

The Political Theory of the American Revolution

Professor - Alec Crisman

Spring 2027

Location: TBD

Contact: aleccrismanteaching@gmail.com

Office Hours: Monday and Wednesday, 1:30PM – 2:30PM, in office

Friday 5:00PM – 7:00PM, on Zoom.

A chronological study of American Revolutionary political thought, from natural rights to constitutional republicanism, this course examines primary texts from Williams to Madison to explicate the key arguments and disputes before, during, and after the American Revolution; student outcomes include developing skills in primary source analysis, normative argumentation, and civil debate on foundational questions of government legitimacy and institutional design.

Instructor Qualifications - Alec Crisman, Ph.D. in Political Science (Political Theory), McGill University (2025). Research focuses on federalism, liberalism, and civic education; prior instructor of record for Intro to Political Theory.

NOTE THAT THIS IS A PROPOSED SYLLABUS, AND NOT AN ACTUAL OFFERING AT ANY SCHOOL. PLEASE DO NOT SHARE OR COPY WITHOUT PERMISSION.

1. Aims and Learning Objectives

This course serves as a primer on the main normative arguments about the role of government, the consent of the governed, the importance of civic virtue, and the relationship of all of these to institutional design, in the decades before, during, and immediately after the American Revolution. In the final weeks, students will compare and contrast the American and French revolutions in order to better understand both the breadth of liberal political philosophy as a whole, as well as to fully grasp the unique characteristics of the American constitutional order. Through examining these foundational debates, students will develop the civic literacy necessary for informed citizenship and gain insight into how Revolutionary-era arguments continue to shape contemporary constitutional interpretation and American political discourse.

Students who take this course will learn how to make evidence-informed normative arguments under conditions of free and open inquiry, how to read historical primary texts, and how to relate and differentiate historical debates to and from modern-day political disputes. Students will practice engaging in civil and rigorous debate on topics of significant political and moral importance, learning to navigate deep disagreement through reason and argumentation.

2. Prerequisites

NONE

3. Texts

All texts have been provided as PDFs and uploaded onto [course website]. There is no course packet and no books are required for purchase.

4. Class Format and Grading

Lectures will feature dedicated time each day near the end of class for students to ask general questions about the day's reading or the course in general. Time permitting, the last ten minutes of class will be dedicated to the next day's readings, so students can know what to look for and what themes to focus on.

Assessments:

15% Participation & Discussion
20% Midterm Essay
40% Capstone Essay
25% Final Exam

Assignments will be submitted in PDF format on [course website]. You must receive a passing grade on each component in order to pass the course. Essays will be graded on ability to make a clearly-written and substantiated argument, *not* the substantive position you take.

Assignments that are late will be penalized 1/3 letter grade per day. This means that a B will become a B-, a B- a C+, and so on. Extensions will be granted in case of documented illness or family emergency. You will have **one automatic extension of up to 24 hours** that you may use as needed without an excuse; you must e-mail me that you are using this by the time the paper is due.

If you believe an error has been made in grading and you wish to challenge your grade, you must send me an email containing a 150-200 word explanation of the error in grading, as well as both a clean and marked version of your paper, all in separate Word documents or PDFs. Challenging your grade does not guarantee your grade will improve; I will **re-grade the paper in full**, meaning that it is also possible that your grade will be lowered.

5: Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is a core expectation in all higher education settings. Students are responsible for knowing and following the academic-integrity standards and policies of this course. Academic misconduct includes any activity that compromises academic honesty or subverts the educational process — for example: plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, copying another student's work, or possessing unauthorized materials during an exam. Ignorance of these standards is not an excuse.

If I suspect academic misconduct, I am required to report it through the university's official process. Sanctions may range from a failing grade on the assignment or in the course to suspension or dismissal. If you're unsure whether something is permitted, please ask me before you proceed.

AI tools may be used for brainstorming/outlining only if disclosed in a footnote; AI-generated drafting or paraphrase is not permitted.

We use a variety of techniques to monitor academic dishonesty and plagiarism. Your assignments may be submitted to text-matching or other appropriate software (e.g., formula-, equation-, and graph-matching). Obviously, downloading or purchasing whole papers is plagiarism, but you can be guilty of plagiarism for much less than that. *Any time you copy someone else's words (including those written by an AI chatbot/LLM) and paste them into your paper without quotation marks, a full citation, and due credit, you have committed academic dishonesty; one sentence from Wikipedia is enough to count.*

Other people's ideas usually warrant a footnote, other people's words *always demand* quotation marks and a full citation. Suspected cases of plagiarism will be vigorously pursued.

