

AMERICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT

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READINGS AND MATERIALS

Keith E. Whittington

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BRIEF CONTENTS

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF VOLUME *xvii*
TABLES, FIGURES, AND ILLUSTRATIONS *xxiii*
PREFACE *xxv*

CHAPTER 1 **Introduction to American Political Thought** 1

CHAPTER 2 **The Colonial Era, Before 1776** 13

CHAPTER 3 **The Founding Era, 1776–1791** 81

CHAPTER 4 **The Early National Era, 1791–1828** 159

CHAPTER 5 **The Jacksonian Era, 1829–1860** 231

CHAPTER 6 **Secession, Civil War, and Reconstruction,
1861–1876** 309

CHAPTER 7 **The Gilded Age, 1877–1900** 363

CHAPTER 8 **The Progressive Era, 1901–1932** 425

CHAPTER 9 **The New Deal Era, 1933–1950** 499

CHAPTER 10 *Civil Rights and the Great Society, 1951–1980* 563

CHAPTER 11 *Recent Politics, 1981–Present* 635

SOURCES 00

INDEX 00

CONTENTS

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF VOLUME *xvii*

TABLES, FIGURES, AND ILLUSTRATIONS *xxiii*

PREFACE *xxv*

CHAPTER 1 **Introduction to American Political Thought** 1

CHAPTER 2 **The Colonial Era, Before 1776** 13

I. **Introduction** 13

II. **Democracy and Liberty** 19

Roger Williams, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution* (1644) 21

John Cotton, *An Exposition upon the 13th Chapter of the Revelations*
(1645) 24

John Winthrop, *Little Speech on Liberty* (1645) 26

John Wise, *A Vindication of the Government of New England Churches*
(1717) 28

Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (1776) 33

III. **Citizenship and Community** 39

Mayflower Compact (1620) 40

Jonathan Mayhew, *A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission
and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers* (1750) 41

William Livingston, *Of Party Divisions* (1753) 47

IV. **Equality and Status** 49

William Henry Drayton, *Letters of Freeman* (1769) 50

Slaves' Petition to the Massachusetts Governor (1774) 52

	Jonathan Boucher, <i>On Civil Liberty, Passive Obedience, and Non-Resistance</i> (1775)	54
V.	Political Economy	57
	John Winthrop, <i>A Modell of Christian Charity</i> (1630)	58
	Cotton Mather, <i>A Christian at his Calling</i> (1701)	62
	Benjamin Franklin, <i>The Way to Wealth</i> (1758)	64
VI.	America and the World	66
	Joseph Doddridge, <i>Notes on the Settlement and Indian Wars</i> (1824)	68
	John Dickinson, <i>Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania</i> (1768)	70
	Daniel Leonard, <i>Massachusettsensis</i> (1775)	74
	Thomas Jefferson, <i>Declaration of Independence</i> (1776)	77
CHAPTER 3	The Founding Era, 1776–1791	81
I.	Introduction	81
II.	Democracy and Liberty	85
	John Adams, <i>Thoughts on Government</i> (1776)	87
	Carter Braxton, <i>An Address to the Convention of the Colony</i> (1776)	90
	Thomas Jefferson, <i>An Act for Establishing Religious Freedom</i> (1777)	92
	Alexander Hamilton, <i>Federalist Papers</i> (1787)	94
	James Madison, <i>Federalist Papers</i> (1787)	100
	<i>Brutus Essays</i> (1787)	111
	<i>Letter from the Federal Farmer</i> (1787)	119
	Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, <i>Correspondence on a Bill of Rights</i> (1787–1789)	123
III.	Citizenship and Community	126
	J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, <i>Letters from an American Farmer</i> (1782)	127
	John Jay, <i>Federalist Papers</i> (1787)	129
IV.	Equality and Status	131
	Abigail Adams and John Adams, <i>Correspondence on Women's Rights</i> (1776)	132
	Thomas Jefferson, <i>Notes on the State of Virginia</i> (1787)	134
	Benjamin Banneker and Thomas Jefferson, <i>Correspondence on Slavery</i> (1791)	138
V.	Political Economy	141
	James Madison, <i>Vices of the Political System of the United States</i> (1787)	142
	Thomas Jefferson, <i>Notes on the State of Virginia</i> (1787)	146

