American Political Thought
GOVT 420-001, Spring 2020
George Mason University
Wednesday 7:20-10:00 PM in Van Metre Hall 468
Professor: Joseph Kochanek (email: jkochane@gmu.edu)
Office Hours: Wednesday at 6:20 or by appointment

This course will acquaint students with main ideas in American political thought. There are several reasons why American political thought merits the attention of students. Those involved in policy debates take seriously arguments from the history of American political thought, to the end of seeking policy solutions. Understanding American political thought can help students understand American political development. Furthermore, many modes of political argument recur over time, so mastering older iterations of these arguments will prepare students for future iterations of them. This is worthy of special attention in a state with a self-consciously revolutionary tradition, such as the USA, because such a tradition seems to embed the possibility of transformational change in debates over political questions. This course will not seek a particular resolution of these debates, but it will arm students with the knowledge necessary to better understand what is at stake in them, and to resolve them on their own insofar as such resolution is possible.

The texts for this course have been ordered by the George Mason University Bookstore on the Arlington Campus. Other readings on this syllabus will be available either through the course website or through the George Mason Library Website. I will occasionally post additional works on the course website, typically after having referred to them in class. Books available at the bookstore:


Course Requirements:
1) Well-informed participation in class. Classes will be balanced between lecture and discussion. Discussion will be driven by your questions about the material. I expect every member of the class to be prepared to speak about the readings in each class.
2) Weekly Assignments. A brief writing assignment will be assigned and completed in class each week.
3) A Paper of 1800-2200 words, due April 22. You will receive topics in early April.
4) A Midterm Exam. The midterm exam is scheduled for March 4. The exam will consist of two essays. This exam will be closed-book, with no notes allowed.
5) Final Exam. The final exam is scheduled Wednesday, May 6, at 7:30 PM. The exam will consist of four essays. The final exam will be closed-book, with no notes allowed.

Grading Breakdown:
Class Participation: 10%
Weekly Assignments: 10%
1800-2200 Word Paper: 20%
Midterm Exam: 20%
Final Exam: 40%
Course Schedule:

January 22: American Political Thought in the Colonial Period
Why did many early settlers of the thirteen colonies take religious freedom seriously? Is there a connection between religious freedom and other political values? What were these other political values? What is familiar in these political theories? What is unfamiliar?

Reading Assignment for January 22:
Tocqueville, 1-17, 31-51, 483-488, 642-643.
Kramnick and Lowi, 1-66.
NOTE: It’s okay if you did not read before this meeting, but I will refer to these when lecturing.

January 29: The American Revolution
What are the challenges to justifying political revolution? Is there reason to think that political actors are better able to overcome these challenges than philosophers and theorists? What justifies government? Or do government and political revolution not need justification at all?

Reading Assignment for January 29:
Locke, Second Treatise, ch. II, III, V, VIII, IX, X, XI, XII, XIV, XIX.
Kramnick and Lowi, 67-119.

February 5: Creating Constitutional Government
The creation of the Constitution is often characterized in terms of compromise. What was being compromised? What specific choices were made in the creation of the United States Government, and what choices were rejected? What kinds or arguments are offered by Madison and Hamilton in The Federalist? What are rights, and why are they necessary to a government? Or are they not necessary?

Reading Assignment for February 5:
Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 126-137; 179-185.

February 12: America as a New State
What economic decisions faced the new American state? What was the basis for the emerging party divide in the 1790s? Were parties inevitable, or were other modes of coalition-building possible? Or is consensus about the best course of government possible as an ongoing and routine matter? How did the decisions in Marbury v. Madison and McCulloch v. Maryland shape American politics?

Reading Assignment for February 12:
Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 111-116, 195-204.
Kramnick and Lowi, 243-340.

February 19: Jacksonian America
What was distinctive about the political thought of the Jacksonian era? What is tyranny of the majority? Why would tyranny of the majority have been a special problem during this era? What modes of thought supported the idea of the omnipotence of the majority? What is the basis of the claim of the majority to rule? What modes of thought opposed the claims of the majority?

Reading Assignment for February 19:
Kramnick and Lowi, 341-430
February 26: Politics and Political Thought Before the Civil War
What egalitarian ideas emerged in the decade or two before the American Civil War? How did theorists of the period understand the role of women in the context of egalitarian ideas? What kinds of arguments did those supporting the abolition of slavery offer, and how did their opponents respond to them? What was the import of the ruling in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*?

**Reading Assignment for February 26:**
Kramnick and Lowi, 431-559

March 4: Lincoln’s Political Thought
The political thought of America in the 1860’s was dominated by a single figure – Abraham Lincoln. How did he argue against slavery? How did he understand the Constitution? How did he understand the purpose of the Civil War?

