

Course # | American Politics and Equality

Description

American politics is in a bad way. Racism and nativism are resurgent, a pandemic is devastating the globe and dividing Americans, and on January 6, 2021, the peaceful transition of power following a presidential election was broken for the first time since the American Civil War. This course offers a historical, empirical, and normative inquiry into the social and structural forces driving American politics—especially American political disfunction—today. To give structure to our exploration, we will focus on the role played by *inequalities* of various sorts in bringing us to our present predicament.

In his Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln characterized the United States as a nation “conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” On its face, this is a laughable claim. How can a country in which millions of people were held in bondage have been said to be concerned with liberty or equality? And yet, Americans have long been thought to be a particularly egalitarian people. Alexis de Tocqueville went so far as to remark that “Americans are so enamored of equality, they would rather be equal in slavery than unequal in freedom.” Which view of equality’s place in the American project is more accurate? And how strong is the dedication of modern Americans to the idea of equality? Is there a distinctively American idea of equality? And what might be done to better realize it in our contemporary institutions and political culture?

Assignments

- (1) *Reading Critique* (x2): Sign up to write a 1,000-word critique of a reading twice over the course of the semester. This should both summarize and evaluate the reading. While your evaluations should take a position on the reading—i.e., do you agree or disagree?—they should also attempt to situate the article in the wider context of both the course as a whole and the section we are studying at that time. A critique does not necessarily mean the same thing as criticism. Strong criticism can often stand in the way of subtlety and depth. If you decide to be strongly critical, you should be sure to be critical in a way that still does justice to the author’s argument. Moreover, although you are responsible for summarizing the reading, a summary is not the same thing as a “play-by-play” of the reading. A good summary should be able to convey the essence of the reading without giving all the details. Fill in details only insofar as it is necessary to explicate the essential points. The best way to approach these critiques is to think of yourself as the teacher. What should students know from your reading? What questions should they ask about it? Finally, your critique should introduce questions and topics that would be useful and important for the class as a whole to take up in discussion. On the day that we cover the reading you critiqued, you should also be prepared both to summarize the reading and to facilitate the class’s discussion of this material: you will actually become the teacher! Also, if writing on more than one reading, you should feel free either to concentrate entirely on one reading or to write an integrative analysis of all of them. This should be posted to the course site forty-eight hours before the class on which the reading is due to give those who will critique it time to write their critiques.
- (2) *Peer Critique Responses* (x2): In order further to facilitate productive discussion in class, you will also be responsible for writing two 1-page critiques of your peers’ critiques over the course of the semester. These should evaluate and react to the main arguments that your classmate has made in their critiques. You should answer the following kinds of questions: Do they misunderstand the reading? Do they overstate the author’s case? Do they understate it? Is their disagreement justified?
- (3) *Case Studies* (x3): Several in-class case studies will take place throughout the semester. In addition to participating in these activities, you will be asked to respond to several short reflection questions about the experience.
- (4) *Term Paper*: The major work of this semester is the writing of a term paper between 2,500 and 3,500 words in length on an approved topic. A number of mandatory, interim assignments are designed to help you write this paper:
 - a. 500-word proposal due [date]
 - b. 500-word propositional outline due [date]
 - c. Rough draft peer-exchange due [date]
 - d. Final draft due [date]

The Idea of Equality

Equality, American Style

01. ▪ Ellis, Richard J. “Rival Visions of Equality in American Political Culture.” *The Review of Politics* 54, no. 2 (1992): 253–80.
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Opportunity and Outcomes

02. ▪ Daniel Bell. (1975). “The Revolution of Rising Entitlements.” *Fortune*, 91(4), 98.
▪ Thomas Sowell. (2002). *A conflict of visions : ideological origins of political struggles*. Basic Books, 129-150.
▪ Espinoza, Oscar. “Solving the Equity–Equality Conceptual Dilemma: A New Model for Analysis of the Educational Process.” *Educational Research* 49, no. 4 (December 2007): 343–63.
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Egalitarianism in American Political Development: Five Snapshots

The Revolution of 1776

03. ▪ The Declaration of Independence (1776)
▪ Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams (March 31, 1776)
▪ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, pp. 3-10, 50-64
▪ Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, Chapter 13.
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The Revolution of 1787