	VI. America and the World	148
	Corn Tassel (Onitositah), <i>Reply to the American Commissioners</i> (1777)	149
	Alexander Hamilton, <i>Letter to James Duane</i> (1780)	151
	George Washington, <i>Circular Letter to the State Governors</i> (1783)	154
CHAPTER 4	The Early National Era, 1791–1828	159
	I. Introduction	159
	II. Democracy and Liberty	163
	Thomas Jefferson, <i>Kentucky Resolutions</i> (1798)	165
	Fisher Ames, <i>The Mire of Democracy</i> (1805)	168
	Thomas Jefferson, <i>Letter to a Committee of the Danbury Baptists</i> (1802)	170
	John Marshall, <i>Marbury v. Madison</i> (1803)	171
	Lyman Beecher, <i>Practicality of Suppressing Vice</i> (1803)	174
	Thomas Jefferson, <i>Letter to Samuel Kercheval</i> (1816)	176
	James Kent and David Buel, Jr., <i>Debate at New York Constitutional Convention</i> (1821)	178
	III. Citizenship and Community	182
	George Washington, <i>Farewell Address</i> (1796)	183
	Thomas Jefferson, <i>First Inaugural Address</i> (1801)	186
	Thomas Jefferson, <i>Letter to John Adams</i> (1813)	188
	John Marshall, <i>McCulloch v. Maryland</i> (1819)	191
	IV. Equality and Status	197
	Judith Sargent Murray, <i>The Necessity of Subordination</i> (1798)	199
	<i>Memorial of the Free People of Color to the Citizens of Baltimore</i> (1826)	201
	V. Political Economy	204
	Alexander Hamilton, <i>First Report on Public Credit</i> (1790)	206
	Alexander Hamilton, <i>Report on Manufactures</i> (1791)	210
	John Taylor, <i>Tyranny Unmasked</i> (1822)	217
	VI. America and the World	220
	George Washington, <i>Farewell Address</i> (1796)	221
	Thomas Jefferson, <i>Letter to William Henry Harrison</i> (1803)	223
	John Quincy Adams, <i>Speech on Independence Day</i> (1821)	225
	James Monroe, <i>Seventh Annual Message</i> (1823)	227

CHAPTER 5	The Jacksonian Era, 1829-1860	231
	I. Introduction	231
	II. Democracy and Liberty	235
	George Bancroft, <i>The Office of the People in Art, Government, and Religion</i> (1835)	236
	Henry David Thoreau, <i>Civil Disobedience</i> (1849)	238
	John C. Calhoun, <i>A Disquisition on Government</i> (1850)	243
	Theodore Parker, <i>Law of God and the Statutes of Men</i> (1854)	250
	III. Citizenship and Community	252
	Samuel F. B. Morse, <i>Imminent Dangers to the Free Institutions of the United States</i> (1835)	254
	Ralph Waldo Emerson, <i>Politics</i> (1844)	257
	George H. Colton, <i>Responsibility of the Ballot Box</i> (1846)	262
	IV. Equality and Status	265
	William Lloyd Garrison, <i>Declaration of Principles for The Liberator</i> (1831)	266
	Elizabeth Cady Stanton, <i>Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments</i> (1848)	269
	Sojourner Truth, <i>Ain't I a Woman</i> (1851)	271
	Frederick Douglass, <i>What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?</i> (1852)	272
	George Fitzhugh, <i>Cannibals All!, or, Slaves Without Masters</i> (1857)	276
	James Hammond, <i>Speech to the Senate on Slavery</i> (1858)	279
	Abraham Lincoln, <i>Speech at New Haven</i> (1860)	282
	V. Political Economy	284
	Andrew Jackson, <i>Veto of the Bank Bill</i> (1832)	285
	Henry Clay, <i>Speech on the American System</i> (1832)	288
	William Leggett, <i>True Functions of Government</i> (1834)	291
	Orestes Brownson, <i>The Laboring Classes</i> (1840)	293
	VI. America and the World	296
	Andrew Jackson, <i>Speech on Indian Removal</i> (1830)	298
	<i>Memorial of the Cherokee Nation</i> (1830)	301
	John L. O'Sullivan, <i>Manifest Destiny</i> (1839)	304
CHAPTER 6	Secession, Civil War, and Reconstruction, 1861-1876	309
	I. Introduction	309
	II. Democracy and Liberty	312
	Abraham Lincoln, <i>First Inaugural Address</i> (1861)	314
	Thaddeus Stevens, <i>Speech on the Reconstruction Acts</i> (1867)	318

