

CGCL 6200: Foundations of American Democracy

Dr. Robert John Burton

Summer 2025

Term	Summer 2025
Class Time	M-F: 9:00-10:30, 11:00 – 12:30, 1:30-3:30 M-F: 10:00 – 11:30, 12:30 – 2:00, 2:30 – 4:00
Instructor	Dr. Robert John Burton
Classroom	Online, via MS Teams
Contact	rburton@uvu.edu
My Office Hours	I will be available immediately after every class session, as well as by appointment.
Office Location	MS Teams

INTRODUCTION

To understand America's democratic foundations, we will draw on a variety of thinkers – including Aristotle, John Winthrop, Anne Bradstreet, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, Walt Whitman, Orestes Brownson, Herbert Croly, Teddy Roosevelt, Robert Dahl, and Robert Putnam. However, the vast majority of our time will be spent in a careful study of one thinker, and one book: what Harvard political philosopher Harvey Mansfield has called the “best book on democracy and the best book on America ever written” – Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.

Arriving in America for the first time in 1831, Tocqueville sought to understand what made democracy work in America. With unparalleled insight and foresight, Tocqueville went on to compare his experience in America with that of France, that other early revolutionary attempt at democratic life. By comparing both the French and American democratic revolutions and subsequent attempts at self-government, Tocqueville predicted how the movement towards equality would change everything, from political structures, newspapers, and international relations, to family relations, religion, and our deepest commitments. For Tocqueville, some of these changes would be salutary, while others would prove deeply problematic. He thus ends not with unadulterated praise of America, but warnings about its future, including how an unbending commitment to equality can undermine political liberty and human flourishing. We will then end the course by turning to contemporary social science to evaluate the state of democracy in America today.

Note: like most graduate-level seminars, this course requires a lot of reading. To be successful in this class, students must have completed all the readings and learning journal entries prior to the first day of class. You simply cannot do the readings during that week. All study time during the week of our course will be spent reviewing readings and notes and preparing preces and presentations. You will also need time to relax your mind. I expect everyone to complete every reading, make notes, and come to class ready to discuss.

MY TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

As a teacher, mine is the serious, yet thrilling, responsibility to facilitate students' natural capacity for – and inclination towards – truth. Because I respect my students' innate capacity for truth, I do not “hold back” nor “water things down.” I seek to educate, not indoctrinate. I invite critical thinking by offering the best

arguments for opposing positions and avoid the temptation to employ straw interlocutors. In the books we read, I employ primary texts that have stood the test of time, as well as new works that bring diverse perspectives to timeless questions. I show how, despite its difficulties and complexities, the pursuit of truth answers a longing of their souls – that the work is worth it.

While encouraging critical thinking and an open mind, I help my students recognize the importance of convictions and help them live by theirs and respect those of others. As a teacher, I will continue to live by my conviction that all human beings are equal in dignity and worthy of respect. I seek to exemplify the humility of one who knows just enough to know he does not have all the answers. In both my teaching and research, I treat the adversaries of my ideas with respect and show how reasonable people of goodwill can disagree. As I prepare to teach, I read (or reread) the same materials as my students so that my questions and ideas are fresh and active. In all my endeavors, I seek first to understand, then to be understood. In the quest for truth, my students and I are fellow seekers.

TEXT

Please purchase the **exact text** below. If you read French, you may consider the four volume, dual English-French, edition from Liberty Fund. For all other readings, I have either uploaded them to Canvas or provided links here in the syllabus.

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (English Edition), Two Volumes. Ed. Eduardo Nolla, Trans. James T. Schleifer. Liberty Fund: Indianapolis, 2012. ISBN 978-0-86597-840-9.
<https://www.libertyfund.org/books/democracy-in-america/>

COURSE SCHEDULE

Monday: Ancient Regimes and the American Democratic Regime

Session 1 Welcome, Regimes and Citizenship

Overview: Understand regime typology and its relationship to citizenship; be able to analyze governments in terms of regimes.

Questions:

- According to Aristotle, what is a “regime” and what kinds are there?
- What is “civic virtue” and why do different regimes require different kinds of citizens?
- What does Hamilton mean when he calls the American regime a “republic”?

