

Contemporary Political Issues

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- Description** This course employs the tools of political philosophy to examine a range of contemporary issues: democratic ideals and electoral practice; the importance of free speech, and the phenomena of ‘no platforming’ and ‘fake news’; whether states have a right to exclude potential immigrants; when it is justified to engage in civil disobedience, whistleblowing, or vandalism; whether the descendants of those who suffered injustice are entitled to reparations, apology, or affirmative action; and the promise of Universal Basic Income.
- Level** Introductory undergraduate course.
- Prerequisites** No previous work in philosophy or political science is required or assumed.
- Requirements** This course will be held in a lecture format. You will review the assigned materials in advance of each lecture, and then discuss them in your weekly seminar.
- Student grades are determined by five components:
- First paper (1000 words): 20%
 - Second paper (1500 words): 25%
 - Final exam: 30%
 - Participation: 25%
- Class participation is very important in this course. I am asking you do two things:
- Post a reaction to at least one of the assigned materials on the course discussion board by midnight on the day before the seminar. You can clarify a tricky aspect of the paper, raise an objection, ask a pertinent question, bring attention to an interesting case study, or simply identify an issue that you would like to talk about during the seminar. Your TA will read your comments and do their best take them up during the seminar.
 - Actively participate in the discussions during the seminar. Please bear in mind that the topics covered in this course can be controversial. At the same time, do not hesitate to present arguments in support of unpopular positions or objections to those that are widely held.
- Blind grading** Please submit your work with no identifying information other than your student number.
- Office hours** I hold weekly office hours. I welcome you to use this opportunity. You don’t need to come with a specific question about the readings or an assignment. We can just grab a cup of coffee and talk about philosophy.
- Resources** Don't be discouraged if you have difficulty following an argument in an assigned reading or if you misunderstand something. Philosophy is challenging and many philosophers are not gifted stylists. I often read philosophical articles twice and encourage you to do the same. You can find many helpful tips about reading philosophical texts, participating in seminars, and writings essays in this [Pink Guide to Philosophy](#) by Helena de Bres. Another excellent resource, regularly used by students and professors alike, is the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#).

Week 1: Elections I

Bird introduces five major arguments for democratic rule. Galston outlines the case for compulsory voting.

- Colin Bird. (2019). Democratic Rule. In his *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*. (21 pages)
- William A. Galston. (2011). Telling Americans to Vote, or Else. *The New York Times*. (3 pages)

Week 2: Elections II

Brennan argues that only citizens of sufficient political competence should be allowed to vote. Guerrero makes the radical proposal that we should use lotteries, not elections, to select political officials.

- Jason Brennan. (2011). The Right to a Competent Electorate. *Philosophical Quarterly*. (25 pages)
- Alexander Guerrero. (2014). The Lottocracy. *Aeon Magazine* (8 pages) OR Alexander Guerrero. (2014). Against Elections: The Lottocratic Alternative. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. (44 pages)

Week 3: Freedom of Speech I

Shah argues that freedom of speech is essential for us to maintain our values rationally, and not as mere prejudices. Simpson and Srinivasan argue that the practice of ‘no platforming’ can be reconciled with core liberal ideals.

- Nishi Shah. (2021). Why Academic Freedom Matters. *The Raven*. (15 pages)
- Robert Simpson and Amia Srinivasan. (2018). No Platforming. In *Academic Freedom*. (26 pages)

Week 4: Freedom of Speech II

Hornsby and Langton argue that pornography silences women, and therefore infringes upon their right to free speech. Rini examines the nature of and potential solutions to the phenomenon of fake news.

- Jennifer Hornsby and Rae Langton. (1998). Free Speech and Illocution. *Legal Theory*. (17 pages)
- Regina Rini. (2017). Fake News and Partisan Epistemology. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*. (16 pages)

Week 5: Immigration I

Carens argues that, for all the reasons that we acknowledge a right to move freely *within* borders, we ought to acknowledge a right to move freely *across* borders as well. Miller critiques this argument and suggests that limits on immigration are necessary to preserve a state’s distinctive culture.