6. In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

Copyright and Dissemination of Class Materials: Instructor-generated course materials (e.g., handouts, notes, summaries, exam questions) are protected by law and may not be copied or distributed in any form or in any medium without explicit permission of the instructor. All slides, video recordings, lecture notes, etc. remain the instructor's intellectual property. As such, you may use these only for your own learning (and research, with proper referencing/citation) ends. You are not permitted to disseminate or share these materials; doing so may violate the instructor's intellectual property rights. Note that infringements of copyright can be subject to follow up by the University under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures.

7. Academic Accommodations

If you anticipate or experience academic barriers due to a disability (including mental-health or medical conditions, whether chronic or temporary), please contact me privately and register with the university's accessibility/disability services office to establish reasonable accommodations. After you are approved, share your accommodation letter and meet with me as early as possible so we can implement accommodations in a timely manner. Students are not required to disclose medical details or diagnoses to instructors.

8. Reading and Lecture Schedule:

Note that this course is **readings-heavy**; it is expected that you **do the readings *before* the lecture**. All readings will be excerpted unless stated otherwise.

Week 1: Moral and Religious Background

- Roger Williams – *The Bloody Tenet of Persecution*
- Benjamin Franklin – *Autobiography*
- John Locke – *Letter Concerning Toleration*
- Thomas Paine – *The Age of Reason*

Week 2: Pre-Enlightenment

- Polybius – Selections on Mixed Constitutions
- Cicero – *De Officiis*
- Thomas Hobbes – *Leviathan*

Week 3: Locke

- John Locke – *Second Treatise*
- John Locke – Letter Concerning Toleration (re-read)

Week 4: Non-Lockean Liberalism

- David Hume – “Of the Original Contract”
- Baron de Montesquieu – *The Spirit of the Laws*
- Adam Smith – *The Wealth of Nations*

Week 5: Pre-Revolutionary Currents

- Declaratory Act
- Trenchard and Gordon – *Cato's Letters*
- James Otis – *The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved*
- John Dickinson – *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*

Week 6: From Grievance to Independence

- Thomas Paine – *Common Sense*
- Thomas Jefferson – *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*
- George Mason – Virginia Declaration of Rights
- Declaration of Independence

Week 7: Confederation

- Articles of Confederation
- James Madison – *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments*
- Thomas Jefferson – “A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom”

Week 8: Road to Philadelphia

- Handout on Shays' Rebellion
- James Madison – “Vices of the Political System of the United States”
- Selections from the Constitutional Convention Debates
- The Constitution of the United States

Week 9: Federalists v. Anti-Federalists

- *The Federalist* – Nos. 1, 10, 39, 51
- Anti-Federalists – “Brutus I”, “Federal Farmer I-II”

Week 10: Federalists v. Anti-Federalists II: The Judiciary

- *The Federalist* – No. 78
- “Brutus XI, XV”
- Bill of Rights

Week 11: Alien and Sedition Acts

- Alien and Sedition Acts
- James Madison – Virginia Resolutions
- Thomas Jefferson – Kentucky Resolutions
- Massachusetts Legislature’s Answer to the Virginia Resolutions

Week 12: The French Revolution

- Jean-Jacques Rousseau – *The Social Contract*
- Abbé Sieyès – *What Is the Third Estate?*
- Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen

Week 13: The Aftermath

- Maximilien Robespierre – “On the Principles of Political Morality”
- Edmund Burke – *Reflections on the Revolution in France*
- Thomas Paine – *Rights of Man*
- Mary Wollstonecraft – *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*

Week 14: The American Revolution v. the French Revolution

- George Washington – “Proclamation of Neutrality”
- James Madison – “Helvidius No. 1”
- Debate/preparation for capstone essay
- Should one support the American Revolution but not the French Revolution, both, or neither?

Acknowledgements: This syllabus is based on the similar syllabi from Prof. Jacob Levy and Dr. Aberdeen Berry, to whom I am indebted and very grateful, not just for this.