AMS 2010: Civil Discourse and the American Political Order

I. General Information

Class Meetings

- Spring 2026
- 100% In-Person, no GTAs, 30 residential students
- MWF Period 4 (10:40 AM–11:30 AM)
- Classroom: CSE 0453
- 3 Credits

Instructor

- Amy Chandran
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- Office hours MWF 1.30-2.30 PM and by appointment

Course Description

What is civil discourse? And does the American political order require civil discourse properly to function? This course takes up these questions. In the process, it explores the historical and philosophical roots of equality, toleration and free speech, requisites of civil discourse. Students will also consider the role of free speech and civil discourse, not only in the context of American civic life but within the context of American university life. To do this, students will survey the basic principles of American democracy and how they are applied in our republican form of government, including by developing an understanding of the U.S. Constitution; by developing a knowledge of the nation's founding documents and how they have shaped the nature and functions of our institutions of self-governance; and by developing an understanding of landmark Supreme Court cases and their impact on law and society, particularly as they relate to freedom of expression. Finally, students will apply the lessons they have learned to particular case studies. The course aims to enable students to engage in civil debates with multiple points of view and to master the ability to synthesize information that informs civic decision-making.

General Education Credit

- Humanities (H)
- Writing Requirement (WR) 2000 words

This course accomplishes the General Education objectives of the subject areas listed above. A minimum grade of C is required for General Education credit. Courses intended to satisfy General Education requirements cannot be taken S-U.

The Writing Requirement (WR) ensures students both maintain their fluency in writing and use writing as a tool to facilitate learning.

Course grades have two components. To receive writing requirement credit, a student must receive a grade of C or higher and a satisfactory completion of the writing component of the course.

Required Readings and Works

1. Required readings will be posted as PDFs to Canvas.
2. The writing manual for this course is: *The Economist Style Guide*, 11th edn. (2015). ISBN: 978–1–61039–575–5.
3. Materials and Supplies Fees: N/A.

Course Objectives

- Identify, describe, and explain the history and underlying theories of civil discourse.
- Identify, describe, and explain elements of the U.S. Constitution, and the founding documents.
- Identify, describe, and explain landmark Supreme Court cases and their impact on law and society.
- Evaluate the extent to which the founding documents have shaped the nature and functions of our institutions of self-governance.
- Analyze primary documents, situate them in historical and literary context, and develop critical interpretations of their significance to the emergence of modern conceptions and practice of civil discourse.
- Analyze key elements, biases and influences that shape the theory and practice of civil discourse generally and in America more specifically.
- Develop and articulate in writing clear and effective responses to central questions about civil discourse from multiple perspectives.
- Communicate orally and in writing clearly and effectively the significance of the development of modern conceptions of civil discourse in our society.

II. Graded Work

Description of Graded Work

1. **Active Participation and Attendance: 20%**
    a. **Participation: 15%**
        i. An exemplar participant shows evidence of having done the assigned reading before each class; consistently offers thoughtful points and questions for discussion; and listens considerately to other discussants. See participation rubric below. (R)

    b. **Class Attendance: 5%**
        i. On-time class attendance is required for this component of the course grade. Class attendance will be recorded daily. You may have two unexcused absences without any penalty. But starting with the third class missed your grade will be affected. Starting with the third unexcused absence, each unexcused absence reduces your attendance grade by 2/3: an A– becomes a B, and so on.
        ii. Except for absence because of religious holiday observance, documentation is required for excused absences, per university policy. Excessive unexcused absences (10 or more) will result in failure of the course.

2. **In-class presentation: 25%**
    a. Over the course of the semester, students will present a reading for 10 minutes at the start of class.
    b. Students will be responsible for outlining the relevant background context for the reading, the basic content, the key points of the reading. Students may also highlight points for further discussion.
    c. Following the class, students will submit a 750-word summary of the presentation; with a reflection on the discussion elicited by their presentation. Summary discussion reflections will be due 1 week after the presentation is given.

3. **Reading Quizzes: 15%**
    a. Reading quizzes will be administered at the start of class throughout the semester. Reading quizzes will test the student's knowledge of the week's readings, and will contain short-answer, short essay, and/or multiple-choice questions.
    b. Quizzes will take place throughout the semester; without notice. Only the highest three grades will be counted towards the final grade (at 5% each), the lowest two grades will be dropped.

