CGCL 6300: Foundations of American Liberty

Dr. Savannah Eccles Johnston

Summer 2025

Term: Summer 2025
Class Time: July 14-18 (M-F) 9-1030; 11-1; 1:30-3pm
Instructor: Savannah Eccles Johnston
Classroom: MS Teams
Contact:
Office Hours: Email me to meet after class!
Office Location: MS Teams

Course Overview:

Surveys the philosophical and historical foundations of individual rights, limited government, and liberty in America. Covers key texts from the classical liberal tradition, including Roger Williams, John Locke, Thomas Paine, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Publius. The heavy focus of this course is on the Declaration of Independence and debates over its meaning and authority in American political history.

Note: like most graduate-level seminars, this course requires a lot of reading, which must be completed prior to class. I expect everyone to complete every reading, make notes, and come to class ready to discuss.

Course Objectives:

By the end of the semester, students should have accomplished the following:

1. Demonstrate they can extract and describe the core arguments of the authors from the assigned readings and analyze those arguments both sympathetically and critically.
2. Distinguish between various conceptions of liberty (e.g., ancient vs. modern, negative vs. positive) and articulate how these conceptions have changed across time and lead to different arguments for individual rights and limited government.
3. Describe the philosophical, political, and historical foundations of American liberty, especially as expressed in the Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution, and analyze how these foundations have been interpreted, contested, and expanded over time.
4. Analyze key episodes in American history—such as the Founding, Reconstruction, and Progressive Era—as turning points in the development of liberty, civil rights, and constitutional government.
5. Evaluate debates over who is included in the American political project and how claims to liberty and equality have been expanded or denied across different eras.
6. Analyze the connection between liberty and virtue.

Required Texts:

Whittington, Keith E. 2017. *American Political Thought: Readings and Materials.* Oxford University Press. (Amazon)

Note: All readings for the course are found in Whittington's book (APT), online via the links provided, or on Canvas.

Assignments:

Attendance & Participation 35%
Journal 25%
Class Presentations 15%
Final Exam 25%

Attendance and Participation (35%)

Attendance at all sessions is mandatory. To be counted as present, you must a) always have your camera on and b) be in a distraction free environment with the text and your notes in front of you and where you can unmute yourself to contribute (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.

Journal (25%):

You are required to keep a journal (electronic or paper) of your readings for each session and course experience that you will submit at the end of the course (it will be returned to you). Your journal should contain two types of entries: short reading summaries of the assigned readings for each session, and a reflective entry at the end of each day. The short reading summaries identify the main claim of the reading and its supporting reasons; it may also include the historical roots of that claim, an assessment of the argument, and the likely implications of if the claim is accepted. Note: The final exam's essay will test how well you developed these skills.

The journal's reflective entries (350 words, minimum) describe what you learned in that day's sessions. The entries should summarize the main ideas, themes, and connections that were explored that day. I strongly encourage you to also write down the ideas you may want to explore later in a research paper.

Class Presentations (15%):

At the beginning of each class session, I will randomly call on 1-2 students to summarize a reading or readings for that class session. These presentations will be graded on their clarity and

concision in identifying the readings' primary claim and supporting reasons, accurately assessing the argument's supporting reasons, and identifying likely implications if the argument is accepted. Presentations should last 3-5 minutes. If the student is called on to summarize a court case, the student will be graded on their clarity and concision in identifying the facts of the case, the constitutional questions addressed, the ruling, and any relevant dissents.

Final Exam (25%):
There will be a final exam to test your mastery of course material. Students will have two hours to complete two essay questions.

Class Schedule:

Monday, July 14
9-10:30: Is American liberty under threat?

Bari Weiss, "Rising Antisemitism and Choosing Freedom", Honestly Podcast, (4/22/2024) - https://www.honestlypod.com/podcast/episode/2c2aea3a/rising-antisemitism-and-choosing-freedom
Patrick Deneen, "The End of Liberalism?" Lecture at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. (Youtube)
M. Anthony Mills, "Liberalism is not enough" *National Affairs*. 2025.