04. ▪ Publius, *The Federalist*, No. 10, 38, 39, 54, 55, 62 (1788)
▪ Danielle Allen, “The Flawed Genius of the Constitution,” *The Atlantic*, Oct 2020.
▪ Thurgood Marshall. 1987. “Reflections on the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution.” *Harvard Law Review* 101(1): 1–5.
▪ Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” (1852).
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Jacksonian America

05. ▪ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 3–13, 275–277, 479–482, 567–581. (On the spirit of equality)
▪ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 302–348. (On slavery and dispossession of Native Americans)
▪ *Johnson & Graham's Lessee v. McIntosh*, 21 U.S. 543 (1823). [Excerpts]
▪ *Cherokee Nation v. State of Georgia*, 30 U.S. 1 (1831). [Excerpts]
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The Slave Power & Abolitionism

06. ▪ *Prigg v. Pennsylvania*, 41 U.S. 539 (1842). [Excerpts]
▪ *Dred Scott v. Sanford*, 60 U.S. 393 (1857). [Excerpts]
▪ Abraham Lincoln, “The Meaning of the Declaration of Independence,” in Nichols, *Readings in American Government*, pp. 9–11.
▪ William Lloyd Garrison, “The Great Crisis,” *The Liberator*, 52, 2 (December 29, 1832), 206–207.
▪ Frederick Douglass, “The Constitution of the United States: Is It Pro-Slavery or Anti-Slavery?” (1860)
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The Legacy of the Civil Rights Act

07. ▪ Klinker, P.A., and R. M. Smith. 2002. “Benign Neglect?: Post-Civil Rights America, 1968-1998.” In *The Unsteady March: The Rise and Decline of Racial Equality in America*, pp. 288–318.
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- Massey, D.S. 2015. “The Legacy of the 1968 Fair Housing Act.” *Sociological Forum*, 30 (S1): 571–588.
- M. Delmont, “The Lasting Legacy of the Boston Busing Crisis.” *The Atlantic*, March 29, 2016.

Equality & Congress

Money & Influence

- John Adams, “The Role of the Rich and the Poor in the Legislature,” in Nichols, *Readings in American Government*, pp. 48–50.
- Randy Leonard and Paul V. Fontelo, “Every Member of Congress’ Wealth in One Chart,” *Roll Call*, March 2, 2018.
- 08. ▪ Manning, Jennifer E. 2022. *Membership of the 117th Congress: A Profile*. Congressional Research Service. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46705>.
- Soroka, S., & Wlezien, C. (2008). “On the Limits to Inequality in Representation.” *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 41(2), 319-327.
- Gilens, Martin. “Preference Gaps and Inequality in Representation.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 42, no. 2 (April 2009): 335–41.

Equal Voice?

- 09. ▪ *Citizens United v. FEC*, 558 U.S. 310, 372 (2010) [excerpts].
- Stewart, “Regulating Elections,” in *Analyzing Congress*: 226-244.

Race & Gender

- Atkinson, Mary Layton, and Jason Harold Windett. “Gender Stereotypes and the Policy Priorities of Women in Congress.” *Political Behavior* 41, no. 3 (September 2019): 769–89.
- 10. ▪ Rocca, Michael S., and Gabriel R. Sanchez. “The Effect of Race and Ethnicity on Bill Sponsorship and Cosponsorship in Congress.” *American Politics Research* 36, no. 1 (January 2008): 130–52.
- Ebonya Washington. 2008. “Female Socialization: How Daughters Affect Their Legislator Fathers’ Voting on Women’s Issues.” *American Economic Review* 98 (1): 311-332.

Partisan Gerrymandering

- 11. ▪ Stewart, “Regulating Elections,” in *Analyzing Congress*, pp. 205–226.
- “The Atlas Of Redistricting,” *FiveThirtyEight*.

Race, Districting, and the VRA

- *Shelby County v. Holder*, 570 U.S. 529 (2013). [Excerpts]
- 12. ▪ Fallon, Richard H. “Unenumerated’ Fundamental Rights,” in *The Dynamic Constitution*. Second edition. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 193–203.
- Thompson, Dennis F. 2002. *Just Elections: Creating a Fair Electoral Process in the United States*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press: 38–53.

Equality & The Presidency

Race in Presidential Elections

- 13. ▪ Tesler and Sears. 2010. *Obama’s Race: The 2008 Election and the Dream of a Post-Racial America*, pp. 1–51.