4. **Analytical Paper: 15%**
    a. In Week 12, you will submit a 1,250-word analytical essay answering to a prompt provided by Week 7.
    b. The professor will evaluate and provide written feedback, on all the student's written assignments with respect to grammar, punctuation, clarity, coherence, and organization.
    c. Students may want to access the university's Writing Studio.
    d. An additional writing guide website can be found at Purdue OWL.

5. **Final Examination: 25%**
    a. Students will take a written final examination during the final class. It will consist of multiple choice, short answer questions and an essay.

Grading Scale

For information on UF's grading policies for assigning grade points, see here.

A	94 – 100%		C	74 – 76%
A–	90 – 93%		C–	70 – 73%
B+	87 – 89%		D+	67 – 69%
B	84 – 86%		D	64 – 66%
B–	80 – 83%		D–	60 – 63%
C+	77 – 79%		E	<60

Grading Rubrics

Participation Rubric

A (90-100%)	Typically comes to class with pre-prepared questions about the readings. Engages others about ideas, respects the opinions of others and consistently elevates the level of discussion.
B (80-89%)	Does not always come to class with pre-prepared questions about the reading. Waits passively for others to raise interesting issues. Some in this category, while courteous and articulate, do not adequately listen to other participants or relate their comments to the direction of the conversation.
C (70-79%)	Attends regularly but typically is an infrequent or unwilling participant in discussion. Is only adequately prepared for discussion.
D (60-69%)	Fails to attend class regularly and is inadequately prepared for discussion. Is an unwilling participant in discussion.
E (<60%)	Attends class infrequently and is wholly unprepared for discussion. Refuses to participate in discussion.

Examination Rubric: Essays and Short Answers

	Completeness	Analysis	Evidence	Writing
A (90-100%)	Shows a thorough understanding of the question. Addresses all aspects of the question completely.	Analyses, evaluates, compares and/or contrasts issues and events with depth.	Incorporates pertinent and detailed information from both class discussions and assigned readings.	Presents all information clearly and concisely, in an organized manner.
B (80-89%)	Presents a general understanding of the question. Completely addresses most aspects of the question or address all aspects incompletely.	Analyses or evaluates issues and events, but not in any depth.	Includes relevant facts, examples and details but does not support all aspects of the task evenly.	Presents information fairly and evenly and may have minor organization problems.
C (70-79%)	Shows a limited understanding of the question. Does not address most aspects of the question.	Lacks analysis or evaluation of the issues and events beyond stating accurate, relevant facts.	Includes relevant facts, examples and details, but omits concrete examples, includes inaccurate information and/or does not support all aspects of the task.	Lacks focus, somewhat interfering with comprehension.
D (60-69%)	Fails fully to answer the specific central question.	Lacks analysis or evaluation of the issues and events beyond stating vague, irrelevant, and/or inaccurate facts.	Does not incorporate information from pertinent class discussion and/or assigned readings.	Organizational problems prevent comprehension.
E (<60%)	Does not answer the specific central question.	Lacks analysis or evaluation of the issues and events.	Does not adduce any evidence.	Incomprehensible organization and prose.

Writing Rubric

	Thesis and Argumentation	Use of Sources	Organization	Grammar, mechanics and style
A (90-100%)	Thesis is clear, specific, and presents a thoughtful, critical, engaging, and creative interpretation. Argument fully supports the thesis both logically and thoroughly.	Primary (and secondary texts, if required) are well incorporated, utilized, and contextualized throughout.	Clear organization. Introduction provides adequate background information and ends with a thesis. Details are in logical order. Conclusion is strong and states the point of the paper.	No errors.
B (80-89%)	Thesis is clear and specific, but not as critical or original. Shows insight and attention to the text under consideration. May have gaps in argument's logic.	Primary (and secondary texts, if required) are incorporated but not contextualized significantly.	Clear organization. Introduction clearly states thesis, but does not provide as much background information. Details are in logical order, but may be more difficult to follow. Conclusion is recognizable and ties up almost all loose ends.	A few errors.
C (70-79%)	Thesis is present but not clear or specific, demonstrating a lack of critical engagement to the text. Argument is weak, missing important details or making logical leaps with little support.	Primary (and secondary texts, if required) are mostly incorporated but are not properly contextualized.	Significant lapses in organization. Introduction states thesis but does not adequately provide background information. Some details not in logical or expected order that results in a distracting read. Conclusion is recognizable but does not tie up all loose ends.	Some errors.
D (60-69%)	Thesis is vague and/or confused. Demonstrates a failure to understand the text. Argument lacks any logical flow and does not utilize any source material.	Primary and/or secondary texts are almost wholly absent.	Poor, hard-to-follow organization. There is no clear introduction of the main topic or thesis. There is no clear conclusion, and the paper just ends. Little or no employment of logical body paragraphs.	Many errors.
E (<60%)	There is neither a thesis nor any argument.	Primary and/or secondary texts are wholly absent.	The paper is wholly disorganized, lacking an introduction, conclusion or any logical coherence.	Scores of errors.