11-1: What is liberty?
Constant, Benjamin. 2017. "Liberty of the Ancients compared with that of the Moderns."
Berlin, Isaiah. "Two Concepts of Liberty."
Conversations with Bill Kristol: Harvey Mansfield on Locke, Aristotle, and the Spirit of Liberalism. Apple Podcasts.

1:30-3: What is the basis of individual rights?
Locke, Letter Concerning Toleration
Locke, Second Treatise of Government, ch. II, III, V, VIII, IX, XI,
Bachiochi, Erika. The Rights of Women. Mary Wollstonecraft's Moral Vision, excerpt (Canvas).

Tuesday, July 15
9-10:30: Liberty in Colonial America
Roger Williams, Letter to the town of Providence (Jan. 1655)
Roger Williams. The Bloody Tenent of Persecution. (APT)
John Winthrop. Little Speech on Liberty. (APT)
Thomas Paine. Common Sense. (APT)
Mayhew, Jonathan. A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers (APT)
Slaves' Petition to Massachusetts Governor Thomas Gage (APT)
Cato's Letters no. 38 (1721)

11-1: The Declaration and the Constitution
Declaration of Independence
Virginia Declaration of Rights (1776)
U.S. Constitution
John Adams, "Thoughts on Government" (APT)
West, Thomas. "Does America have a Constitutional or a Declaration of Independence Soul?"
Madison and Jefferson - Correspondence on a Bill of Rights (APT)
Kendall, Willmoore. "The Bill of Rights and American Freedom." (Canvas)
Fisher Ames. The Mire of Democracy (APT)
Federalist #9,10, 22
Brutus Essays 1-2 (APT)
Recommended:
Calvin Coolidge. "Speech on the Occasion of the 150th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence."

1:30-3: Slavery, the Declaration, and the Constitution
Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, 1787 (APT pg 134-137)
Benjamin Banneker and Jefferson - Correspondence on Slavery, 1791 (APT)
U.S. Constitution
Northwest Ordinance
Frederick Douglass, What to a Slave is the 4th of July? 1852 (APT)

Wednesday, July 16
9-10:30: *Who is "All Men?" Lincoln v. Calhoun v. Douglas*
Calhoun, A Disquisition on Government, 1850 (APT)
Calhoun, Speech on the Oregon Bill, 1848
Lincoln, Speech at New Haven, 1860 (APT)
Dred Scott v Sanford (1857)
Lincoln Speech on Dred Scott
Don Fehrenbacher, ed., Abraham Lincoln: A Documentary Portrait Through His Speeches and Writings (excerpts on Canvas)

11-1: *Civil War and the Declaration of Independence*
James Hammond, Speech to the Senate on Slavery, 1858 (APT)
Alexander Stephens, Cornerstone Speech, 1861(APT)
Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, 1865 (APT)
Lincoln, Gettysburg Address (1853)
Charles Sumner, The Barbarism of Slavery, 1860 (APT)
Reconstruction Amendments (APT)

Thaddeus Stevens, Speech on the Reconstruction Acts, 1868 (APT)

1:30-3pm: *Reconstruction, Civil Rights, and the Meaning of Liberty*
Akhil Amar, "Labor Pains in America's New Birth of Freedom." (Youtube)
National Constitution Center, "The Second Founding: How the Civil War and Reconstruction Remade the Constitution." (Youtube)
W.E.B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk, 1913 (APT excerpts)
Martin Luther King Jr. "I Have A Dream" (APT)
Martin Luther King Jr. "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (APT)
Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet" (APT)
Thurgood Marshall, "Bicentennial Speech" (APT)

Thursday, July 17
9-10:30: *Women, Liberty, and the Declaration of Independence*
Abigail Adams and John Adams - Correspondence on Women's Rights (APT)
Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments, 1848 (APT)
Susan B Anthony, Is It a Crime for a Citizen of the US to Vote? 1873 (APT)
Jane Addams, If Men Were Seeking the Franchise, 1913 (APT)
Minor v. Happersett (1875)
19th amendment

