



Diablo Valley College – San Ramon Valley Campus
POLSC 120 – 8402 / Introduction to Politics: Hybrid / 3 Units / Spring 2026
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Instructor: John Kropf – Student Questions and Concerns: Tuesdays 5:00 to 6:00 pm (ZOOM).
Schedule: Wednesday, Hybrid: 4:05 to 5:30 pm and ONLINE, January 28 – May 20, 2025

Course Description: This course presents an introduction to key concepts of politics, the state, and relations between the state and individual as applied to the United States political system. Comparison of the United States system with other political systems will also be discussed. In studying this field, we will utilize a multidisciplinary approach, meaning we will use other disciplines such as history, philosophy, law, economics, sociology, anthropology, religion, international relations theory, and even the natural sciences (especially the emerging field of environmental theory) to help us shed light on this fascinating area of study. A very important subtopic included in this course will be a discussion of what our true *nature* is, and how discovering this can help us to answer one of the more enduring questions in political science: Who (if anyone), can be trusted to decide what is best for everyone else? Formerly POLSC-120 (25-26).

Recommended: Eligibility for ENGL-122 or equivalent

Student Learning Objectives (SLOs): At the completion of this course, students will be able to...

1. Compare and contrast the nature, foundations and interrelations of American government at all levels.
2. Identify alternative systems for public policy formation.
3. Describe the choices of American political values and structures in the context of systems of political thought.
4. Locate themselves with some discernment and judgment among the assertions and choices in public life.
5. Formulate a political outlook that does some justice to the complexity of the world and to the contributions of other thinkers.
6. Recognize the origin of political conflict in their own values and expectations.
7. Demonstrate a basic understanding of some of the concepts used in the philosophy of science and political science.
8. Demonstrate an understanding of some of the more common assumptions about human nature as propounded by our most important Western, as well as Eastern, philosophers.
9. Examine and discuss *human nature* as one tool to explain and predict various political behavior and processes in the American political system.
10. Analyze and *critically* evaluate some of the most important contemporary issues we face in the 21st century based on 1-4 above.

Course Texts: Robert Heineman, *Political Science: An Introduction*, and Leslie Stevenson, *Twelve Theories of Human Nature*. The instructor will also provide other assigned readings.

Course Methodology: Classes will consist primarily of class lectures and discussions, which will amplify and clarify text materials. Students will be expected to read assigned material prior to lectures/discussions.

Class Evaluation: Student progress will be evaluated through an essay exam and response questions and discussion boards related to your readings and documentary viewing. Late work will be accepted on a case-by-case basis but will *definitely* lower your grade. Getting written work uploaded to Canvas in a timely fashion will be very important. Attendance is mandatory and will be taken formally at each session. Discussion forms an important component of this course, so class participation is strongly encouraged. Student participation in class is an indicator of student interest and shows that the student is keeping up with the assigned readings. Also, since a significant portion of your grade is based on participation, *this means that missing more than two classes will almost certainly lower your overall letter grade*. Your final grade will break out as follows:

Study Questions Journals – 20%	First Draft Research Paper – 25%	
Discussion Boards – 20%	Final Draft Research Paper – 25%	Class Participation – 10%

This course is under completely restricted AI use!

Students are NOT allowed to use ANY advanced automated tools (artificial intelligence or machine learning tools such as ChatGPT, DALL-E, Grammarly, GitHub CoPilot, etc.) on assignments in this course. Each student is expected to complete each assignment without substantive assistance from others, including automated tools.

Important Dates:

February 8 – Last day to drop class *without* a “W” on your transcript.

April 24 – Last day to drop class *with* a “W” on your transcript.

May 15 – Last day to request pass / no pass.