III.	Citizenship and Community	321
	Jefferson Davis, <i>Farewell to the Senate</i> (1860)	322
	Abraham Lincoln, <i>Second Inaugural Address</i> (1865)	325
	Lysander Spooner, <i>No Treason</i> (1867)	327
IV.	Equality and Status	330
	Charles Sumner, <i>The Barbarism of Slavery</i> (1860)	331
	Alexander H. Stephens, <i>Cornerstone Address</i> (1861)	334
	Abraham Lincoln, <i>Gettysburg Address</i> (1863)	337
	<i>Reconstruction Amendments to the U.S. Constitution</i>	338
	Frederick Douglass, <i>Oration in Memory of</i> <i>Abraham Lincoln</i> (1876)	340
	Susan B. Anthony, <i>Is It a Crime for a Citizen of the United States</i> <i>to Vote?</i> (1873)	343
V.	Political Economy	347
	Abraham Lincoln, <i>First Annual Message</i> (1861)	348
	Russell H. Conwell, <i>Acres of Diamonds</i> (1870)	350
VI.	America and the World	352
	Abraham Lincoln, <i>Fourth of July Message to Congress</i> (1861)	353
	Abraham Lincoln, <i>Letter to James C. Conkling</i> (1863)	357
	Chief Spotted Tail, <i>Speech to the Sioux Commissioners</i> (1876)	359
CHAPTER 7	The Gilded Age, 1877–1900	363
I.	Introduction	363
II.	Democracy and Liberty	366
	Francis Parkman, <i>The Failure of Universal Suffrage</i> (1878)	368
	Stephen J. Field, <i>The Centenary of the Supreme Court of the</i> <i>United States</i> (1890)	370
	James B. Weaver, <i>A Call to Action</i> (1892)	372
III.	Citizenship and Community	374
	Henry W. Grady, <i>The New South</i> (1886)	375
	Frederick Jackson Turner, <i>The Significance of the Frontier in American</i> <i>History</i> (1893)	379
	Henry Cabot Lodge, <i>Speech to the Senate on Literacy Tests</i> (1896)	382
	Grover Cleveland, <i>Literacy Test Veto</i> (1897)	384
IV.	Equality and Status	386
	Thomas E. Watson, <i>The Negro Question in the South</i> (1892)	387
	Booker T. Washington, <i>Atlanta Exposition Address</i> (1895)	390
	Helen Kendrick Johnson, <i>Woman and the Republic</i> (1897)	393
	Charlotte Perkins Gilman, <i>Women and Economics</i> (1898)	395

	V. Political Economy	398
	William Graham Sumner, <i>What Social Classes Owe to Each Other</i> (1883)	399
	Andrew Carnegie, <i>The Gospel of Wealth</i> (1889)	405
	Henry D. Lloyd, <i>Wealth against Commonwealth</i> (1894)	408
	Thorstein Veblen, <i>The Theory of the Leisure Class</i> (1899)	411
	VI. America and the World	413
	Josiah Strong, <i>Our Country</i> (1885)	414
	William Graham Sumner, <i>The Conquest of the United States by Spain</i> (1899)	417
	Elihu Root, <i>Speech at Canton, Ohio</i> (1900)	420
CHAPTER 8	The Progressive Era, 1901–1932	425
	I. Introduction	425
	II. Democracy and Liberty	429
	Theodore Roosevelt, <i>The New Nationalism</i> (1910)	432
	Woodrow Wilson, <i>The New Freedom</i> (1913)	436
	John Dewey, <i>The Public and its Problems</i> (1927)	440
	III. Citizenship and Community	446
	Louis D. Brandeis, <i>True Americanism</i> (1915)	448
	Randolph S. Bourne, <i>Trans-National America</i> (1916)	450
	IV. Equality and Status	453
	Edgar Gardner Murphy, <i>The White Man and the Negro at the South</i> (1900)	454
	W. E. B. Du Bois, <i>The Souls of Black Folk</i> (1903)	456
	Jane Addams, <i>If Men Were Seeking the Franchise</i> (1913)	462
	V. Political Economy	465
	Eugene V. Debs, <i>Unionism and Socialism</i> (1904)	466
	Emma Goldman, <i>Anarchism</i> (1907)	470
	Herbert Croly, <i>The Promise of American Life</i> (1909)	474
	Herbert Hoover, <i>American Individualism</i> (1922)	481
	VI. America and the World	484
	Theodore Roosevelt, <i>Social Values and National Existence</i> (1915)	485
	Woodrow Wilson, <i>Address to the Senate on the Terms of Peace</i> (1917)	487
	Randolph S. Bourne, <i>The State</i> (1918)	491
	William E. Borah, <i>On the Need for Naval Disarmament</i> (1919)	494