**Reading Assignment for March 4:**
Lincoln, “Lyceum Address”
Kramnick and Lowi, 559-596

NOTE: The midterm exam is scheduled for March 4, at 8:45 PM. It will cover all of the reading assigned in the course so far, including the materials treated in class on March 4 before the exam.

March 11: Spring Break

March 18: Political and Social Change in the Gilded Age
The second half of the nineteenth century was a period of significant social change in the USA. What elements of life changed most dramatically? What elements of social life or political thought revealed continuity with the first half of the eighteenth century? Or was life altogether new after the Civil War?

**Reading Assignment for March 18:**
Tocqueville, 649-652
Kramnick and Lowi, 597-780

March 25: American Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism in Theory and Practice
In what ways did America’s domestic politics shape attitudes about foreign policy? How did America’s activities in international politics shape domestic social life? How did America’s increasingly significant role in world politics shape its regard for the rest of the world? What elements of political thought offer evidence of continuity between the first half of the nineteenth century and the second half, if any?

**Reading Assignment for March 25:**
Kramnick and Lowi, 781-889

April 1: The American Progressive Movement
What kind of movement was the progressive movement? Was it driven by distinctive elements of urban life, or did it inherit the doctrines of the populist movement of a generation or so earlier? Or was the movement too capacious to characterize simply? To the extent that weeks eight and nine of the course revealed tensions in American political thought, did the progressive movement resolve them, or exacerbate them? Or something else?

**Reading Assignment for April 1:**
Kramnick and Lowi, 890-996
April 8: From New Deal to Cold War: Mid-Twentieth Century American Political Thought
What was the New Deal? Did it carry forward progressive ideas from earlier in the century, or was it a new attempt to solve new problems? Did the New Deal fundamentally shape American politics and political thought, or is it best thought of as primarily focused on economic policy? What did the Cold War reveal in American political thought? Did the Cold War serve a solitary function for American society? Or did it reveal social tensions left insufficiently addressed in the 1930s and 1940s?

Reading Assignment for April 8:
Kramnick and Lowi, 997-1114

April 15: Debating Freedom and Justice: American Political Thought in the 1960s and 1970s
What was the new left, and how did it differ from the old left? How did the idea of egalitarianism shape the political thought of the 1960s? What was the relationship between academic political theory of the period, and political events?

Reading Assignment for April 15:
Kramnick and Lowi, 1115-1249

April 22: American Political Thought at the Turn of the New Century
In the final weeks of the course, we examine ideas close to our own time. What unfolding events have shaped the political thought of the last generation? Or would you argue that the political thought of the late twentieth century shaped events?

Reading Assignment for April 22:
Kramnick and Lowi, 1250-1484 (we will likely split up this week’s reading among the class members, with the paper being due today, to cut the reading load by about half for any particular student)
Note: The 2000-word paper is due today.

April 29: American Political Thought: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow
How has recent American political thought shaped the political events of today? What theoretical accounts of American politics would you use to explain American politics? To the extent that one can so distinguish, are political actions today driven to an unusual degree by theoretical concerns, as opposed to practical concerns?

Reading Assignment for April 29:
Kramnick and Lowi, 1485-1544
Tocqueville, 816-834
**Academic Ethics:** GMU is an Honor Code university; please see the Office for Academic Integrity for a full description of the code and the honor committee process. The principle of academic integrity is taken very seriously and violations are treated gravely. What does academic integrity mean in this course? Essentially this: when you are responsible for a task, you will perform that task. When you rely on someone else’s work in an aspect of the performance of that task, you will give full credit in the proper, accepted form. Another aspect of academic integrity is the free play of ideas. Vigorous discussion and debate are encouraged in this course, with the firm expectation that all aspects of the class will be conducted with civility and respect for differing ideas, perspectives, and traditions. When in doubt (of any kind) please ask for guidance and clarification.

**Electronic Devices:** Laptops and similar devices may be used for taking notes or for consulting assigned texts in electronic format. Please do not use cellular phones or similar devices in the classroom.

**Email:** Mason uses only Mason e-mail accounts to communicate with enrolled students. Students must activate their Mason e-mail account, use it to communicate with their department and other administrative units, and check it regularly for important university information including messages related to this class.

**Disability resources:** If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the [Office of Disability Services](ods.gmu.edu) at 703.993.2474 or ods.gmu.edu. All academic accommodations must be arranged through that office.

**Important deadlines for this semester:** Students are responsible for verifying their enrollment in this class. Schedule adjustments should be made by the deadlines published in the Schedule of Classes.

- **Last Day to Add:** Tuesday, January 28, 2020
- **Last Day to Drop:** Tuesday, February 11, 2020

After the last day to drop a class, withdrawing from this class requires the approval of the Dean and is only allowed for non-academic reasons.