*One final note: Dropping this class is YOUR responsibility. *DVC policy mandates that I cannot drop you from this class after April 24th through the final grading period.*

Political Science 120 / Introduction to Politics Outline

This schedule is tentative and can be adjusted to accommodate student/instructor interest
RH = Heineman text; SH = Stevenson / Haberman text; WEB = Readings from class website

January 28: Introduction to and Description of the Course. We'll begin tonight with a brief description of the topics we'll be covering this semester and begin a discussion of politics and human nature. We should also take any questions, comments, or concerns found in the syllabus.

Readings for 2/4: RH – Chapter 1; SH – Introduction.

February 4: LECTURE / DISCUSSION ONE: The Study of Politics and Human Nature. Our first lecture will cover the concept of political “theory”; kinds of political systems; empirical/normative dichotomies; methodological categories such as qualitative/quantitative, rational choice; and perspectives on politics, including elitist, pluralist and democratic. Included will be a critique on the discipline itself: can we even study politics “scientifically”? We will also begin our first discussion of human nature and contrast this perspective with the “environmental” (nurture) approach.

Video: *Understanding Human Nature with Steven Pinker*.

Readings for 2/11: RH – Chapters 2 and 18.

February 11: LECTURE / DISCUSSION TWO: Understanding and Critically Analyzing Political Theory.

Moving deeper into the theoretical territory of politics, we'll ask some tough questions about the discipline of poli sci itself: Has the field contributed to making the world a better, safer, more humane place to live? If not, why not? A quick look at possible research topics from the field; “organic” versus individual level political theories; and finally, a discussion of the concept of “historicism” and its implications for the discipline of political “science”.

Video: *The Lottery of Birth*.

Readings for 2/18: RH – Chapter 3; SH – Chapters 4 and 5.

February 18: LECTURE / DISCUSSION THREE: Our Pre-Modern Heritage – Part I: Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero.

Tonight, we'll go back in time and look at how classical Greece initiated the rise of philosophical and political thought. We'll begin with Plato and discuss his concept of justice and how it informed his views on human nature. From there, we'll move on to Aristotle and the advances he produced in the realm of political thought and finally touch briefly on Cicero, the famous Roman jurist and scholar. Throughout our discussion we will attempt to apply the questions of their day to some of the problems and issues in our own day.

Video: *What is Democracy?*

Readings for 2/25: RH – Chapter 3; SH – Chapters 6 and 7 (Historical Interlude).

February 25: LECTURE / DISCUSSION FOUR: *Our Pre-Modern Heritage – Part II: God, The Bible, Augustine, and Aquinas*. Finishing our discussion of our philosophical forerunners will require us to examine how western theological traditions inform modern politics. So, we should begin with a look at Christianity as a whole and the impact some of the Christian philosophers have had in politics today. The philosophical focus will be on St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, but we'll also look at some of their contemporaries such as Machiavelli and the period of feudalism generally.

Video: *Waiting for Armageddon*.

Readings for 3/4: RH – Chapter 4; SH – Chapter 8.

March 4: LECTURE / DISCUSSION FIVE: *Liberalism and Kant*. The period of Enlightenment saw some of the greatest progress ever in the field of human understanding. Central to this era was the concept of liberalism and the movement of science and reason in the displacing of faith and dogmatism. One of the most important thinkers of the period, Immanuel Kant, will be profiled tonight along with a discussion of the social contract, utilitarianism, economic theories of laissez-faire, and contemporary liberal theorists such as Rawls and his theory of justice.

Video: *The Most Dangerous Thing in the Western Hemisphere*.

Readings for 3/11: RH – Chapter 6; SH – Chapter 7.

March 11: LECTURE / DISCUSSION SIX: *Conservatism and Islam*. The next to last of our great traditions will focus on the philosophies of conservatism. We'll examine the different varieties of this tradition, beginning with traditional and laissez-faire through the more contemporary versions as outlined by Kirk.

Video: *Mr. Conservative: Goldwater on Goldwater*.

Readings for 3/18: RH – Chapter 5; SH – Chapter 9.