III. Weekly Schedule

Week 1: Civility
(January 12, 14, 16)

This week students will read and familiarize themselves with the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Students will also listen to a TED Talk on the meaning of civility and what civility requires of democratic citizens.

Readings (20 pages + 13 min video):

1. First Amendment to *The Constitution of the United States* in *Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, The Federalist*, ed. Terence Ball (New York, 2003), pp. 545–565.
2. Teresa Bejan, "Is Civility a Sham?" TED Conferences, October 2018, https://www.ted.com/talks/teresa_bejan_is_civility_a_sham

Week 2: Freedom and Self-Governance
(January 21 & 23)

America's constitutional framers believed that freedom of speech, the press, assembly, and the right to petition the government to redress grievances was a requisite for a free and self-governing people. Students this week will consider the history of freedom and self-governance of which the framers saw themselves as heirs.

Readings (56 pages):

1. Aristotle, *Politics,* ed. and trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), Book I. Ch 1–2 and 8-9, pp. 35–37, 43–48.
2. John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, in *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), Chs. II, V (sections 25-37), VIII, XIX (sections 211–229), pp. 269–278, 285–294, 330–349, 406–417.
3. *Declaration of Independence* (1776), in *American Political Thought*, eds. Kramnick and Lowi, pp. 115–118.

Week 3: The Enlightenment Inheritance
(January 26, 28 & 30)

America's founders formulated their thinking about freedom, toleration, and freedom of speech against the backdrop of the Enlightenment. This week students will read seminal Enlightenment works regarding religious toleration and freedom of speech.

Readings (35 pages):

1. John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, in *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York, 1995), 81-90.

2. Immanuel Kant, 'What is Enlightenment?', in *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, ed. Kramnick, pp. 1-7.
3. Bernard Mandeville, 'The Fable of the Bees', in *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, pp. 242–254.
4. Benjamin Franklin, "Industry and the Way to Wealth," in *The Portable Enlightenment Reader,* pp. 483–490.

Week 4: The U.S. Constitution
(February 2, 4 & 6)

Influenced by classical and early modern discussions of liberty and self-governance, the American Founders developed their own framework for a new political order. Students will read what America's founders thought about the value of freedom, freedom of expression, and freedom of religion. They will also read a selection from *The Federalist Papers* in defense of the proposed Constitution.

Readings (~49 pages):

1. Jonathan Mayhew, *A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers* (1750), in *American Political Thought*, eds. Kramnick and Lowi, pp. 32–41.
2. John Adams, *Thoughts on Government* (1776), in *American Political Thought*, eds. Kramnick and Lowi, pp. 88–94.
3. *The Constitution of the United States*
4. Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, John Jay, *The Federalist*, ed. Lawrence Goldman (Oxford, 2008), *Federalist 1, 9–10*, pp. 11–14, 44–60.
5. James Madison, 'A Memorial and Remonstrance', in *Foundations of Education in America*, eds. Noll and Kelley, pp. 148–153.

Week 5: Federalism & The Separation of Powers
(February 9, 11 & 13)

Fundamental to the American political order is the division of government into three branches (the executive, the legislative and the judicial) and the division of power between the federal government and the states. This week, students will read selections from the debates between The Federalists and the Anti-Federalists over the separation of powers in the Constitution. They will also read a selection from Thomas Paine who argued for a "simple government" over a government of separated powers.

Readings (33 pages):

1. Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist*, ed. Lawrence Goldman (Oxford, 2008), *Federalist 47–48, 51*, pp. 239–249, 256–260.
2. *Brutus 1*, October 18, 1787 (5 pages total) https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/brutus-i/
3. Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (New York, 2004), pp. 3–10, 16–23.

