

Seminar in American Political Thought: Ethics and Politics in the Age of Trump, and Beyond
Spring 2022
21:790:454:Q1

Tuesday 6 to 9 pm.
Dr. Segers

This course is designed to provoke thoughtful reflection upon some of the difficult choices and ethical dilemmas which may arise in American politics, governance, and policymaking. Such ethical dilemmas arise in both global and domestic politics. Recent events in U.S. politics have focused our attention on truth and deception in politics, and on memory, truth and past history (for example, continuing controversies over monuments and memorials). Recent events in global affairs require our attention to public health in pandemic times while we also confront challenges of violence and warfare in different parts of the world.

This semester, we will examine an extraordinary confluence of events in American politics. Since 2020, the United States has faced not one but two presidential impeachments, along with major pandemic problems, against the backdrop of racial protests and a hotly contested presidential election. For the first time in American history, the losing candidate refused to concede victory to his opponent, claiming the winner had “stolen” the election. On January 6, 2021, a rioting crowd stormed the Capitol to disrupt and prevent Congress from certifying the election of the new president, Joseph Biden. Once calm was restored, the full Congress re-convened to complete the Electoral College vote. President Donald Trump refused to attend the inauguration of his successor on January 20th and quietly left the White House.

What are the ethical dilemmas confronting us in the age of Trump, and beyond? We will analyze the 2016 and 2020 elections and the presidency of Donald Trump to see what norms he challenged. Did he merely flaunt accepted conventions? Or did he cross some fundamental moral boundaries essential in a democratic society? Donald Trump insists that President Biden’s presidency is illegitimate and denounces anyone in the Republican Party who claims otherwise. He is apparently planning to run for the White House again, in 2024.

The legacy he has left is troubling. The American political system faces serious problems such as polarization of the people, extreme partisanship in Congress, legislative gridlock in House and Senate, and a Supreme Court divided over moral and social issues such as abortion, gun safety, and religious liberty. A Congressional committee is investigating the insurrection at the Capitol last January, charging many with obstruction of justice, and leaders with the charge of seditious conspiracy. In many states, Republican-controlled legislatures have passed restrictive voting laws to prevent any future Democratic election “steals.”

To consider these problems, a variety of source materials will be used: these include classical treatises in political thought; case studies; essays in philosophy, history, and the humanistic social sciences; and monographs and journal articles. In addition to these problems in American government, we will consider issues of character and integrity in the lives of exemplary public servants. But we need also to school ourselves in the details of elections and voting procedures, the filibuster, and the utility and fairness of the Electoral College. The fear is that the United States is backsliding away from democracy. We are learning that democracy is fragile, and that conscientious citizens much work hard to protect and preserve democratic government.

REQUIRED READINGS: Available at Barnes & Noble Bookstore in Hahnes Building.

L.Sandy Maisel and Hannah E. Dineen, eds., *TRUMPING ETHICAL NORMS* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2007). May now be published by Routledge. ISBN 978-0-815-35938-8 (paperback).

Frederick Douglass, *NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS, AN AMERICAN SLAVE*, New York: Barnes & Noble, 2003 ISBN 10-1-59308-041-7.

Brian Kilmeade, *THE PRESIDENT AND THE FREEDOM FIGHTER: Abraham Lincoln & Frederick Douglass and Their Battle to Save America’s Soul* (NY: Sentinel, 2021)

Jesse Wegman, LET THE PEOPLE PICK THE PRESIDENT: THE CASE FOR ABOLISHING THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE (NY: St. Martin's Press, 2020). ISBN978 – 125022 1971.

Ezra Klein, WHY WE'RE POLARIZED (NY: Avid Reader Press, 2020). ISBN 978-1-4767-0032-8

Phillip Hallie, LEST INNOCENT BLOOD BE SHED (Harper Perennial, 1994). (Paperback). ISBN 0-06-092517-5.

Gerald Pomper, ON ORDINARY HEROES AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY (Boulder, COL: Paradigm Publishers 2007). ISBN-13 978-1-59451-391-6. In paperback.