March 18: LECTURE / DISCUSSION SEVEN: *Marxism*. The reaction against some of the more egregious aspects of capitalism found their ultimate expression in our last school of thought – Marxism. We will discuss some of the more pertinent points brought up by Karl Marx through various readings ranging from the *Communist Manifesto* to *Capital*. Beginning with the different perspectives of Marx, we'll go through the concepts of the dialectic, the idealism / materialism dichotomy, relations of production, the concept of surplus value, alienation and more. Our video this week we'll allow us to critically analyze both the premise and promise of capitalism.

Video: *Marx Reloaded*.

Readings for 4/1: SH – Chapter 10.

March 25: Spring Break

April 1: LECTURE / DISCUSSION EIGHT: *The Impact of Darwinian Theories on the Traditions of Western Thought*. As a culmination of our discussion on these three theories of the western philosophical tradition, we'll take a deeper look at the impact of Darwin's theories of evolution and the realm of natural science has informed certain contemporary conservative traditions, by examining not just Darwin, but also such important thinkers as Durkheim, Skinner, Chomsky, Tinbergen, and especially E.O. Wilson's contribution of sociobiology.

Video: *Human Zoos: America's Forgotten History of Scientific Racism*.

Readings for 4/8: RH – Chapter 10; SH – Chapter 11.

April 8: LECTURE / DISCUSSION NINE: *Political Parties and Sartre*. An important corollary to the American political heritage has been the rise (and fall?) of political parties. Tonight, we'll look at how they started, what some of the early leaders of the country felt about them, and what possible direction they might be going. Differences between the two-party and multiparty systems will be examined along with a critique of third parties in the American electorate – their function and efficacy. The human nature question will be focused on the life and work of Jean Paul Sartre. How has existentialist philosophies informed and shaped American politics?

Video: *Sartre: Leading an Authentic Life*.

Readings for 4/15: RH – Chapter 9; SH – Chapter 10.

April 15: LECTURE / DISCUSSION TEN: *Interest Groups and Freud*. As part of the tradition of pluralist thought in American political science, tonight's lecture and discussion will look at what interest groups are, how they form, and what affect they have on modern politics. This school has a long tradition beginning with Madison, but we'll also briefly examine the thoughts of many other scholars in this area. We will also deepen our focus on the elite theories of government and examine some of the major thinkers from this tradition. Our human nature discussion will be led by Sigmund Freud, whose ideas relating to the unconscious basis of mind have had an enormous impact on the field of political science, certainly paving the way for the behavioralist school.

Video: *The Century of Self*.

Readings for 4/22: RH – Chapters 7 and 8.

April 22: LECTURE / DISCUSSION ELEVEN: *Public Opinion, the Mass Media, and B.F. Skinner*. This week we'll switch gears again and have a look at the effects of public opinion and the media on modern politics. We'll start with Lippman, who had some major concerns on how public opinion might affect decision-maker's ability to govern in the best interest of all, to Herman and Chomsky's theories of mass media as propaganda device for those with power. We will also discuss the thoughts of B.F. Skinner, whose work on psychological conditioning connects most assuredly to our examination of the media and the complexities of public opinion.

Video: *United States of Distraction*.

Readings for 4/29: RH – Chapter 12; SH – Chapter 1.

*****RESEARCH PAPER DUE TONIGHT APRIL 29, 2026 AT 11:59 PM*****

April 29: LECTURE / DISCUSSION TWELVE: *Leadership Dynamics, Executive Offices, Bureaucracies, and Confucius*. What makes a good leader? What qualities have we traditionally looked for in our leaders? Theories of leadership and a look at how bureaucracies operate will be the theme of tonight's discussion. Special emphasis will be put on parliamentary versus presidential systems of leadership. Which type appears to be more "accountable"? As a student of leaders and leadership theory, Confucius had a wide ranging, and for our times, controversial take on leadership, so he will form the basis of our section on human nature tonight.

Video: *Confucianism in Modern Society*.

Readings for 5/6: RH – Chapters 14 and 15; SH – Chapter 2.