Week 6: Equality
(February 16, 18, & 20)

The conviction that individuals are equal is an axiom of the American political order. This week students will examine visions of equality in America: George Washington's appeal to the natural rights of "all classes of citizens," Thomas Jefferson's reflections on slavery, Alexis de Tocqueville's observations on the egalitarian social state of the Anglo-Americans.

Readings (44 pages):

1. George Washington, *Letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport* (1790) in *Writings*, ed. John H. Rhodehamel (New York, 1997), pp. 766–767.
2. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query 18 (1 page total), letter to Henri Grégoire 25 February 1809 (<1 page), "Original rough draught" of the *Declaration of Independence* (3 pages)
3. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. and eds. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago, 2000), Vol. I, Part I, Chs. 3-4, pp. 45–55, Vol. II, Part II, Ch. 1-5, pp. 406–420 and Part IV, Ch. 6-8, pp. 583–597.

Week 7: Inequality
(February 23, 25 & 27)

To what degree did the practice of slavery and the disenfranchisement women violate the principle of human equality articulated in the *Declaration of Independence*? Could this principle be invoked in defense of abolition and enfranchisement? This week, students will examine these questions through the debate between Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison on slavery and the Constitution along with Elizabeth Cady Stanton's restatement of equality in the "Declaration of Sentiments."

Readings (41 pages):

1. Frederick Douglass, 'What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?' (1852) in *Princeton Readings in Political Thought*, ed. Mitchell Cohen (Princeton, 2018), pp. 411–426.
2. Frederick Douglass, 'The Constitution of the US: Pro or Anti-Slavery?' (1860), 10 pages.
3. William Lloyd Garrison, "On the Constitution and the Union (1832), 5 pages https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/on-the-constitution-and-the-union-2/
4. Lincoln, "Speech at Chicago" (1858), 4 pages.
5. Lincoln, "Gettysburg Address" (1863), 1 page. https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/gettysburg-address/
6. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 'Declaration of Sentiments' (1848) in *Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony*, ed. Ann D. Gordon (New Brunswick, N.J., 1997), 6 pages.

Week 8: Emancipation & American Education
(March 2, 4 & 6)

In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois declared that the problem of the twentieth century is "the problem of the color line," a reference to segregation and to the legal and social barriers that excluded African-Americans from white society. This week, students will explore the ongoing exchange

between Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, each of whom offered a different vision of education to remedy the problem of "the color line" in the United States. Students will also frame the discussion with two landmark Supreme Court cases: *Plessy v. Ferguson* and *Brown v. Board*.

Readings (38 pages):

1. *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), *Brown I* (1954), *Brown II* (1955), in *Constitutional Law*, Geoffrey Stone et al eds. (9th ed., 2023, Aspen Publishing), 418-37
2. Booker T. Washington, 'Atlanta Exposition Address' (1895), 5 pages.
3. W.E.B. Du Bois, 'The Talented Tenth' (1903), excerpts, 3 pages.

Week 9: the purpose of a University
(March 9, 11 & 13)

The university is a distinctive Western institution, one which has always been oriented towards helping students to discern truth and to developing the moral character of good citizens. This week, students will consider classic descriptions of the purpose of education and the role of the university.

Readings (45 pages):

1. Michael Oakeshott, 'The Idea of a University' in *Academic Questions*, pp. 23–29.
2. Robert Maynard Hutchins, *Education for Freedom* (Baton Rouge, 1944), pp. 19–30 and 39–64.
3. *University of Chicago, Report on the Committee on Free Expression* (2014), 3 pages.

[Spring Break]

Week 10: Freedom of Speech and Freedom of Inquiry I
(March 23, 25 & 27)

The canonical modern statement of the virtues of freedom of speech and freedom of inquiry is laid out in John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (1859). This week students will consider Mill's defence of free speech.

Readings (57 pages):

1. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859) 'Introductory' & 'Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion' in *On Liberty and Other Essays,* ed. John Gray (Oxford, 2008), pp. 5-62.

Week 11: Freedom of Speech and Freedom of Inquiry II
(March 30, April 1 & 3)

This week, students will read landmark Supreme Court cases regarding free speech, especially regarding religious expression.