11-1: *Progressives, the Administrative State, and Liberty*
Theodore Roosevelt, The New Nationalism, 1910 (APT)
Woodrow Wilson, The New Freedom, 1913 (APT)
Herbert Croly, The Promise of American Life, 1909, (APT)
Franklin Roosevelt, The Four Freedoms, 1941
Franklin Roosevelt, Commonwealth Club Address (APT)
Herbert Hoover, Challenge to Liberty, 1936
Wickard v. Filburn
Barry Goldwater, Acceptance Speech for Republican Nomination, 1964 (APT)
Ronald Pestritto. "The Birth of the Administrative State,"*Heritage Foundation.*

Recommended:
Yarbrough, Jean. 2002. The Forgotten T.R.
Yarbrough, Jean. 2012. Theodore Roosevelt: Progressive Cruasader. *Heritage Foundation.*

1:30-3pm: *Liberty and Commerce*
John Winthrop, A Modell of Christian Charity (APT)
Cotton Mather, A Christian at His Calling (APT)
Benjamin Franklin, A Way to Wealth (APT)

Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia (APT pg 146-147)
Hamilton, Report on Manufacturers, 1791 (APT)
Herbert Hoover, Rugged Individualism, 1928 (APT)
Milton Friedman, Capitalism and Freedom, 1962 (APT)
Ronald Reagan, First Inaugural Address, 1981 (APT)
National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Economic Justice for All, 1986 (APT)
Jay Cost. "Capitalism and Republicanism in the Founding Era." AEI.

Recommended:
Epstein, Richard. Skepticism and Freedom, 2003 (APT)

Friday, July 18
9-10:30: *Liberty in the 21st Century*
Betty Friedan, The Feminine Mystique, 1963 (APT)
"Has the Sexual Revolution Failed?" A Free Press Debate. (Youtube)
Richard Epstein. "The Wrong Rights, Or: The Inescapable Weaknesses of Modern Liberal Constitutionalism." University of Chicago Law Review.
Alexander Solzhenitsyn. "A World Split Apart."

11-12:30: Sarah Hamilton-Jiang Guest Lecture
Readings TBD

1-3pm: Exam

Course Decorum:

We may engage sensitive topics during this course, and we will most certainly find points of disagreement and controversy in our discussions. I expect each student to treat others' opinions with respect. You do not have to agree with an expressed opinion – in fact, I will do my best to always play devil's advocate to make sure an echo chamber does not occur – but you do have to argue your point logically and respectfully. Also, I expect each student to pay attention during lectures and when fellow students are speaking.

AI & Plagiarism Policy:

AI is a very useful tool when used correctly. Please do not use AI to write your papers or to avoid doing the readings yourself. Any use of AI in submitted written works - or other forms of plagiarism - will result in an automatic F and will be reported to the university.

Online Classroom:

Please join class from a distraction free space. Joining from your cell phone while "on the go" is not acceptable. Keep your video on the entire class. Mute yourself when you're not talking. Turn off notifications from your laptop and phone to protect the learning environment. Please have your notes and books close to you.

Attendance:

This is a one-week summer intensive. Attendance is mandatory! Students who miss a session without an excuse will be docked a full letter grade.

Late Work:

All assignments are due on the date and at the time assigned. Excuses will be accepted only for an adequately documented illness or emergency. Nothing prevents the student with a known scheduling conflict from reading ahead and completing the assignment early. Unexcused assignments will be penalized at the rate of one full letter grade (for example from B+ to C+) for each 24-hours, with the first 24-hours beginning when the assignment was due.

Accommodations:

Reasonable accommodations will be provided for students with documented physical, sensory, systemic, cognitive, learning and psychiatric disabilities. If you believe you have a disability requiring accommodation in this class, please notify the Director of the Disability Resource Center. That office will provide the course instructor with verification of your disability, and will recommend appropriate accommodations.

Formatting Written Assignments:

All papers and other written assignments must be formatted in Times New Roman, 12 point, double spaced, with page numbers (top right) and one-inch margins.