- Joseph. H. Carens. (2013). The Case for Open Borders. In his *The Ethics of Immigration*. (30 pages)
- David Miller. (2005). Immigration: The Case for Limits. In *Contemporary Debates in Applied Ethics*. (13 pages)

Week 6: Immigration II

Wellman argues that, just as an individual has a right to determine whom (if anyone) they want to marry, the state has a right to determine whom (if anyone) they would like to invite into its political community. Macedo argues that states should prioritise the interests of their citizens over those of potential immigrants.

- Christopher Heath Wellman. (2011). Defense of the Right to Exclude. In *Debating the Ethics of Immigration*. (44 pages)
- Stephen A. Macedo. (2018). The Moral Dilemma of U. S. Immigration Policy Revisited: Open Borders vs. Social Justice. In *Debating Immigration*. (25 pages)

Week 7: Civil Disobedience I

King advocates for civil disobedience against unjust laws. Rawls offers a systematic account of civil disobedience as a public, non-violent, conscientious breach of law undertaken with the aim of bringing about a change in laws or government policies. Lyons suggests that, in paradigmatic cases of civil disobedience, there was no moral obligation to obey the law in the first place.

- Martin Luther King Jr. (1963). Letter from a Birmingham Jail. (6 pages)
- John Rawls. (1971/1999). Sections 53, 55, 57, 59. In his *A Theory of Justice*. (23 pages)
- David Lyons. (1998). Moral Judgment, Historical Reality, and Civil Disobedience. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. (19 pages)

Week 8: Civil Disobedience II

Scheuerman and Brownlee present contrasting perspectives on whether Edward Snowden's act of whistleblowing fits within John Rawls's account of civil disobedience. Lim offers a qualified defense of vandalizing public commemorations of people who were responsible for injustice.

- William E. Scheuerman. (2014). Whistleblowing as civil disobedience: The Case of Edward Snowden. *Philosophy and Social Criticism*. (20 pages)
- Kim Brownlee. (2016). The civil disobedience of Edward Snowden. *Phil. and Social Criticism*. (6 pages)
- Chong-Ming Lim. (2020). Vandalizing Tainted Commemorations. *Phil. and Public Affairs*. (32 pages)

Week 9: Repairing Injustice I

Boxill distinguishes between compensation and reparation, and argues that the descendants of enslaved people are entitled to receive reparations for the exploitation of their ancestors. Thompson argues the injustice of slavery is beyond the scope of reparations but merits an apology.

- Bernard Boxill. (1972). The Morality of Reparations. *Social Theory and Practice*. (12 pages)
- Janna Thompson. (2001). Historical Injustice and Reparations. *Ethics*. (22 pages)

Week 10: Repairing Injustice II

Rodney examines what makes an apology legitimate and argues that the apology to African Americans by the US Congress in 2009 fails in this regard. Dworkin comments on the famous lawsuit concerning the affirmative action program at UC Davis.

- Rodney Roberts. (2017). Race, Rectification, and Apology. In *Oxford Handbook of Phil. and Race*. (10 pages)
- Ronald Dworkin. (1977). Why Bakke Has No Case. *The New York Review of Books*. (15 pages)

Week 11: Universal Basic Income I

Bidadanure outlines the core of the Universal Basic Income proposal and the contemporary literature on this topic. Van Parijs offers a liberal case for basic income.

- Juliana Bidadanure. (2019). The Political Theory of Universal Basic Income. *Annual Review of Political Science*. (23 pages)
- Philippe Van Parijs. (1991). Why Surfers Should be Fed? The Liberal Case for an Unconditional Basic Income. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. (31 pages)

Week 12: Universal Basic Income II

Baker offers an egalitarian case for basic income. Rogers contends that standalone basic income would not achieve its egalitarian aims. Harvey argues that basic income would be more costly and less effective than a job guarantee.

- John Baker. (1992). An Egalitarian Case for Basic Income. In *Arguing for Basic Income*. (23 pages)
- Brishen Rogers. (2017). Basic Income in a Just Society. *Boston Review*. (11 pages)
- Philip Harvey. (2013). More for Less: The Job Guarantee Strategy. *Basic Income Studies*. (16 pages)