

PLPT 4XXX: Desperate Times, Equal Measures? Equality and Difference in Politics

Seminar time: Day/Time

Seminar venue: XX

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Office hours: XX, or by appointment

What would your ideal society look like?

Do you agree that the '1%' should share their wealth with the '99%'?

Is affirmative action a just policy for overcoming racial inequality?

To what extent are the globally affluent responsible for assisting the global poor?

These questions took on new significance following the 2008 economic recession, which galvanized diverse political debate and protest and raised important questions about the status quo. In this course we will explore a central theme of this debate:

What is the fairest distribution of resources (whether economic, cultural, or political) in society?

In addressing this question you will engage with contemporary politics from a rigorous, theoretical standpoint. We will discuss some of the major debates in contemporary egalitarian theory, including questions about equality of opportunity versus equality of outcome; equality of resources versus equality of welfare; and the validity of luck egalitarianism. In the latter half of the course we will apply the conclusions from these broad frameworks to specific issues, such as whether affirmative action violates principles of equality; how to address concerns about equality between genders; and who should be responsible for global inequality.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

In this course, you will learn to distinguish between theoretically informed and theoretically impoverished political discourse. You will explore the ways in which discourse around equality is used in the United States to bolster or negate particular political cultures and policies.

More specifically, this course encourages you to:

1. *identify* different conceptions of equality in contemporary political rhetoric, policy, and action
2. *examine* the philosophical foundations of these forms of equality, and *assess* their relative strengths and weaknesses
3. *analyze* and *critique* manifestations of 'equality' in political discourse, asking to what extent these form cohesive or desirable political platforms
4. *critically reflect* on the impact this discourse has on your life and society
5. *respectfully engage* with others within and outside the course on questions of political and social importance, both during semester and in the future

Who should take this course?

Political Theory encourages students to challenge the status quo. It asks people to stop and reflect on their institutions, their political culture, their hopes for the future, and to critically assess alternative possibilities. Political theory also requires students to:

- read carefully and critically
- summarize and analyze key arguments
- learn the difference between refutable claims and evidence-based arguments
- think critically, and apply this knowledge to real world scenarios
- engage in robust, respectful and reflective debate both within and outside the class

These are all invaluable skills that you have likely been developing throughout your college career, and will continue to develop throughout your life.

Because of the general applicability of political theory knowledge and skills, this is a course that is relevant to anyone with an interest in the social sciences and humanities, the ideas outlined above, or simply an active engagement with the political and social world. It is not necessary for you to have studied political theory before, or to have familiarity with theoretical literature or methods – I have designed the course to allow you to develop the key skills and access the important ideas needed to succeed in this course.

ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

1. Research Essay (50%)

You will write a 3000 word research essay on a topic of your choice related to the course.

This involves:

a. Creating a grading rubric

Individually you will create a grading rubric for the essay. In section you will share your work and we will aggregate ideas to design a fair rubric by which your essay proposal and essay will be assessed. This will help you explore what constitutes a good essay.

b. Essay proposal (10%)

No more than 4 pages (single-spaced). I will give you a handout explaining the essential components of an essay proposal in Week 5. In essence, the proposal should present a clear research question, explain the importance of this question, and provide a tentative outline of the essay alongside an annotated bibliography. This exercise will ensure you have a feasible, valuable research question and to help you organize and refine your ideas.

c. Essay draft (10%)

This draft should be between 2000-3000 words. It is an opportunity to get external feedback on your essay before you submit your final copy. Please note, the better your first draft, the more helpful feedback you are likely to get from your peers!

d. Feedback on two essays (5%)

You will read and comment on two other students' essay drafts using the rubric we created together in class. This allows you to offer your peers helpful feedback on their essay, to reflect on your own essay, and to learn about two other areas of research.

e. Final essay + self-assessment (25%)

Your final essay should be **no more than** 3000 words (not counting footnotes or bibliography). This is an opportunity for you to clearly communicate your critical engagement with a key question that is important to *you*. In addition to the essay, please include a one page (single-spaced) response to the feedback you received from your peers and a personal assessment of your essay.