Readings:

- Aristotle’s *Politics*: Bks I, Ch. 1-3, Bks III-IV
 - Link: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/6762/6762-h/6762-h.htm#link2H_4_0004
- Hamilton, et. al., *Federalist Papers*, no. 39
 - Link: https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed39.asp

Session 2 Tocqueville and America's Democratic Regime

Overview: Have a clear understanding of Tocqueville's Questions in DA; understand Tocqueville's regime typology as applied to America.

Questions:

- In Tocqueville's account, what caused the rise and expansion of democracy?
- Why does Tocqueville write *Democracy in America*? What are his principal questions?
- What is Tocqueville's investigative method (or how does he propose exploring the role democracy plays in America)?

Readings:

- Tocqueville, DA: Vol. I, Part 1, "Introduction"

Session 3 Point(s) of Departure – America's Two Foundings

Overview: Understand various arguments about America's true "founding" or "point" of departure.

Questions:

- For Tocqueville, why do foundings matter?
- What is America's true founding (or "point of departure")?
- What made America's "founding" democratic?

Readings:

- Tocqueville, DA: Vol. I, Part 1, Ch. 2-4
- Mayflower Compact
 - Link: <https://themayflowersociety.org/history/the-mayflower-compact/>
- Winthrop, "Model of Christian Charity"
 - Link: <https://minio.la.utexas.edu/webeditor-files/coretexts/pdf/163020model20of20christian20charity.pdf>
- Anne Bradstreet, "Anne Bradstreet's "A Dialogue between Old England and New."
 - Link: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43700/a-dialogue-between-old-england-and-new>
- Declaration of Independence
 - Link: <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>

Tuesday: America's Democratic Practice

Session 4 Exercises in Self-Government: Township, County, and State

Overview: Understand the role of communities and states in the success of American democracy.

Questions:

- What roles do local and state governments play in making Americans good democratic citizens?
- How do Americans participate in self-rule?

Readings:

- Tocqueville, DA, Vol. I, Part 1, Ch. 5
- Orestes Brownson, “Democratic Principle”
 - Link: <http://orestesbrownson.org/democratic-principle.html>

Session 5 The American Constitution and Democracy

Overview: Understand the degree to which America’s constitutional system is (or is not) democratic.

Questions:

- How democratic is the American Constitution?
- How do democratic citizens rule through the Constitution?
- How does the Constitution discourage democracy’s vices and promote its virtues (or the reverse)?

Readings:

- Tocqueville, DA: Vol. 1, Part I, Ch. 8
- Constitution of the United States
 - Link: <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>

Session 6 Government of and by the People: Parties, Press, and Associations

Overview: Understand the ways in which democratic citizens govern through (and interact with) their constitutional order.

Questions:

- How to political parties affect the American people’s efforts at self-government? What about other political associations?
- What blessings and dangers do freedom of the press bring to American democracy?

Readings:

- Tocqueville, DA: Vol. 1, Part II – Introduction; Ch. 1-4

Wednesday: America’s Democratic Culture

Session 7 The Democratic Mind

Overview: Understand and evaluate Tocqueville’s conception of the way democratic citizens think and the impact of democracy on American culture.

Questions:

- How does Tocqueville describe the functioning of the American mind?
- How does the way in which Americans think affect the way they live and function as citizens?
- Does Whitman’s democratic poetry refute or confirm Tocqueville’s evaluation of America’s scientific and literary potential?

Readings

- Tocqueville, DA: Vol II, Part 1, Introduction, Ch. 1-4, 7-8, 9

- Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (selections in Canvas)

Session 8 The Democratic Community

Overview: Understand the impact of democracy on the family and associations.

Questions:

- What roles (civic, personal, educational) do associations play in America?
- In what ways has democracy changed the family? For better or for worse?

Readings:

- Tocqueville, DA: Vol II, Part II, Ch. 5-7 (associations)
- Tocqueville, DA: Vol II, Part III, CH. 8-10 (the democratic family)

Session 9 The Democratic Soul

Overview: Understand and evaluate the impact of democracy on value, purpose, and religiosity.

