Politics and Political Life – Difficult Choices
College of St. Benedict / St. John’s University
POLS 211

Spring semester, 1-3-5 cycle, 1:00 – 2:40pm
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Office hours: 1-3-5 cycle, 9:30-10:30 and by appointment
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Course description:

This course is designed to introduce students to perennial issues and challenges in political life and to do so in a way that engenders critical engagement and personal reflection. “Politics” is not confined to the voting booth or the floor of the Senate; we encounter political issues all the time in our daily lives – whenever we must confront issues of power and justice. Thus, to talk about “political life” is to talk about life – to consider the ways that political issues saturate our lives and the ways in which we interact with our government, with each other, and with those beyond our borders.

The theme of this section of Politics and Political Life is difficult choices. Throughout our lives, we will find ourselves in difficult situations and we will have to make tough choices – choices that require the courage of our convictions, the ability to weigh competing values and allocate scarce resources, and a willingness to put ourselves in others’ shoes. We will explore themes including civil disobedience, justice, ethics, racism, sexism, and war. What does it take to stand up for one’s beliefs? To fight injustice? What do we owe one another every day and in times of crisis? Each of these questions is political – they require us to examine power dynamics and consider issues of justice. At the end of the semester, each of you will write a political autobiography in which you explore the development of your own political beliefs and identity.
Learning objectives:

• To inquire into some of the most important issues and challenges of political life
• To recognize the ubiquity of issues of power and justice in our lives, and to learn how to evaluate competing claims about power and justice
• To engage in a collaborative discussion about these issues with your colleagues
• To become more prepared to address difficult choices in our own lives
• To explore the development of our own political views and identities
• To become more thoughtful and serious readers and writers

Assignments:

Four essays (45%)

2/1 the individual and the state 15%
2/25 righting wrongs 15%
3/14 sex and power 15%
4/7 tough choices: position paper 5%

Political autobiography of 10-15 pages (25%)

4/29 first draft 5%
5/9 final draft 20%

Participation (30%)

Your participation grade will be based upon many factors: attendance, preparation for class (doing ALL the readings for EVERY class), and participation in discussion. I will sometimes assign short writing exercises that you will need to bring to class as preparation for the discussion. You will each be responsible for leading class discussions at least once during the semester.

The following books are for sale in the SJU Bookstore:

Sophocles, Antigone
Gurney, Another Antigone
Coetzee, Waiting for the Barbarians
Weisenthal, The Sunflower

Nafisi, Reading Lolita in Tehran
Cruse, Stuck Rubber Baby
McCarthy, The Road
O’Brien, The Things They Carried

Other readings will be distributed to you electronically

PLEASE NOTE that this syllabus is always subject to change – if I need to update the syllabus in any way I will give you adequate advance notice. Please WAIT to buy the O’Brien and McCarthy books until spring break, so we are certain we will have time to read them.
Part I. The individual and the state: speaking truth to power

Mon. 1/14 Introduction
Wed. 1/16 Sophocles, Antigone
Fri. 1/18 Gurney, Another Antigone

Tues. 1/22 Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience”
Thurs. 1/24 Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet” and King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail”

Mon. 1/28 Havel, “The Power of the Powerless”
Wed. 1/30 Orwell, selected essays
Fri. 2/1 PAPER DUE: Speaking truth to power

Part II. Righting wrongs: transformation and forgiveness

Tues. 2/5 Coetzee, Waiting for the Barbarians
Thurs. 2/7 Coetzee, Waiting for the Barbarians

Mon. 2/11 Weisenthal, The Sunflower
Wed. 2/13 Weisenthal, The Sunflower
Fri. 2/15 Weisenthal, The Sunflower

Tues. 2/19 Film: American History X

Mon. 2/25 PAPER DUE: transformation and forgiveness

Part III. Sex and power

Fri. 2/29 Nafisi, Reading Lolita in Tehran

Thurs. 3/6 Cruse, Stuck Rubber Baby

Mon. 3/10 Cruse, Stuck Rubber Baby
Wed. 3/12 Film: Kiss of the Spiderwoman
Fri. 3/14 PAPER DUE: Sex and power
Part IV.  Tough choices: studies in ethics
Wed. 3/26   Workshop: Political Autobiography
PAPER DUE: Sex and power (15% of final grade)
Fri. 3/28   Alford, “Whistle-Blower Narratives: The experience of choiceless choice”

Tues. 4/1   Brock, “Health Care Resource Prioritization and Rationing: Why Is It So Difficult?”
Kipnis, “Forced Abandonment and Euthanasia: A Question from Katrina”
Thurs. 4/3   Moore, “Deciding Humanitarian Intervention”

Part V.  State of war
Mon. 4/7   Levinson, “Slavery and the Phenomenology of Torture”
PAPER DUE: Tough choices position paper (5% of final grade)

Wed. 4/9   O’Brien, The Things They Carried
Fri. 4/11   O’Brien, The Things They Carried

Tues. 4/15  O’Brien, The Things They Carried
Thurs. 4/17  McCarthy, The Road

Mon. 4/21  McCarthy, The Road
Thurs. 4/24  McCarthy, The Road

Part VI.  You
Mon. 4/28  Twenge, The Me Generation: “You Don’t Need Their Approval: The Decline Of Social Rules”
Draft of Political Autobiography due (5% of final grade)


Fri. 5/2   Twenge, The Me Generation: “Yeah, Right, The Belief That There’s No Point in Trying”

Fri. 5/9   FINAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY DUE (20% of final grade)