2. Equality Portfolio (40%)

You will create an online portfolio of your work on the course Wordpress site, demonstrating your engagement with the major themes and readings of this course.

This involves:

a. Reading matrices (10%)

For each reading you will complete a short matrix (I will hand this out in class) in which you explain the main thesis, identify the key evidence or logic that was used, and devise at least two questions for class discussion. The point of this assignment is to encourage you to practice *efficient*, *effective*, and *critical* reading. These responses should not be time-intensive—in fact, they are designed to improve the speed and quality of your academic reading—and they will be posted to your individual Wordpress site before class, which should allow for more productive class discussion. Each week I will randomly choose five student matrices to assess, evaluating a total of 20 matrices for each student over the course of the semester. They will be graded as either ‘satisfactory’ or ‘unsatisfactory’ (i.e. pass/fail).

b. Blogging equality (25%)

Over the course of the semester, I would like you to think about how the material we are discussing in class connects with contemporary political and social themes. You will produce **five** one-page blog entries (submission dates will be decided in class) in which you identify material from outside the course that engages with the ideas we are studying. In your blogpost you will attach or link to the document or media (where possible), or include a brief (less than a paragraph) explanation of the book, building, or material you want to assess. Explain your choice of item and why it is relevant and thought-provoking for this course. I encourage you to think creatively about the kinds of material you might like to study, including (but not limited to): print news media, TV news media, a novel, a movie, a TV show/episode, the physical environment (for example, an analysis of building layout, e.g. curbing-cutting), reflecting on a conversation with a peer or family member. The only restriction is that you should not use the same kind of item more than once. Each week I will ask two students to present their blog entry to the class as a prelude to class discussion. The blog will allow you to identify and evaluate how political theory informs your everyday experience and serves as encouragement to engage in academic conversations outside the classroom.

c. Reflective essay (5%)

This essay should be between 500-600 words. Explain how your thinking about theories of equality in contemporary politics has changed (or not changed) over the semester. The point of this essay is to allow you to critically reflect on your learning experience in this course.

3. Class Participation (10%)

In the first class I will give you the rubric by which I will be assessing your participation over the semester. My main objective in assessing your participation is to incentivize you to engage with your classmates and with me over the course material, to consider different perspectives on equality, and to develop your verbal communication skills through practicing how to analyze, critique, and respond to critique respectfully in discussion.

HOW TO SUCCEED IN THIS COURSE

Read carefully and completely

Engaging thoughtfully with the course materials is essential for your success, and I have designed assignments to help you learn how to become a more efficient and effective reader. If you are uncertain about your understanding of any particular text or material, please ask me or your peers for clarification as soon as possible. It is also important that you read assignments and the course schedule carefully—don't undermine your good understanding of the material by not following the particular instructions for an assignment or by not submitting an assignment on time.

Participate in class discussion actively and constructively

Engaging in political discourse (whether in the public or private sphere) is important for good citizenship. As a consequence, modeling engaged, reflective debate is one of the key objectives of this course. Participating in class requires you to not only attend all classes, but to actively contribute to discussion. Considering diverse perspectives is also essential to good conversation and decision-making, and as such it is also important that you encourage your classmates to make contributions and to listen thoughtfully and respectfully to what they say.

Think ahead

Please tell me in advance if there are impediments to your learning and participation so that we can work together preemptively to address potential problems. I aim to respond to emails promptly (within one business day of receipt), turn back assignments in a timely fashion (within a week of the due date), and treat students fairly by applying standardized grading templates (which you will be given in advance of assignments). I also relish the opportunity to talk with you about the course and your work in office hours or by appointment, and welcome any feedback you might have on the course or my teaching. However, please don't email me at midnight before an assignment is due to ask for help. Think ahead about your schedule and come see me in advance so that we can discuss strategies for successfully completing the different activities.

COURSE MATERIALS

All course readings, supplementary material, and resources will be available on Collab.

