

Politics Department: Subfield Guides for Undergraduates

Political Theory

Political theory is the study of the concepts and principles that people use to describe, explain, and evaluate political events and institutions. It explores the nature of justice, democracy, power, and other key ideas, developing frameworks for thinking evaluatively about pressing issues of politics and public policy of the day.

Traditionally, the discipline of political theory has approached this study from two different perspectives: the history of political thought, and contemporary political philosophy. Princeton's political theory faculty has strength in both of these areas of the discipline, and indeed a number of faculty members actively teach and work in both. An undergraduate specializing in political theory will ideally develop competence in both areas, and do so by progressing through the courses offered.

Introductory and core courses for expertise in political theory

Students specializing in political theory will often first take the introductory survey, POL 210. The core courses for expertise in the subfield are the 300 level courses, of which students should consider at least two in their sophomore and junior years from those described below, ensuring that their selection of courses exposes them to both the *history of political thought* and *contemporary political theory*. A number of courses listed below will do both.

In *the history of political thought*, two complementary courses consider key texts in the canon in detail: POL 301 (Ancient and Medieval Political Theory: normally taught every other fall) and POL 303 (Modern Political Theory: normally taught every spring). Those interested in exploring further historical sources could supplement these offerings with POL 302 (Continental Political Thought), 304 (Conservative Political Thought) and 305 (Radical Political Thought). Students with special interest in a particular theme or time period may want to take several courses in that area for a more in-depth treatment.

In *contemporary normative theory*, students may choose from a range of courses which consider various aspects of the field: POL 306 (Democratic Theory), 307 (The Just Society), 308 (Ethics and Public Policy), and 313 (Global Justice). Taking either POL 307 or POL 308 is required for the new certificate program in Values and Public Life, which is a certificate fitting particularly well with the interests and coursework of political theory students: see the website of the University Center for Human Values (http://uchv.princeton.edu/undergraduate_programs/vpl.php) for more information.

300-level courses in Political Theory covering core areas of the subfield

Politics 301 Ancient and Medieval Political Theory - Melissa Lane
(Read Thucydides, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine, Aquinas, Marsilius of Padua, Machiavelli, More)

Politics 302 Continental Political Thought from Rousseau to Nietzsche - Anna Stilz
(Read Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche)

Politics 303 Modern Political Thought - Charles Beitz
(Read Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Rousseau, Mill, Marx, Rawls)

Politics 304 Conservative Political Thought - Jan-Werner Mueller
(Read Burke, Hayek, Nash, Oakeshott)

Politics 305 Radical Political Thought - Jan-Werner Mueller
(Read Marx, Foucault, Fanon, de Beauvoir, Gramsci)

Politics 306 Democratic Theory - Philip Pettit
(Read Aristotle, Hobbes, Rousseau and more contemporary work)

Politics 307 The Just Society – Alan Patten
(Read Locke, Marx, Bentham, Mill and more contemporary work)

Politics 308 Ethics and Public Policy – Stephen P. Macedo
(Read Rawls, Nozick, Walzer)

Politics 313 Global Justice - Charles Beitz
(Read Beitz, Rawls, Shue, Pogge)

Political Theory Seminars

Having developed their core knowledge of political theory in both historical and contemporary dimensions, students who specialize in political theory are strongly encouraged to take a political theory seminar, which allows them to engage together with a professor in a small group setting. This can be a very rewarding experience, especially in the junior and/or senior year. Recent examples of seminars offered include POL 310 (The Idea of America), 410 (Executive Power), 411 (Greece and Rome as Political Models), 412 (Natural Law in Contemporary Legal and Political Philosophy), 413 (Law, Politics, and Sexual Morality), and 415 (Reflections on the Human Condition: Adventures in Ideas). Additional seminars in future will be co-sponsored with the University Center for Human Values, focusing on themes in values and public life: one such seminar will be required of students pursuing the certificate in Values and Public Life (http://uchv.princeton.edu/undergraduate_programs/vpl.php), but the seminars will also be open to other students.

Independent Work in Political Theory

Engaging actively in a range of the courses mentioned above is excellent preparation for independent work in political theory. Writing about questions raised by the classic texts of political theory, or about questions arising in contemporary normative debates, is both a feasible and a rewarding choice for independent work. Faculty members in political theory are experienced and enthusiastic supervisors of both junior papers and senior theses. Recent senior theses in political theory in the department have won the Philo Sherman Bennett Prize in Politics and the Stephen Whelan '68 Senior Thesis Prize for Excellence in Constitutional Law and Political Thought, among other awards.

Examples of recent independent work in political theory include:

Junior Papers

Reconciling Kant on Revolution

The Good Samaritan in the Age of Global Justice

American Religion and Immigrant Traditions: how religiously diverse immigration affects the vitality of the modern public sphere

Beyond Marxism and Free-Market Fundamentalism: Popper and Soros on institutional design

Genes and Justice: the problem of genetic enhancement

Senior Theses

Same-Sex Marriage: the moral arguments, prevalent constitutional theories, and the incrementalist approach

The Complex Constitution: politics at the edge of chaos

Intellectual Property, Authorship, and Modern Society

Because Grief Unites Us: humanitarian intervention and our responsibility to protect (in theory and practice)

Disobedience and the Good: reviving the good in politics

Narrating Nationalism: ideology, myth and the media

The senior comprehensive examination

All politics seniors take a comprehensive examination in their declared subfield. In political theory, the examination will offer a choice of questions on the history of political thought and on contemporary political philosophy. Students who have followed the pathways recommended for the study of political theory are most likely to find themselves well prepared for this examination.

Related and complementary opportunities

Students who wish to concentrate on public law may want to develop knowledge in political theory along similar lines to those recommended here, taking at least one course in each of the history of political thought and contemporary political philosophy.

Conversely, political theory students who have developed a core knowledge of the subfield in these ways may want to extend themselves into the related area of public law. Public law courses regularly offered include POL 315 (Constitutional Interpretation) and 316 (Civil Liberties).

Courses in other parts of the Politics Department may also inform and complement the development of expertise in political theory, as may courses in closely related areas such as religion, philosophy, classics, and history. The certificate program in Values and Public Life offered by the University Center for Human Values offers one route to combining a range of interdisciplinary interests including political theory into a coherent program of study.