Questions:

- How does religion affect democracy?
- How does democracy affect religion?
- Can the good things religion provides in a democracy continue once democracy has changed religion?

Readings:

- Tocqueville, DA: Vol I, Part II, Ch. 9, pp. 467-487
- Tocqueville, DA: Vol II, Part I, Ch. 5-6
- Tocqueville, DA: Vol II, Part II, Ch. 9, 15

Thursday: Dangers to and From Democracy (and Potential Counteractions)

Session 10 Omnipotence and Tyranny of the Majority

Overview: Understand and evaluate the causes, problems, and solutions to the tyranny of the majority.

Questions:

- Why does the majority possess “omnipotence” in a democracy?
- What is the tyranny of the majority and how does that affect liberty?
- How can the dangers of tyranny of the majority in democracies be mitigated?

Readings

- Tocqueville, DA: Vol. I, Part II, Ch. 7-8

Session 11 Individualism

Overview: Understand and evaluate the cause, challenge, and solution to the problem of individualism as Tocqueville describes it.

Questions:

- Why is it that Americans love equality more than liberty?

- In a democracy, is individualism to be feared or celebrated?
- Are associations sufficient to mitigate the negative effects of individualism?

Readings:

- DA: Vol. II, Part II, Ch. 1-4

Session 12 Bureaucratic Despotism

Overview: Understand and evaluate the causes, challenge, and solutions to the problem of bureaucratic despotism as Tocqueville describes it.

Questions:

- How does “bureaucratic despotism” differ from other forms of despotism?
- Is it possible for a state to be both democratic and despotic at the same time? If so, how?
- What resources can a democracy draw on to prevent the rise of bureaucratic despotism? Do we currently possess or utilize those resources?

Readings:

- DA: Vol. II, Part IV, Ch. 4, 6-8

Friday: The Future of the American Democratic Regime

Session 13 Democracy in the 20th Century: Individualism and Progressivism

Overview: Understand and evaluate efforts in the 20th Century to further individualism, democratic nationalism, and constitutional change.

Questions:

- In what ways do Croly and Roosevelt embody Tocqueville’s predictions about American democracy? In what ways do they differ?
- Given Tocqueville’s analysis, will changes to the Constitution based on Dahl’s critiques ultimately further or hinder American self-government? Why or why not?

Readings:

- Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, “Ch. 13: Conclusions: The Individual and the National Purposes” (Canvas PDF)
- Roosevelt, “The New Nationalism” (Canvas PDF)
- Dahl, “On Removing Certain Impediments to Democracy in the United States” (Canvas PDF)

Session 14 Democracy in the 20th Century: Decline of Community and Religion

Overview: Understand and evaluate the role and decline of social capital and religious affiliation in the latter 20th and early 21st centuries

Questions:

- Do Americans still possess the “art of association” as Tocqueville describes it? Why or why not? If not, how can one revitalize civic associations in America?

- Given the important role religion plays in mitigating democratic defects, what role will the decline of religiosity in America play in America's democratic future?

Readings:

- Putnam, Robert. "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital." *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 1 (January 1995): 65-78 Link: <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/bowling-alone-americas-declining-social-capital/>
- Campbell and Putnam, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, "Ch. 13: Religion and Good Neighborliness" (Canvas PDF)
- Jones, "Church Attendance Has Declined in Most U.S. Religious Groups" <https://news.gallup.com/poll/642548/church-attendance-declined-religious-groups.aspx>
- Jackson, "Americans Haven't Found a Satisfying Alternative to Religion" (pdf provided in Canvas, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/18/style/religion-america.html>)

Session 15 A Renewal of Civic Life and Education: Final Lecture and Closing Reflections

Overview: In this final session, we will turn from our reflection on the past to a view of the future, asking, what hope do we have for renewal of civic and democratic life in America?

What role can civic education play in fostering this renewal?

Readings: none.

ASSIGNMENTS

Reading Log and Journal (20% - 10% each)

Because this course is so compact, you must complete all the readings *before* the first day of class. You simply cannot do the readings during that week. All study time during the week of our course will be spent reviewing readings and notes and preparing preces and presentations. You will also need time to simply relax your mind.