COURSE SCHEDULE

	Reading	Class Activities	Before Next Class	Due Dates*
Week 1: Why equality?				
	Relevant news article (in class)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Foreword• Introductions• 'What is equality?' 5 minute paper• Discuss article: think-pair-share	Reading Matrices 1 & 2	
Week 2: Equality of what?				
	(1) Janet Radcliffe Richards, 'Equality of Opportunity' (2) Orwell, 'Politics and'	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Peer-assess reading matrices 1 & 2	Design grading rubric Reading Matrices 3 & 4	

	the English Language’ + Sample essays			
Week 3: Is equality of opportunity an illusion?				
	(3) Mason, <i>Levelling the Playing Field</i> (4) Cavanaugh, <i>Against Equality of Opportunity</i>	• Create grading rubric together	Reading Matrices 5 & 6	Group A blog entry 1
Week 4: Is socialism really so bad?				
	(5) Phillips, ‘Defending Equality of Outcome’ (6) Cohen, ‘If You’re an Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich?’	• Debate: equality of outcome v. equality of opportunity	Reading Matrices 7 & 8	Group B blog entry 1
Week 5: Is equality about ‘being’ or ‘having’?				
	(7) Parfit, ‘Equality and Priority’ (8) Frankfurt, ‘Equality as a Moral Ideal’	• Essay proposal information/handout	Reading Matrices 9 & 10	Group A blog entry 2
Week 6: Is equality about feeling good or having things?				
	(9) Dworkin, ‘What is Equality? Part One: Equality of Welfare’ (10) Dworkin, ‘What is Equality? Part Two: Equality of Resources’	• Formative course and teaching evaluation	Reading Matrices 11 & 12	Group B blog entry 2
Week 7: Are we really equal if we can’t exercise our agency?				
	(11) Sen, ‘Capability and Well-Being’ (12) Nussbaum, ‘Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice’	• Peer assess reading matrices 11 & 12 • 5 minute self-reflection on matrices	Reading Matrices 13 & 14	Essay Proposal (Friday, 5pm) Group A blog entry 3
Week 8: Should we think about equality as relational, not distributional?				
	(13) Scheffler, ‘What is Egalitarianism?’ (14) Anderson, ‘What Is the Point of Equality?’	• Return essay proposal & sign up for feedback meeting	Reading Matrices 15 & 16 Proposal meeting with Claire	Group B blog entry 3
Week 9: Spring Break – No Class				
				Group A blog entry 4
Week 10: Is affirmative action a just policy for addressing racial inequality?				
	(15) Arendt, ‘Reflections on Little Rock’ (16) Allen, ‘Law’s Necessary Forcefulness: Ralph Ellison vs.		Reading Matrices 17 & 18	Group B blog entry 4

	Hannah Arendt on the Battle of Little Rock'			
Week 11: *More on affirmative action				
	(17) Jacobs, 'Integration, Diversity and Affirmative Action' Reading (18)		Reading Matrices 19 & 20	Group A blog entry 5
Week 12: *Political equality				
	(19) Mansbridge, 'Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women?' (20) Dovi, 'Preferable Descriptive Representatives: Will Just Any Woman, Black, or Latino Do?'		Reading Matrices 21& 22	Group B blog entry 5
Week 13: *Equality in the family				
	(21) Okin, 'Family: Gender and Justice' (22) Arneson, 'Feminism and Family Justice'	· Essay feedback instructions	Reading Matrices 23 & 24 Essay feedback	Essay Draft (Friday, 5pm)
Week 14: *Gender and global inequality				
	(23) Miller, 'Distributing Responsibilities' Reading (24) + Two student essays		Reading Matrices 25 & 26 Revise essay	Essay Feedback (due in class)
Week 15: What responsibilities, if any, do we have to address global inequality?				
	(25) Singer, 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality' (26) Pogge, 'Assisting the Global Poor'	· Return 'What is equality?' reflection from Week 1		Final Essay (Friday, 5pm)
Week 16: Revisiting 'what is equality?'				
		· Concept map – class themes, essays, blog entries		Equality Portfolio (Friday, 5pm)

*All blog entries are due by 10am the day of class. This gives your fellow students and me a chance to read them before class and to incorporate these ideas into class discussion.