

Politics 2537F: Foundations of Political Theory

Fall 2025

Instructor:

Dr Elizabeth Finneron-Burns (efinnero@uwo.ca). Office hours Thursdays 10-11am in SSC 7211). *Please note my surname is 'Finneron-Burns' not 'Burns'*

Course Outline

This course is an introduction to the study of political theory. We will address several big questions: (i) what is the purpose of the state? (ii) what does it mean to be free and what are the limits of liberty? (iii) what is equality and should we pursue it? (iv) what is justice and how is it best achieved? The focus will be on developing an understanding of the different answers to these questions, but also how to develop your own views of these matters: what do *you* think and, more importantly *why*? The emphasis throughout the course will be on critical review of the arguments provided in the readings and by your fellow students.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course you will be able to:

- i. Understand the major concepts, questions, and themes in the area of political theory.
- ii. Read, understand, analyse, and evaluate academic work in political theory.
- iii. Formulate your own considered opinion about various issues in political theory and express it coherently in writing and orally.

Textbooks

Clark Wolf and Alan Tuckness, *This is Political Philosophy*

Format

Course material will be delivered via lectures and readings. The lectures and readings are intended to complement each other. Lectures will sometimes reinforce what is discussed in the readings, and sometimes go beyond it. Likewise, readings may go into more depth about a topic than was possible to cover in the lectures. For that reason, it is essential that students both attend lectures *and* do the readings. In tutorials you will have the opportunity to ask questions about material from the lectures and readings, discuss the issues/positions/questions raised in them, and develop your essay-writing skills.

Lectures, tutorials, and exams will all take place in person except in extenuating circumstances (e.g., instructor/TA illness). I will post lecture slides, announcements, links to readings, etc. on Brightspace so you should ensure you check it regularly.

Assessments

Midterm Exam (25%) - October 9 12:30-1:30pm. If required, the makeup will take place on Friday, October 17 at 11am.

The exam will occur in-person during the scheduled class time and last 1 hour. It will be multiple choice and cover material from weeks 1 to 4 (i.e., September 11-October 2). **This assessment is not eligible for the absence without documentation.** All requests to write the make-up exam must go through academic counselling only and be for medical or compassionate reasons and not for workload issues. Students with a formal accommodation to write the exam separately and/or with longer time must register with Accessible Education

as soon as possible. If you miss their registration deadline, you will have to write the exam with the rest of the class where it will not be possible to provide accommodations (private rooms, breaks, extra time, etc.).

Essay Proposal (5%) - Available until November 6 NOON

Have your proposed essay topic approved by your TA. This can be done through seeing them in their office hours or through email--there is no need to submit anything through OWL. This is a pass/fail assignment and everyone who completes it will earn the full 5%. This is in your interest to ensure that you are on the right track with the assignment. Given its purpose, no extensions will be given for this task.

Essay (20%) – Due November 13, NOON.

Penalties for late submission (5% per day or part thereof). No papers will be accepted after November 20 except in exceptional circumstances and if supported by academic counselling.

You will select a news event/issue (within the last 5 years) and write an essay analysing it or some element of it using the concepts covered in this course. You must attach a copy of a newspaper/magazine article describing the event/issue with your submission. The article may be about a specific event, or it could just be an example of the issue you are discussing. I have included some examples below.

You must clear your idea with your TA at least one week before the essay deadline. You can do this in their office hours or via email. Once your TA has approved your proposal, they will enter this into the grade book and you will earn 5%. If you do not get your topic approved, you will earn 0% for that gradebook element. This is for YOUR benefit to ensure that the topic is relevant to the course and that the way you want to approach it makes sense.

Examples of possible topics include, but are not at all limited to:

- Analysing whether the George Floyd protesters who broke COVID-19 regulations in 2020 were participating in justified civil disobedience
- Analysing whether deepfakes should be protected as free speech
- Analysing whether the legalization of cannabis would be supported by J.S. Mill's harm principle
- Analysing whether it matters that the new Starbucks CEO is paid 83% more (\$112 million per year) than other fast food chain CEOs

One way to approach this assignment is to regularly read the news looking for something that stands out to you. Another approach is to pick a topic/concept from the course that interests you and go looking for issues/newspaper articles that relate to it. If you are struggling to think of something, visit your TA in office hours and they can help you brainstorm ideas.