CHAPTER 9	The New Deal Era, 1933–1950	499
	I. Introduction	499
	II. Democracy and Liberty	502
	Herbert Hoover, <i>Rugged Individualism Speech</i> (1928)	505
	Franklin D. Roosevelt, <i>Commonwealth Club Address</i> (1932)	508
	Albert Jay Nock, <i>Life, Liberty, and . . .</i> (1935)	513
	Franklin D. Roosevelt, <i>Fireside Chat on the Reorganization of the Federal Judiciary</i> (1937)	515
	III. Citizenship and Community	519
	John Dewey, <i>Liberalism and Social Action</i> (1935)	520
	Thurman Arnold, <i>The Symbols of Government</i> (1935)	523
	IV. Equality and Status	526
	James Weldon Johnson, <i>Negro Americans, What Now?</i> (1934)	528
	Ralph J. Bunche, <i>A Critical Analysis of the Tactics and Programs of Minority Groups</i> (1935)	531
	A. Philip Randolph, <i>March on Washington Keynote Address</i> (1942)	533
	V. Political Economy	535
	Rexford G. Tugwell, <i>The Principle of Planning and the Institution of Laissez Faire</i> (1932)	536
	Adolf A. Berle, Jr., <i>A High Road for Business</i> (1933)	539
	Huey P. Long, <i>Every Man a King</i> (1934)	541
	Earl Browder, <i>What is Communism?</i> (1936)	544
	VI. America and the World	546
	George F. Kennan, <i>The Sources of Soviet Conduct</i> (1947)	547
	Harry S. Truman, <i>Address before a Joint Session of Congress</i> (1947)	551
	Reinhold Niebuhr, <i>The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness</i> (1949)	554
	Robert A. Taft, <i>A Foreign Policy for Americans</i> (1951)	558
CHAPTER 10	Civil Rights and the Great Society, 1951–1980	563
	I. Introduction	563
	II. Democracy and Liberty	567
	Milton Friedman, <i>Capitalism and Freedom</i> (1962)	569
	Barry Goldwater, <i>Acceptance Speech for the Republican Nomination for President</i> (1964)	571
	Herbert Marcuse, <i>An Essay on Liberation</i> (1969)	575
	John Rawls, <i>A Theory of Justice</i> (1971)	579
	III. Citizenship and Community	583
	Young Americans for Freedom, <i>The Sharon Statement</i> (1960)	584

Students for a Democratic Society, *The Port Huron Statement* (1962) 585

Lyndon B. Johnson, *Remarks at the University of Michigan* (1964) 590

Ralph Nader, *We Need a New Kind of Patriotism* (1971) 593

IV. Equality and Status 595

Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from a Birmingham City Jail* (1963) 597

Martin Luther King, Jr., *I Have a Dream Speech* (1963) 602

Malcolm X, *The Ballot or the Bullet* (1964) 605

Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) 610

Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (1969) 613

V. Political Economy 616

John Kenneth Galbraith, *American Capitalism* (1952) 618

George J. Stigler, *The Theory of Economic Regulation* (1971) 620

VI. America and the World 622

Hans J. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest* (1952) 624

James Burnham, *Containment or Liberation?* (1953) 627

J. William Fulbright, *The Arrogance of Power* (1966) 630

CHAPTER 11 Recent Politics, 1981–Present 635

I. Introduction 635

II. Democracy and Liberty 638

Ronald Reagan, *First Inaugural Address* (1981) 640

Richard Rorty, *The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy* (1990) 643