N. Machiavelli, THE PRINCE. This classic is a 90 page paperback. The bookstore undoubtedly has used copies and the paperback book will also be in most university libraries and many public libraries. Do not buy. Use library copy or used copy.

In addition to these books, there will be short readings, accessible either through a link or stored on Blackboard under "Course Documents."

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Midterm Exam and Final Exams

Short Essay: (5 to 7 pp) relatively early in the semester.

Book Review of a presidential biography of Donald Trump, Joseph Biden, Barack Obama, Kamala Harris, Michael Pence.

Oral presentation of Book Review to the class.

In-Class Presentation of the Readings.

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Short Essay

This assignments has two parts:

- (1) See the movie, "Schindler's List," as soon as you can. Screening this movie is not only critical For the essay part of the assignment (below), but will also provide a common reference for discussion later in the course.**

- (2) As you are viewing the film and afterwards, consider the following question: Was Oskar Schindler an ethical person? Write a brief essay (no more than 6 pages) in response to that query, using what evidence you can from the movie and/or whatever other sources are at your disposal (please cite sources used when appropriate).**

This essay is due on Tuesday, February 8th. Be prepared to share your thoughts on this question during our class meeting on Feb. 8th.

Note: For those interested in consulting the book, copies of *SCHINDLER'S LIST*, by Thomas Keneally, are available in bookstores. (This is not required; seeing the Steven Spielberg film is required).

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COURSE SCHEDULE

Spring 2022

Jan 18 & 25

Introduction: Approaches to Ethics & Politics
Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chs. 15-19.
Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, "Thinking Ethically: A Framework for Moral Decision Making." This document is on Blackboard for this course. You can also go to www.scu.edu/ethics.
Elizabeth Kolbert, "Poles Apart" *The NEW YORKER*, Jan. 3 & 10, 2022, 68-72.
Sullivan and Segers, "Ethical Issues in Public Policy." (to be distributed).
Are there any limits to "political necessity" as a justification of violence and deception in politics?

Feb. 1

Ethics and Politics: How Related?
Machiavelli, *The Prince* (continued)
Max Weber, "Politics As a Vocation," available online, google author & title pdf.
Autobiography of Frederick Douglass (entire).

Feb. 8

Truth and Politics: Deception, Lying, and Secrecy
"Disinformation for Qaddafi," pp. 72-77 (to be distributed).
"Five Examples of Lying in Office," to be posted online.
Washington Post, article on Trump & Deception (to be posted).
Recommended: Sissela Bok, *LYING: Moral Choice in Public & Private Life*.
Are there any limits to lying in politics?

Feb. 15

How Did Trump Happen?
How chart Trump's political ascendancy? What did he bring to the political process (campaigning for high public office)? Who backed him, and why? How did he cultivate their support? What role did the Republican Party play in his rise to the GOP nomination? We will look at the data from the 2016 and 2020 elections to learn more about who supported him. Readings from the Washington Post, the New Yorker, and the New York Times will be posted.

Feb. 22

How Did Trump Govern? What was his conception of the powers of the Executive Branch of government? Trump ignored or challenged many norms that are part of the political process---e.g., revealing his tax returns, establishing blind trusts for his own wealth to avoid conflicts of interest. What did Trump accomplish during his term as president? What promises did he fail to keep or goals that he did not realize?

Readings: Lawrence Wright, "The Plague Year," The New Yorker, Jan 4 & 11, 2021, pp. 20-59.

March 1

Trump and the Aftermath of the 2020 Elections

What is Trump's relation to truth and to the bearers of truth? By the end of his Term, he was thoroughly into denial---vote denial, virus denial, climate denial. He constantly belittled the mainstream media, with charges of "fake news." His term ended with Capitol riots and a second impeachment.

Readings: Jill Lepore, "You're Fired: The Origins of Impeachment." The New Yorker, October 2019. Also, Gerald Pomper, ON ORDINARY HEROES AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY, chapter 3 on Peter Rodino: Hero of Congress (for his work as Judiciary Chair during the impeachment hearings on Richard Nixon).

