weekly Semester Schedule

(subject to time adjustments)

Week 1: Jan 1-12 Introduction to the subject matter of the course. (*The relation between private life, personal liberty, and self-government of free citizens*)

Week 2: Jan 17-19 American Beginnings: Federalist Papers (Readings: Federalist 1,10,57)

Week 3: Jan 24-26 Federalist Papers (Readings: Federalist 51,78,49)

Week 4: Jan 31-Feb 2 John Locke: The origins of individual natural rights (Readings: Second Treatise, chaps. II,III,V)

Week 5: Feb 7-9 John Locke continued: (Readings: chaps. VI, VII,IX,XI)

Week 6: Feb 14-16 J.S.Mill and social liberty (Readings: On Liberty, chaps.I,III,IV –p.77-87)

Week 7: Feb 21-23 a. Mill continued. Readings: Subjection of Women, chap.1)

b. H.D. Thoreau and the freedom of civil disobedience. Readings: Civil Disobedience.

Week 8: Feb 28-Mar 2 Athenian citizens and political power: Pericles.
(Readings: Thucydides, Pericles' Funeral oration, Pericles speech after the Plague)

Week 9: Mar 7-9 Machiavelli and the ethics of political leaders (Readings: The Prince, chaps. XV-XIX; XXV-VI)

Week 10: Mar 14-16 **SPRING BREAK**

Week 11: Mar 21-23 Tocqueville. The relation between personal freedoms and citizenship (Readings: Democracy in America, vol. Two, Part II, chaps. 1-5, 7-8, 10;)

Week 12: Mar 28-30 Tocqueville (Readings: Part IV, chaps. 1-4, 6-8)

Week 13: Apr 4-6 M. Sandel and the 'decline of citizenship' today. (Readings: Democracy's Discontent, chaps. 1, 2)

Week 14: Apr 11-13 Sandel continued: (Readings: chaps. 5, 9, Conclusion)

Week 15: Apr 18-20 Aristotle's 'handbook' for educating citizens (Readings: Nichomachean Ethics, Books Eight, Nine; Books Two, Three –sections to be assigned)

Week 16: Apr 25-27 Summary and Discussion: Personal and political freedoms in today's democracies

Final exams week: Apr 30- May 5

**UNIVERSITY POLICIES REGARDING STUDENT'S RIGHTS AND
OBLIGATIONS:**