Readings (26 pages):

1. Content-Based Restrictions: Dangerous Ideas and Information (*Masses v. Patten* [1917]*, Schenck v. United States* [1919], *Abrams v. United States* [1919], *Dennis v. United States* [1951], *Brandenburg v. Ohio* [1969], in *The First Amendment*, ed. Geoffrey Stone et al (7th ed., Aspen, 2024), 21-28, 31-36, 47-55, 58-64.

Case Study: Democracy and Politicization

Week 12: The Nature of the Political

What does it mean that Aristotle famously held humans to be "political animals"? How has the nature of what constitutes the "political" changed across time? What is essential to the nature of politics? How does this manifest in an era marked out by democracy? This week, we'll look at three different readings that canvas different accounts regarding the idea of politics and what it entails. Students will be invited to reflect on how such understandings shape their views about civil discourse.
Readings (48 pages):

1. Aristotle, *The Politics*, ed. and trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago, 2013), selections (~3 pages)
2. Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, Published as "Politik als Beruf," Gesammelte Politische Schriften (Muenchen, 1921), (15 pages)
3. Carl Schmitt, ˆThe Concept of the Political," ed. and trans. George Schwab (University of Chicago Press), 1995, pp. 25-45.

Week 13: Experts and the Democracy
(April 13, 15, 17)

Readings (32 pages):

This week students will dive deeper on the question of democracy and what political rule means when it requires the judgment of experts. What does it mean to govern in the name of the people? Students will consider how those questions recur in new ways in contemporary discussions of the failures of democratic rule.

1. Alan Blinder "Is Government too Political?" *Foreign Affairs* (1997) Vol. 76, No. 6, pp. 115-126.
2. Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton, 2015), pp. 1–23.
3. Hélène Landemore, "Response to Brennan," in *Debating Democracy: Do We Need More or Less?* Ed. Brennan and Landemore (Oxford, 2021), pp. 271–279.

Week 14: Hyperpolitics

What happens when everything becomes political? What is hyper politicization? What is depoliticization? In this final week of the course, we will contrast contemporary approaches to understanding the present state of political life.

1. Anton Jäger, “Everything is Hyperpolitical,” *The Point Magazine,* February 22, 2023, <https://thepointmag.com/politics/everything-is-hyperpolitical>.

[Final Examination: 22 April]

IV. Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs)

At the end of this course, students will be expected to have achieved the General Education student learning outcomes for Humanities (H).

Humanities (H) Humanities courses must afford students the ability to think critically through the mastering of subjects concerned with human culture, especially literature, history, art, music, and philosophy, and must include selections from the Western canon.

Humanities courses provide instruction in the history, key themes, principles, terminology, and theory or methodologies used within a humanities discipline or the humanities in general. Students will learn to identify and to analyze the key elements, biases and influences that shape thought. These courses emphasize clear and effective analysis and approach issues and problems from multiple perspectives.

Content*: Identify, describe and explain the history, underlying theory and methodologies used*. Assessments: Reading quizzes, midterm exam, final exam, and an analytical essay.

- Identify, describe, and explain the history and underlying theories of civil discourse **(H). Assessments:** reading quizzes, midterm exam, final exam.
- Identify, describe, and explain elements of the U.S. Constitution, and the founding documents **(H). Assessments:** Reading quizzes, exams, and paper.
- Identify, describe, and explain landmark Supreme Court cases and their impact on law and society (**H). Assessments:** Reading quizzes, exams.

Critical Thinking: *Identify and analyze key elements, biases and influences that shape thought within the subject area. Approach issues and problems within the discipline from multiple perspectives.*

- Evaluate the extent to which the founding documents have shaped the nature and functions of our institutions of self-governance **(H).** Assessments: midterm exam, final exam, paper.
- Analyze primary documents, situate them in historical and literary context, and develop critical interpretations of their significance to the emergence of modern conceptions and practice of civil discourse **(H).** Assessments: paper.
- Analyze key elements, biases and influences that shape the theory and practice of civil discourse generally and in America more specifically **(H). Assessments:** exams, paper.

Communication: *Communicate knowledge, thoughts and reasoning clearly and effectively.*

- Develop and articulate in writing clear and effective responses to central questions about civil discourse from multiple perspectives (**H). Assessments**: longer paper.
- Communicate orally and in writing clearly and effectively the significance of the development of modern conceptions of civil discourse in our society (**H). Assessments**: class discussion, paper.

V. Required Policies

Academic Policies

All academic policies in this course are consistent with university policies, which can be found here: **https://go.ufl.edu/syllabuspolicies**