

## **POLS 5321: SEMINAR IN POLITICAL THEORY**

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Office Hours: zoom 2-3pm M/T/Th; and Zoom by appointment

Long Summer 2026: May 11-August 8: Wednesdays noon-2pm

Zoom class [link](#)

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

This course introduces graduate students to central questions, methods, and debates in political theory. It explores how theorists conceptualize power, justice, freedom, authority, and the political, and how these concepts evolve across historical and ideological contexts. Students will engage with classical texts and contemporary interventions, learning to interpret, critique, and apply theoretical frameworks to political problems.

### **FURTHER COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

This graduate seminar examines political theory as a distinctive mode of inquiry within political science, emphasizing close textual reading, normative argumentation, and historical interpretation. The course is organized around recurring questions concerning order, liberty, equality, democracy, and political obligation. We begin with an extended engagement with conservative political thought through Russell Kirk's *The Roots of American Order* before moving to democratic, critical, postcolonial, and egalitarian traditions. Because this is a summer seminar meeting once per week for an extended session, each meeting will involve sustained, intensive discussion rather than breadth coverage. The course is also structured to support the production of a substantial original research paper.

### **COURSE OBJECTIVES:**

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Define and distinguish political theory from other political science subfields.
- Analyze key political concepts and their evolution.
- Compare and contrast different theoretical approaches.
- Apply theoretical insights to contemporary political issues.
- Develop original theoretical arguments in written and oral form.

**CANVAS:** This class will meet Wednesdays from noon to 2pm **synchronously** on zoom unless otherwise agreed upon by all members of class. All written and graded assignments will appear on Canvas. Assignments can be found under the "Syllabus," "Assignments," and "Modules" tabs on the Course page. All written and graded work will be submitted via Canvas. Students will also find supplementary handouts and readings on Canvas. All modules, essays, and attendance/participation grades are weighted as part of your final grade.

**TEXTS ARE REQUIRED:** This summer we will be exploring political theory from a variety of perspectives in order to satisfy the requirements for the MA in political science. Basic questions include: what is political theory? How is it different from other subfields in political science (Comparative, IR, American, and Methods)? What can you do with political theory? Why does it

matter? While there are a number of canonical texts, this course centers a conservative American perspective at the beginning (Kirk) and then asks questions that ultimately draw on perennial topics of political theory: what is justice? What is equality? What is liberty? What does it mean to be free? Four books will get primacy (1)Kirk, 2) Brown, 3) Lowe, and 4) Piketty & Sandel). The others are required mostly because they are good and have some essays we will use. To this end, I have selected the following texts to help us engage with these “evergreen” questions:

- 1) Berlin, Isaiah, Henry Hardy, and Ian Harris. 2002. *Liberty: incorporating Four essays on liberty*. 2nd edition ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 2) Brown, Wendy. 2018. *Politics Out of History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- 3) Hall, Stuart, Sally Davison, David Featherstone, Michael Rustin, Bill Schwarz, and Press Duke University, eds. 2017. *Selected Political Writings: The Great Moving Right Show and Other Essays, Stuart Hall: Selected Writings*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- 4) Kirk, Russell. *The Roots of American Order*. 4th ed. Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2003.
- 5) Lowe, Lisa. 2015. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- 6) Piketty, Thomas, and Michael J. Sandel. 2025. *Equality: what it means and why it matters*. Cambridge, UK ; Hoboken, NJ: Polity Press.
- 7) Wolin, Sheldon S., and Nicholas Xenos. 2016. *Fugitive democracy : and other essays*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- 8) Additional readings will be posted on the course site.

## **UT TYLER AND COURSE APPROVED POLICY ON USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)**

UT Tyler is committed to exploring and using artificial intelligence (AI) tools as appropriate for the discipline and task undertaken. We encourage discussing AI tools’ ethical, societal, philosophical, and disciplinary implications. All uses of AI should be acknowledged as this aligns with our commitment to honor and integrity, as noted in UT Tyler’s Honor Code. Faculty and students must not use protected information, data, or copyrighted materials when using any AI tool. Additionally, users should be aware that AI tools rely on predictive models to generate content that may appear correct but is sometimes shown to be incomplete, inaccurate, taken without attribution from other sources, and/or biased. Consequently, an AI tool should not be considered a substitute for traditional approaches to research. You are ultimately responsible for the quality and content of the information you submit. Misusing AI tools that violate the guidelines specified for this course (see below) is considered a breach of academic integrity. The student will be subject to disciplinary actions as outlined in UT Tyler’s Academic Integrity Policy.

**For this course, AI is not permitted in this class at all**

[Chicago Style Citation Information](#)

## ASSIGNMENTS AND EVALUATION

*Class discussion, reflection papers,<sup>1</sup> and attendance:* 25%. Because the seminar meets only once per week, consistent preparation and substantive participation throughout the full two-hour session are required.

*Midterm paper and debate on Kirk:* 25%. Students will submit a critical paper of approximately 10–12 pages on *The Roots of American Order* and participate in a structured in-class debate assessing Kirk's arguments.