Whatever approach you take, your essay must:

- Be 2000 words +/- 10%
- Take an appropriate structure, including an introduction that clearly states your thesis (e.g., "this essay will argue the George Floyd protesters were engaging in legitimate civil disobedience").

- Directly refer to concepts, arguments, ideas, or quotes found in the lectures and/or readings (e.g., "in MLK Jr's Letter from a Birmingham Jail, he sets out the criteria for civil disobedience...")
- Be referenced appropriately. Any citation format (APA, Chicago, etc.) is fine, just keep it consistent throughout. All direct quotes **and paraphrasing of someone else's ideas must be cited.**
- Citations must be specific. This means if you take a quote or idea from page 4 of a book/article, you must include that page number in your citation. Ranges like "4-20" are not sufficient because they will not help your reader locate the quote/idea. Citations without a page number will not be credited as citations.
- You must have a hyperlink for each source in your bibliography.

Guidelines for the use of ChatGPT or other AI tools:

- You can use AI to brainstorm ideas for your event/issue. For example, you might ask it "Tell me some events that show the tension between liberty and equality."
- You can use AI to brainstorm ways the event/issue relates to the course material (though be aware that AI is not very good at this).
- You cannot use AI to write your essay for you. Essays must be human-written and in no circumstances should you copy-paste any text from AI to your final document.

Tutorial Participation (10%) - Ongoing

Political theory is a way of thinking about the political world and the best way to get better at it is to *do it*. For that reason, students will be expected to participate actively in tutorial discussions. Active participation involves contributing to class exercises and discussions generated by both the TA and fellow classmates. Participation will be evaluated according to whether students have completed and thought about the weekly readings and lectures, responded critically and respectfully to fellow tutorial members' points, and shown an openness and willingness to consider the opinions of others and potentially change their own opinion. **This is a participation, not attendance mark.** However, if you are frequently absent from tutorials, it will be difficult for you to achieve a high mark in this component. If you find yourself unable to attend tutorials for an extended period of time, you should contact Academic Counselling.

December Final Exam (40%) - Date set by the registrar

The exam will be multiple choice and cover material since the midterm (ie., October 16-December 4).

Extra Credit (2%) – By December 10

Make a reasonable guess about what the theme of the lecture music is. Email it to me, along with the names of at least four songs that were played, by December 10.

SCHEDULE

September 11 – **What is political theory and how do we do it (well)?**

1. [Jonathan Floyd, *What's the Point of Political Philosophy?* Ch. 3](#)

September 18 – **Must we always obey the law?**

This is Political Philosophy, ch. 6

1. [Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*](#)

2. [Katherine Smits, *Applying Political Theory*, ch. 10](#)

September 25 – **What does it mean to be free?**

1. *This is Political Philosophy*, ch. 2
2. [Jeremy Waldron, "Homelessness and the Issue of Freedom"](#)

October 2 – **When should freedom be limited?**

1. [J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*, ch. 2 \(any version found online or hard copy is also fine\)](#)
2. [Katherine Smits, *Applying Political Theory*, ch. 8](#)

October 9 – MIDTERM EXAM

October 16 & 23 – **Should we care about equality? What should we try to equalize?**

NO TUTORIALS ON OCTOBER 13 (THANKSGIVING DAY)

1. *This is Political Philosophy*, ch. 3
2. Joseph Heath, "Why Philosophers Hate that 'Equity' Meme", <https://josephheath.substack.com/p/why-philosophers-hate-that-equity>
3. [Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, p. 75-87](#)

October 30 - **Is the goal of government to make people happy?**

1. *This is Political Philosophy*, ch. 1

November 6 – READING WEEK

November 13 – **John Rawls' Theory of Justice & Cohen's Socialist Critique**

Tutorial optional this week. Essay Clinic

1. *This is Political Philosophy*, ch. 4
2. [Applying Political Theory, ch. 2](#)

November 20 – **Feminist & racial critiques of Rawls**

1. [Charles Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, ch. 9](#)
2. [Susan Moller Okin, "Justice and Gender"](#)

November 27 – **Nozick's Libertarian Critiques of Rawls**

1. [Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, p. 149-164 and 167-182.](#)

December 4 – **Justice for everyone, everywhere? Review/Q&A Session**

Course Policies

Late or Missing Work

Late work will incur a penalty of 5% per day or part thereof^[1].