Richard A. Epstein, *Skepticism and Freedom* (2003) 646

David Graeber, *Direct Action, Anarchism, Direct Democracy* (2009) 648

III. Citizenship and Community 651

Richard John Neuhaus, *What the Fundamentalists Want* (1985) 653

Michael Walzer, *What Does It Mean to be an 'American'?* (1990) 656

Irving Kristol, *The Neoconservative Persuasion* (2003) 660

Wendell Berry, *Citizenship Papers* (2003) 662

IV. Equality and Status 665

Thomas Sowell, *Civil Rights: Rhetoric or Reality?* (1984) 666

Thurgood Marshall, *Bicentennial Speech* (1987) 668

Cornel West, *Race Matters* (1994) 671

Barack Obama, *Eulogy at the Funeral Service in Honor of Reverend Clementa Pinckney* (2015) 673

V. Political Economy 677Richard A. Posner, *The Economics of Justice* (1981) 678National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*
(1986) 680Bill Clinton, *Remarks to the International Business Community*
(1994) 682Michael Albert, *Beyond Class Rule is Parecon* (2012) 684**VI. America and the World** 686Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, *Dictatorships and Double Standards* (1979) 687Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations?* (1993) 690Noam Chomsky, *Understanding Power* (2002) 693

SOURCES 00

INDEX 00

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF VOLUME

1. Democracy and Liberty

- Roger Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution* (1644)
John Cotton, *An Exposition upon the 13th Chapter of the Revelations* (1645)
John Winthrop, *Little Speech on Liberty* (1645)
John Wise, *A Vindication of the Government of New England Churches* (1717)
Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (1776)
John Adams, "Thoughts on Government" (1776)
Carter Braxton, *An Address to the Convention of the Colony* (1776)
Thomas Jefferson, *An Act Establishing Religious Freedom* (1777)
Alexander Hamilton, *Federalist Papers* (1787)
James Madison, *Federalist Papers* (1787)
Brutus Essays (1787)
Letter from the Federal Farmer (1787)
Correspondence of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison (1787)
Thomas Jefferson, *Kentucky Resolutions* (1798)
Fisher Ames, "The Mire of Democracy" (1805)
Thomas Jefferson, *Letter to a Committee of the Danbury Baptists* (1802)
John Marshall, *Marbury v. Madison* (1803)
Lyman Beecher, *Practicality of Suppressing Vice* (1803)
Thomas Jefferson, *Letter to Samuel Kercheval* (1816)
James Kent and David Buel, Jr., *Debate at New York Constitutional Convention* (1821)
George Bancroft, "Office of the People in Art, Government, and Religion" (1835)
Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience" (1849)
John C. Calhoun, *A Disquisition on Government* (1850)
Theodore Parker, "Law of God and the Statutes of Men" (1854)

Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address (1861)
 Thaddeus Stevens, Speech on the Reconstruction Acts (1867)
 Francis Parkman, "The Failure of Universal Suffrage" (1878)
 Stephen J. Field, "The Centenary of the Supreme Court of the United States" (1890)
 James B. Weaver, *A Call to Action* (1892)
 Theodore Roosevelt, *The New Nationalism* (1910)
 Woodrow Wilson, *The New Freedom* (1913)
 John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* (1927)
 Herbert Hoover, "Rugged Individualism" Speech (1928)
 Franklin D. Roosevelt, Commonwealth Club Address (1932)
 Albert Jay Nock, "Life, Liberty, and . . ." (1935)
 Franklin D. Roosevelt, Fireside Chat on the Reorganization of the Federal Judiciary (1937)
 Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962)
 Barry Goldwater, Acceptance Speech for the Republican Nomination for President (1964)
 Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (1969)
 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (1971)
 Ronald Reagan, First Inaugural Address (1981)
 Richard Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy" (1990)
 Richard A. Epstein, *Skepticism and Freedom* (2003)
 David Graeber, "Direct Action, Anarchism, Direct Democracy" (2009)

2. **Citizenship and Community**

Mayflower Compact (1620)
 Jonathan Mayhew, *A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers* (1750)
 William Livingston, "Of Party Divisions" (1753)
 Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, "Letters from an American Farmer" (1782)
 John Jay, *Federalist Papers* (1787)
 George Washington, "Farewell Address" (1796)
 Thomas Jefferson, "First Inaugural Address" (1801)
 Thomas Jefferson, Letter to John Adams (1813)
 John Marshall, *McCulloch v. Maryland* (1819)
 Samuel F. B. Morse, *Imminent Dangers to the Free Institutions of the United States* (1835)
 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Politics" (1844)
 George Colton, "Responsibility of the Ballot Box" (1846)
 Jefferson Davis, Farewell to the Senate (1860)
 Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address (1865)
 Lysander Spooner, *No Treason* (1867)
 Henry W. Grady, "The New South" (1886)
 Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893)
 Henry Cabot Lodge, Speech to the Senate on Literacy Tests (1896)