*Final research paper:* 50%. A 20–25 page original research paper in political theory developed over the course of the semester with staged submissions and feedback.

## COURSE SCHEDULE

**Week 1** (May 11–17): What Is Political Theory?

**Topics:** Political theory as a field and as labor, purposes of normativity, canon and critique.

**Readings:**

- 1) Wolin, "Political Theory as a Vocation."<sup>2</sup>
- 2) Berlin, "Introduction" to *Liberty*.<sup>3</sup>
- 3) Stuart Hall, Thinking as Labor [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jY4Ve\\_r1PHU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jY4Ve_r1PHU)

**Seminar focus:** What kinds of questions political theory asks and why they matter.

**Week 2** (May 18–24): Order, Tradition, and the Conservative Imagination

**Readings:**

- 1) Kirk, *The Roots of American Order*, Chapters: I–III.<sup>4</sup>

**Seminar focus:** Moral order, tradition, and civilizational inheritance.

**Week 3** (May 25–31): American Order and Ideology

**Readings:**

- 1) Kirk, *The Roots of American Order*, Chapters: IV–VI.<sup>5</sup>
- 2) Hall, "The Great Moving Right Show."<sup>6</sup>

**Seminar focus:** Conservatism, ideology, and political authority.

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<sup>1</sup> Reflection paper specifications: 500 words; sandwich writing; due at start of class; no AI usage; footnote and Chicago style. See: Kate L. Turabian et al., *A manual for writers of research papers, theses, and dissertations: Chicago Style for students and researchers*, 9th edition ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Sheldon S. Wolin and Nicholas Xenos, *Fugitive democracy: and other essays* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016), 3–32.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah Berlin, Henry Hardy, and Ian Harris, *Liberty: incorporating Four essays on liberty*, 2nd edition ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3–54.

<sup>4</sup> Russell Kirk, *The roots of American order*, 4th ed. (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2003), 3–97.

<sup>5</sup> Kirk, *The roots of American order*, 97–220.

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Hall et al., eds., *Selected Political Writings: The Great Moving Right Show and Other Essays* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 172–86.

! Midterm paper prompt distributed.

**Week 4** (June 1–7): Debating Conservative Order

**Readings:**

- 1) Kirk, *The Roots of American Order*, Chapters: XI-XII.<sup>7</sup>
- 2) Wolin, *Fugitive Democracy*, Chapter 18

**Activities:**

- ! Midterm paper due.
- ! Extended seminar debate on Kirk's conception of order, liberty, and tradition.

**Week 5** (June 8–14): Democracy Beyond Institutions

**Readings:**

- 1) Wolin, *Fugitive Democracy*, Chapters 3-5
- 2) Berlin, *Liberty*, pages: 166-217.

**Seminar focus:** Democracy as episodic practice rather than stable regime.

- ! Final paper prospectus due (2–3 pages).

**Week 6** (June 15–21): Neoliberalism and the Reconfiguration of the Political

**Readings:**

- 1) Brown, *Politics Out of History*, chapters 1-7.

**Seminar focus:** Time, economization, and depoliticization in contemporary governance.

**Week 7** (June 22–28): Empire, Capitalism, and Liberal Order

**Readings:**

- 1) Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, read the entire book.

**Seminar focus:** Colonialism, slavery, and the hidden foundations of liberal political theory.

**Week 8** (June 29–July 5): Equality, Justice, and Moral Standing



**Readings:**

- 1) Piketty and Sandel, *Equality*, Entire Book.

**Seminar focus:** Competing conceptions of equality and political legitimacy.

- ! Annotated bibliography for final paper due.

**Week 9** (July 6–July 19): Research and Writing Week

-  No regular seminar meeting.
-  Individual conferences scheduled during the week.

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<sup>7</sup> Kirk, *The roots of American order*, 393–478.

✚ Focus: Argument development, literature integration, and drafting.

**Week 10** (July 20–August 8): Research Presentations and Synthesis

**Activities:**

- ! Conference-style presentations of research papers during the scheduled seminar meeting.
- ! Integrative discussion on the contemporary stakes of political theory.
- ! Final research paper due by August 6, 2026.

**Academic Expectations**

This course is conducted as a graduate seminar. Students are expected to complete all readings before each meeting, prepare written notes and discussion questions, and engage consistently throughout the full two-hour session. Written work should demonstrate careful textual engagement, conceptual precision, and original argumentation. AI usage will result in failure.

Reference List

Berlin, Isaiah, Henry Hardy, and Ian Harris. *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty*. 2nd edition ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Hall, Stuart, Sally Davison, David Featherstone, Michael Rustin, Bill Schwarz, and Press Duke University, eds. *Selected Political Writings: The Great Moving Right Show and Other Essays*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

Kirk, Russell. *The Roots of American Order*. 4th ed. Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2003.

Wolin, Sheldon S., and Nicholas Xenos. *Fugitive Democracy: And Other Essays*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016.