You must submit the essay to pass the course. This means that if you do not submit (for example) the essay, but do very well on both exams, you will still not pass the course. This is because you will not have been assessed on each of the learning outcomes.

Exams that are missed without accommodation will receive a mark of 0.

Any student who, in the opinion of the instructor, is absent too frequently from lectures or tutorials may be barred from writing the final examination (after due warning has been given).

Extensions/Make Up Exams

No extensions or missed exam accommodations will be granted by the course instructor. If you require an accommodation for medical, compassionate, or exam conflict reasons, you must contact Academic Counselling/Accessible Education. You will only get an extension if it is approved by Academic Counselling/Accessible Education, and it will be for however many days they approve. For example, if the essay is due on the 20th, and you have an extension from the 20th to the 22nd, your essay will be due on the 22nd. If you receive an accommodation that begins after the essay due date, you will be accommodated for those days, but not the ones in between the due date and the start of your accommodations. For example, if the essay is due on the 1st and you have accommodation from the 3rd-5th, then you will accrue late penalties from the 1st until the 3rd. **If you are accommodated by academic counselling, you do not need to email me because instructors are sent an automatic notification.**

Students who have the “flexibility with assignment deadlines” accommodation from Accessible Education do NOT need to email me. You must contact academic counselling to have an extension approved and it will be for a maximum of 3 days. Longer extensions will not be granted (unless the counsellors see fit). Having the “flexibility with assignment deadlines” accommodation does not apply to the date you write the exams.

Grade Appeals

All grade appeals must go through the TAs first by email and NOT in-person. You must wait at least 48 hours after you receive your grade and then email your TA 2-3 paragraphs detailing why you believe your assignment deserves a better grade (not why you need a better grade)—e.g., things you believe they overlooked, misunderstood, etc. No appeals will be considered more than 2 weeks after the assignment feedback was returned. If you are not satisfied with the TA’s response to your email, you can ask for it to be marked by a second reader (either another TA or the instructor). Note that this can also result in your mark going down.

No exam grade appeals will be considered. The exams are multiple choice and marked by the computer which does not make grading mistakes. However, if you think there was a problem with a question, you are welcome to email me about it.

Grade Requests/Extra Credit

I do not give ‘grade bumps’ or offer extra credit. I understand that many of you are seeking high marks to gain entry into Ivey, law school, graduate school, or for scholarships. However, I do not provide grade bumps, make-up work, or extra credit. These requests are not fair to those students who accept their grade and are competing for the same opportunities.

Missed Lectures

The instructor does not provide lecture notes for students who miss class. If you have to miss a class, you are strongly encouraged to ask for notes from a classmate. Note that simply reading the lecture slides will not prepare you for success on the exams.

Email Policy

I do my best to respond to emails in a timely way, despite the high volume I receive. However, I do not routinely check my email in the evenings or on the weekends. You are welcome to email me at your convenience, but should not expect a response during those times (but there might be a welcome surprise if I do check). You're strongly advised not to wait until the night before an assignment/exam to email with questions. If I have not responded within 48 business hours, feel free to send me a nudge with the following caveat. I do not respond to emails that:

1. Ask questions that are answered in this syllabus (e.g., "can I use an undocumented absence on the essay?").
2. Ask questions that were already explained in a course-wide email (e.g., "I know you emailed saying that there is an extension on the essay but I just wanted to check that there's an extension on the essay").
3. Request grade bumps or extra credit (e.g., "I need an 80% average to get into Ivey, so would you consider rounding my mark up by 2%?")

Grade Adjustments

In order to ensure that comparable standards are applied in political science courses, the Department may require instructors to adjust final marks to conform to Departmental guidelines.