Grover Cleveland, Literacy Test Veto (1897)
 Louis D. Brandeis, "True Americanism" (1915)
 Randolph S. Bourne, "Trans-National America" (1916)
 John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action* (1935)
 Thurman Arnold, *The Symbols of Government* (1935)
 Young Americans for Freedom, The Sharon Statement (1960)
 Students for a Democratic Society, The Port Huron Statement (1962)
 Lyndon B. Johnson, Remarks at the University of Michigan (1964)
 Ralph Nader, "We Need a New Kind of Patriotism" (1971)
 Richard John Neuhaus, "What the Fundamentalists Want" (1985)
 Michael Walzer, "What Does It Mean to be an 'American'?" (1990)
 Irving Kristol, "The Neoconservative Persuasion" (2003)
 Wendell Berry, *Citizenship Papers* (2003)

3. Equality and Status

William Henry Drayton, *Letters of Freeman* (1769)
 Slaves' Petition to the Massachusetts Governor (1774)
 Jonathan Boucher, On Civil Liberty, Passive Obedience, and Non-Resistance (1775)
 Correspondence of Abigail Adams and John Adams (1776)
 Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787)
 Correspondence of Benjamin Banneker and Thomas Jefferson (1791)
 Judith Sargent Murray, "The Necessity of Subordination" (1798)
 Memorial of the Free People of Color to the Citizens of Baltimore (1826)
 William Lloyd Garrison, Declaration of Principles for the *Liberator* (1831)
 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions" (1848)
 Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I a Woman" (1851)
 Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" (1852)
 George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All!, or, Slaves Without Masters* (1857)
 James Hammond, Speech to the Senate on Slavery (1858)
 Abraham Lincoln, Speech at New Haven (1860)
 Charles Sumner, The Barbarism of Slavery (1860)
 Alexander H. Stephens, Cornerstone Address (1861)
 Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address (1863)
 Reconstruction Amendments to the U.S. Constitution
 Frederick Douglass, "Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln" (1876)
 Susan B. Anthony, "Is It a Crime for a Citizen of the United States to Vote?" (1873)
 Thomas E. Watson, "The Negro Question in the South" (1892)
 Booker T. Washington, Atlanta Exposition Address (1895)
 Helen Kendrick Johnson, *Woman and the Republic* (1897)
 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics* (1898)
 Edgar Gardner Murphy, *The White Man and the Negro at the South* (1900)

W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)
 Jane Addams, "If Men Were Seeking the Franchise" (1913)
 James Weldon Johnson, *Negro Americans, What Now?* (1934)
 Ralph J. Bunche, "A Critical Analysis of the Tactics and Programs of Minority Groups" (1935)
 A. Philip Randolph, March on Washington Keynote Address (1942)
 Martin Luther King, Jr., Letter from a Birmingham City Jail (1963)
 Martin Luther King, Jr., I Have a Dream Speech (1963)
 Malcolm X, The Ballot or the Bullet (1964)
 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)
 Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (1969)
 Thomas Sowell, *Civil Rights: Rhetoric or Reality?* (1984)
 Thurgood Marshall, Bicentennial Speech (1987)
 Cornel West, *Race Matters* (1994)
 Barack Obama, Eulogy at the Funeral Service in Honor of Reverend Clementa Pinckney (2015)

4. Political Economy

John Winthrop, *A Modell of Christian Charity* (1630)
 Cotton Mather, *A Christian at his Calling* (1701)
 Benjamin Franklin, "The Way to Wealth" (1758)
 James Madison, "Vices of the Political System of the United States" (1787)
 Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787)
 Alexander Hamilton, First Report on Public Credit (1790)
 Alexander Hamilton, Report on Manufactures (1791)
 John Taylor, *Tyranny Unmasked* (1821)
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TABLES, FIGURES, AND ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 2-1 Timeline of the Colonial Era