Because you will be completing the readings prior to our course, we have two assignments to make doing so manageable and effective. First, you will complete a reading log in Canvas, through which you will track your reading progress. Second, given that the readings may be done long before class starts, it's especially important that you take notes and record questions, so you come prepared for our discussions. To that end, for each session listed above that has readings assigned, you will submit proof of a reading journal entry. The format and style of these entries are up to you: they can be handwritten, typed, or even in the margins of your readings. I'm less concerned about length than I am about quality: a page or two per session (or the equivalent in the format of your choice) will likely be sufficient. Be sure to record questions you have with specific references to the text (so you can take us there in our discussions). To complete each reading journal assignment, you will upload a document, pdf, or photo of your entry. All journal entries are due by 11:59 pm on July 3. **However, I strongly encourage you to complete the readings and journal assignments before the deadline.** Late assignments will not be accepted.

Attendance and Participation (40%)

Attendance at every session is essential for both your learning and the success of our course, so attendance at all sessions is mandatory. To be counted as present, you must a) always have your camera on and b) be in a professional and studious environment with the text and your notes in front of you and where you can unmute yourself to contribute (that said, baby noises are always welcome!). For example, it is unacceptable to be joining “on the go” from your phone. For participation, I expect everyone to contribute to the discussion in each session.

Evaluative Précis (30%)

You will each choose one of the assigned readings and write a brief exegetical précis (5 double-spaced pages). Signups will be distributed the weekend prior to the first day of class. An exegetical précis is a “thoughtful, evaluative summary” of a particular text. When we study great texts like Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, we often get so excited that we jump immediately to what we think about what Tocqueville said. But as with all good conversations, we must first seek to understand, then be understood. To complete this assignment, you will a) pick a passage from your assigned session’s readings, b) write a thoughtful, evaluative summary of the argument (e.g. context of the passage, what the author is arguing – thesis, evidence, purpose, assumptions, etc. – and your own concluding reflection on why this passage matters/what’s at stake, what you find intriguing, confusing, or contradictory and *why*, etc.). The exegetical précis will form the basis for your in-class presentation. You will also include 3-5 key questions at the end of your précis that draw from that session’s readings. In your presentation (see below) you will share these questions to guide our discussion. You will email your précis to me no later than midnight the day before your assigned session (e.g. if you’re writing on the materials for session 10, then the précis will be due the night before, by 11:59 pm. This gives me time to review them before our first session of the day.

Rubric for the Evaluative Précis (for a total of 30 points/100% on the assignment)

- Correctly explains the context of the passage (how does this part fit within the section, author’s overall argument) - 5 points
- Accurately captures the argument of the text (thesis, evidence, purpose, assumptions, etc.) – 15 points
- Thoughtfully reflects on the passage (why it matters, what you find intriguing, confusing, or contradictory, etc.) and offers 3-5 questions for discussion – 5 points
- Employs proper spelling, grammar, and formatting – 5 points

Class Presentation (10%)

You will make a 5-minute, formal presentation in class on the argument, themes, and key passages of the readings covered in your précis (5 minutes). Do not simply read your précis. Conclude the presentation by sharing your questions and why you think these questions matter. You will then help lead the discussion for that session (by responding to answers to your questions, actively participating in discussion). I strongly recommend having additional backup questions for our consideration if discussion flags. There will usually be two presentations per session. However, no need to worry about repeating what the previous presenter shared: chances are, you’ll have a different perspective and even if you don’t, it’s likely worth repeating anyway.

Rubric for Class Presentation (for a total of 10 points/100% on the assignment)

- Briefly summarizes the readings assigned for this session and shows how the selection of the précis fits within the session's readings (2 points)
- Summarizes the key findings of the précis (6 points)
- Provides thoughtful questions and demonstrates why these questions matter (2 points)

Summary of Assignments

Reading Journal	20%
Attendance and Participation	40%
Evaluative Presis	30%
Presentation	10%