Racialized Voting in 2008

14. ▪ Tesler and Sears. 2010. *Obama's Race: The 2008 Election and the Dream of a Post-Racial America*, pp. 52–114.

The Paradox of Gender in 2008

15. ▪ Tesler and Sears. 2010. *Obama's Race: The 2008 Election and the Dream of a Post-Racial America*, pp. 115–159.

On the “Obama-Trump Voter”

16. ▪ Stone, John, and Polly Rizova. “From Obama to Trump: The Dialectics of Race and Nationalism in Contemporary America.” In *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism*, edited by John Stone, Rutledge Dennis, Polly Rizova, and Xiaoshuo Hou, 1st ed., 29–42. Wiley, 2020.
- Stout, Christopher T, Keith Baker, and Madelyn Baker. “How Social Desirability Response Bias May Lead to an Overestimation of Obama-Trump Voters.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (October 21, 2021): 694–705.

Explaining Trumpism: Which Inequality Matters Most?

17. ▪ Isabel V. Sawhill, “Donald Trump’s election: Was it economics or culture?” *Brookings Institution*, December 6, 2016.
- Diana C. Mutz. “Status Threat, Not Economic Hardship, Explains the 2016 Presidential Vote.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 19 (May 8, 2018): E4330–39.
- Ben Casselman, “Stop Saying Trump’s Win Had Nothing To Do With Economics.” *FiveThirtyEight*, Jan. 9, 2017.

Equality & The Courts

Composition of the Courts

18. ▪ Sonya Sotomayor, “Lecture: ‘A Latina Judge’s Voice,’” *New York Times*, May 14, 2009.
- Smelcer, Susan Navarro. “Supreme Court Justices: Demographic Characteristics, Professional Experience, and Legal Education, 1789-2010.” *Congressional Research Service*, 2009.
- Root, Danielle, Jake Faleschini, and Grace Oyenubi. “Building a More Inclusive Federal Judiciary.” *Center for American Progress*, October 2019, pp. 1–39.

Religious Equality

19. ▪ Fallon, Richard H. “Freedom of Religion,” in *The Dynamic Constitution*. Second edition. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 77–100.

Equal Protection of the Laws

- Fallon, Richard H. “Equal Protection of the Laws,” in *The Dynamic Constitution*. Second edition. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 149–190.
20. [CASE STUDY: “Values in Conflict: The Furor over Admissions Policy at a Popular Virginia Magnet School”]

Legitimacy of Judicial Review

21. ▪ Waldron, Jeremy. “The Core of the Case Against Judicial Review.” *The Yale Law Journal* 116 (2006): 1346–1406.

Equality & Public Policy

Welfare & Economic Inequalities

22. ▪ Martin Gilens. 2000. *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 5.
- Chetty et al. “Is the United States Still a Land of Opportunity? Recent Trends in Intergenerational Mobility.” *American Economic Review* 104, no. 5 (May 1, 2014): 141–47.

The Wars on Crime & Drugs

23. ▪ Hinton, Elizabeth. In *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America*. Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England: Harvard University Press, 2016, Introduction and Chapter 4.
- [CASE STUDY: A Rising Storm: Eric Garner and the Explosive Controversy over Race & Policing]

Immigration Policy

24. ▪ Abrajano, Marisa A., and Zoltan Hajnal. *White Backlash: Immigration, Race, and American Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017, Chapters 1 and 2.

Health

25. ▪ Case, Anne, and Angus Deaton. “Rising Morbidity and Mortality in Midlife among White Non-Hispanic Americans in the 21st Century.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112, no. 49 (December 8, 2015): 15078–83.
- Inequality.org. “COVID 19 and Inequality,” n.d. <https://inequality.org/facts/inequality-and-covid-19/>.

Women’s Rights

26. ▪ Fallon, Richard H. “*Roe v. Wade* and Abortion Rights,” in *The Dynamic Constitution*. Second edition. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 209–213.
- Mansbridge, Jane J. *Why We Lost the ERA*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp. 1–44.

The ERA

27. ▪ Mansbridge, Jane J. *Why We Lost the ERA*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp. 90–164.

Conclusion: Equality and the Idea of America

Why Inequality Matters

28. ▪ Scanlon, Thomas M. “Precis of Why Does Inequality Matter?” *Philosophical Studies* 176, no. 12 (December 2019): 3353–56.

[CASE STUDY: “Integration and Democratic Ideals”]