Figure 3-1 Timeline of the Founding Era

Box 3-1 The Two James Madisons

Figure 4-1 Timeline of the Early National Era

Figure 4-2 Percentage of States with Property Qualifications on Voting

Figure 5-1 Timeline of the Jacksonian Era

Figure 6-1 Timeline of Secession, Civil War, and Reconstruction

Figure 7-1 Timeline of the Gilded Age

Figure 7-2 Percentage of Population in Urban Areas

Figure 8-1 Timeline of the Progressive Era

Figure 8-2 Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections

Figure 8-3 Foreign Born as Percentage of Population

Figure 8-4 Percent of States by Region Allowing Women to Vote at Time of Nineteenth Amendment

Figure 9-1 Timeline of the New Deal Era

Figure 9-2 Federal Revenue and Expenditures as Percentage of GDP

Figure 10-1 Timeline of Civil Rights and the Great Society

Figure 10-2 Military Personnel as Percentage of Population and Military Expenditures as Percentage of GDP

Figure 11-1 Timeline of Recent Politics

Figure 11-2 Trust in Government Index, 1964–2008

Figure 11-3 Share of Total Income and Total Wealth by Top 1% of Wealth Holders, 1913–2012

PREFACE

This textbook takes a new approach to the study of American political thought. The target audience consists of professors, students, and readers interested in researching, teaching, and learning about the intellectual history and the history of political thought in the United States. The work focuses on those questions of politics and society of concern to all Americans and provides readers with the materials necessary for thinking intelligently about these issues. The book provides an introduction to the ideas that have affected, shaped, and transformed American politics and an appreciation of the controversies and disputes that have mobilized Americans since the first European settlements in North America.

American political thought sits at the intersection of political theory and American politics. With that in mind, this text highlights four important features of this material:

- The *full range of American political thought*
- The *interaction of American political thought and politics*
- The *struggle over American values*
- The central role of *history and historical development*

The teaching of American political thought has traditionally served a variety of purposes. It provides an entry point for studying American political history broadly. The debates that make up the central sources of American political thought trace the history of American politics and policymaking. Key political and policy innovations and significant challenges to American success have been accompanied by new thinking about what values are most central to American politics and how they should be applied, extended, or modified to help chart the path ahead.

American political thought provides an angle for better understanding American society and politics. The history of American political thought is the record of the struggle to define the fundamental principles that should guide political decision making. Contemporary politics rests on an inheritance of political traditions and values that have been built up (and sometimes torn down) across generations. American political thought

exposes the choices that have been made over time and the rationales that underwrite political action.

The study of American political thought is the study of a particular kind of intellectual history. American political thought focuses on the ideas associated with different stages of society and politics, the contesting ideologies that motivate, legitimate, and guide political action. Unlike some other primary documents associated with historical study, the materials of American political thought do not simply show what happened and how people lived. They show how people have thought about the world in which they lived and how they sought to explain it, rationalize it, or change it.

An appreciation for American political thought complements the study of political theory as such. American political thought is concerned with ideas in action. It engages with the fundamental questions of political life, but it does so within immediate contexts and with foreseeable consequences. Participants in the American political tradition have sought to extrapolate basic commitments and lessons from the American political experience but have then made use of those lessons to advocate concrete action within the political realm. The study of American political thought serves as a bridge between the discussion of abstract principles and value systems and the examination of how politics works in practice.

FULL RANGE OF AMERICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT

This text covers the full range of American political thought. Many texts artificially truncate the subject, either by restricting the range of voices that have contributed to public debates in American history or by narrowing the scope of the subject matter to a few particular themes. This text takes an expansive approach to the subject matter, exposing readers to the full spectrum of political debate and challenging them to think about all the key issues that have informed and been informed by enduring American political values.

The text takes a comprehensive approach to understanding American political thought. The thinkers, writers, and speakers represented in these pages include scholars, intellectuals, politicians, judges, journalists, ministers, and political activists of all stripes. The debate over political values has not taken place in the seminar room, but neither has it been restricted to the loftiest seats of political power. The key consideration for inclusion is whether the speaker or writer was insightful, reflected significant political sentiments and concerns, and was influential in public debates. In those debates, presidents and senators rub elbows with labor organizers and escaped slaves. This text seeks to capture American political thought in all its richness, giving due consideration to those who spoke from the pulpit or the lectern, for the marginalized and for the privileged, on behalf of an America that had been inherited and of an America that was being imagined.