Grading Scale

A	94-100%	C	73-76%
A-	90-93%	C-	70-72%
B+	87-89%	D+	67-69%
B	83-86%	D	63%-66%
B-	80-82%	D-	60-62%
C+	77-79%	F	0-59%

Grade	Description	Explanation
A	Truly Exceptional	All work meets or exceeds the highest expectations for the course
A-	Outstanding	Superior work in all areas of the course
B+	Very Good	Superior work in most areas of the course
B	Good	Solid work across the board
B-	More than Acceptable	More than acceptable, but falls short of solid work
C+	Acceptable	Meets all the basic requirements and standards for the course
C	Acceptable	Meets most of the basic requirements and standards in several areas
C-	Minimally Passing	Work falls short of meeting basic standards in several areas
D	Minimally Passing	Work just over the threshold of acceptability
F	Failing	Unacceptable performance

POLICIES

Online Classroom. Because our video call is our classroom, you need to join from a space where you are free from distractions or noise. It is unacceptable to join class “on the go” from your cell phone. Your video must remain on the entire class, with no exceptions. Do not distract yourself with anything on your computer, from notifications to visiting other sites. You should have your notes in front of you and your book open. As we are a large group, please mute yourself when you're not talking.

Plagiarism and AI. Do not, under any circumstances, consult, use to write, or otherwise employ AI in my class. To do so not only cheats yourself, but also others. Any employment of ChatGTP or other AI systems constitutes plagiarism. Plagiarism, or “the practice of taking someone else's work or ideas and passing them

off as one's own," will not be tolerated. Plagiarism will result in an automatic F and will be reported to the university.

Respectful Discussion and Controversial Topics. Open (and impassioned) discussion of controversial views is an essential aspect of our moral and intellectual development. Also of importance is that our discussion remains respectful of our colleagues. Good rules of thumb: attack ideas, not people; seek first to understand, then to be understood. As your teacher, I will often encourage debate and, for teaching purposes, I may defend views for didactic purposes that you (and I) may find controversial or even morally reprehensible. Our readings may also contain disturbing themes or language. I understand that past experiences can have traumatic effects. In such cases, I want to be as helpful as possible. If you believe a particular subject may be difficult for you, I encourage you to come talk to me so class discussions can be a positive experience.

Laptops and Electronic Devices. Because research overwhelmingly indicates that electronics (such as laptops) are detrimental to learning in the classroom, I normally ban laptops and other electronic devices in class. However, because this course is online, we cannot do that. However, I ask everyone to commit that the only things that will ever be on their screens are a) the readings, b) our call, c) written notes if you have not done them by hand. Research does suggest that notetaking by hand increases retention and comprehension. Accommodations requiring technology are exempt from this policy.

Deadlines. The old saying is simply wrong. Permission is much better than forgiveness. All deadlines are final without prior permission. Out of fairness, permission will only be granted in truly extenuating circumstances.

Student Code of Conduct. Honor the university's [Student Code of Conduct](#).

Disabilities and Illness. I will do everything reasonably possible to accommodate disabilities and illnesses, both physical and mental. Please come talk to me or send me an email if you think you need help. To receive long-term health accommodations, you must (and should!) work with [Accessibility Services](#). Students needing accommodations due to a disability, including temporary and pregnancy accommodations, should contact Accessibility Services at accessibilityservices@uvu.edu or 801-863-8747 located in LC 312. To request ASL interpreters, please contact Katie Palmer at kateip@uvu.edu.

Requests and Communication. All requests and communications must be submitted by email so we both have a record: rburton@uvu.edu. DO NOT MESSAGE ME VIA CANVAS.

Deadlines. The old saying is simply wrong. Permission is much better than forgiveness. All deadlines are final without prior permission. Out of fairness, permission will only be granted in truly extenuating circumstances.

Ending Class. I will be done on time, no matter where we are in our discussion. In return, I ask that you please refrain from packing up before class ends. Shuffling papers, closing laptops and zipping backpacks can be very distracting. As a teacher, I sometimes save my most important points for the end.

Formatting Written Assignments. All papers and other written assignments must be formatted in Times New Roman or Garamond, 12 point, double spaced, with page numbers (top right) and one-inch margins. Please also include a header with your name, the assignment name, the date, and the course title.

Changes to This Syllabus. It may prove necessary to make changes to the syllabus, including the schedule, from time to time. I will always strive to ensure fairness in making these changes.