May 6: LECTURE / DISCUSSION THIRTEEN: *Legislative and Judicial Systems and Upanishadic Hinduism*. Legislatures serve as a core bureaucracy in most democracies. Tonight, we'll take a close look at how our legislative system functions and compare it with other types, particularly our system of single-member district, winner-take-all arrangement versus proportional representation and multimember districts. We'll also examine some of the key concepts associated with judiciaries in the US and discuss and debate the merits of judicial review. Our last discussion of human nature will look at the complex philosophy of Hinduism, and that tradition's contributions to the understanding of the human condition.

Video: *In Search of India's Soul: From Mughals to Modi – Episode 1*.

Readings for 5/13: RH – Chapters 19 and 20.

May 13: LECTURE / DISCUSSION FOURTEEN: *New Directions in Political Science and Important Cognate Fields*. We're done! Our last night together will sort of wrap it all up, by looking at some of the new directions the discipline is going (and a critical discussion on whether those directions will prove fruitful) with an emphasis on postmodernism and feminist theories in political science. We'll also briefly examine how other fields such as history, philosophy, law, economics, sociology, anthropology, and even the natural sciences(!) are enriching and informing the field of political science. Final discussions and questions relating to the final research paper.

Video: *Four Horsemen*.

May 20 / Final discussion and wrap up of the course. FINAL DRAFT OF RESEARCH PAPER DUE TONIGHT. Best wishes to all and have a great summer break!

Final Considerations for the Course

1. Sensitive Subjects Warning

Due to the sensitive and controversial nature of the topics discussed in this course, the possibility of being triggered or emotionally challenged is a likelihood for some. This is because these issues may be very real in our everyday lives. For others, the information in this course may be new to them and may also prove to be upsetting. Still others may be upset due to feelings of guilt or shame for not having known or understood how things have been working in our government and society. Of course, all these feelings are okay. It's how we handle them that matters. Hopefully, we can challenge ourselves to pay attention to our emotions, considering what is upsetting us, listen to and respect one another, and share this honestly with the class (or with me in private if you prefer). This is how authentic learning takes place.

2. Inclusivity

Every student in this classroom, regardless of personal history or identity categories, is a member of this group. Your experiences are important, and you should share them as they become relevant to our class. No student in this class is ever expected or believed to speak for all members of their group(s).

In this class, you have the right to determine your own identity. You have the right to be called by whatever name you wish. You have the right to be referred to by whatever pronouns you wish. You have the right to adjust those things at any point in your education.

If you find that there are aspects of course instruction, subject matter, or class environment that result in barriers to your inclusion, please contact me privately without fear of reprisal.

3. Respectful Dialogue

“Everyone thinks; it is our nature to do so. But much of our thinking, left to itself, is biased, distorted, partial, uninformed, or downright prejudiced. Yet the quality of our life and that of what we produce, make, or build depends on the quality of our thought. Shoddy thinking is costly, both in money and in quality of life. Excellence in thought, however, must be systematically cultivated.”

- Linda Elder and Richard Paul, *Critical Thinking: Teaching Students to Study and Learn*

In this class, I would like us to cultivate “excellence in thought” by creating a learning environment that supports a diversity of thoughts, perspectives, and experiences, and that honors all our identities (including race, gender, class, veteran status, sexuality, religion, ability, etc.). With this in mind, let’s discuss what we all need in order to slow down, recognize our own positions (including unexamined biases), and take another look at someone’s ideas, experiences, or values. How can we listen to and hear different opinions, even if we don’t accept them or understand them, with an open heart and mind? In this class, let’s practice these skills together.

4. On Academic Freedom

Academic freedom is the foundation of higher education and critical inquiry. In this course, academic freedom protects the right of the instructors to design the curriculum, select course materials, and facilitate discussion of issues relevant to the field, including topics related to social inequality, power, and justice. It also protects the right of students to engage thoughtfully with course content, ask questions, and express ideas grounded in academic evidence and respectful dialogue.