As part of the effort to broaden the scope of what is traditionally considered within the rubric of American political thought, the text also expands the field of issues under consideration. Each chapter is divided into five parts: democracy and liberty, citizenship and community, equality and status, political economy, and America and the world. These are overlapping categories, and even within a single speech or pamphlet a thinker may range

over and connect several of these issues. Nonetheless, these divisions usefully capture some recurring debates within American political thought. Debates over democracy and liberty have revolved around such questions as how political authority is grounded, what popular government implies, how liberty can best be preserved, and what rights should be recognized. Debates over citizenship and community ask what it means to be an American, why and how the American political community is tied together, what are the bonds that hold the community together, and what are the privileges and duties of a citizen. Debates over equality and status consider what one of the axiomatic principles of the United States—that all men are created equal—might mean, what are the tensions between equality and liberty, how status and privilege can be reconciled with republican community, and on what terms different races, ethnicities, classes, and sexes work together in a common political and social space. Debates over political economy investigate the relationship between the material world and the political, between public policy and the public welfare, between labor and capital and the basic ordering of the social and economic world. Debates over America and the world try to identify how the United States can and should position itself on the international stage and what American foreign policy says about the values and identity of the United States, and how American values should shape American behavior abroad.

Such themes are broad, but they are regularly played out in particular contexts, motivated by specific public problems and concerned with distinct policies. These readings are chosen because the writer is able to rise above the details of a particular policy debate and illuminate broader concerns. These particular debates are an occasion for thinking about enduring features of American politics and recurrent aspirations, ideals, and concerns. They are of interest not because we seek to replay the legislative debates surrounding the construction of the Maysville Road or the occupation and governance of the Philippines, but because those debates open for inspection conflicting ideas about basic American commitments.

INTERACTION OF AMERICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT AND POLITICS

A central theme of the study of American political thought is that political action and political ideas are intertwined. *American Political Thought* presents readers with materials for evaluating the extent to which politics influences ideas and vice versa. Every historical chapter begins with an introduction that outlines the political, social, and intellectual circumstances of the period. These introductions provide an understanding of the most important political coalitions of that period, their platforms, major political personalities, the most important policy disputes, the social conditions and cleavages, and predominant social and political ideas. This information enables students to determine for themselves whether American political values are timeless or time-bound, whether the expression of political ideas operates on a separate track from the pursuit of political interests, or whether ideas and interests work in concert.

American political thought can be viewed primarily from the perspective of political philosophy, with American theorists contributing to timeless and universal debates over

the deep foundations and eternal questions of political life. This book provides the resources for approaching American political thought in this way. The readings include substantial excerpts from the most profound political thinkers in American history—the *Federalist Papers* on constitutionalism, Thoreau on political resistance, Calhoun on majoritarianism, Lincoln on nationalism and equality, Dewey on democracy—and background discussion of the international philosophical debates within which they participated. The excerpts included in this volume address timeless themes and eternal questions of political life, and these thinkers can readily be put in dialogue with each other and with debates and concerns of today.

But the American contribution to the long tradition of Western political philosophy is limited. American political writers have been more practical and concrete in their concerns than theoretical and abstract. Over time, the United States has produced more statesmen and lawyers than political philosophers. Understanding what motivated these writers, how they intervened in political events, and what they sought to accomplish requires some appreciation for their surroundings, the problems they faced, the intellectual and political resources they possessed, and the conversations in which they were involved. These materials reveal the *political* in American political thought and the connections between public policy, political action, and political thought. They reveal the political ideals that inspired and puzzled political entrepreneurs.

STRUGGLE OVER AMERICAN VALUES

American political history is replete with disagreements over American political identity and ideals. *American Political Thought* details the struggle over American values and national ideals. The materials in the book demonstrate the range of arguments, actors, and political movements that have roiled the American political landscape. The book canvasses a diverse set of writers and political actors who have contributed to the American political conversation. The book illuminates the extent to which disputes within American political thought have been resolved, while also indicating the extent to which debates over ideas and practice have evolved across time and reemerged over time.

These materials help illuminate a specifically American political tradition. They illustrate the values and concerns that have moved generations of Americans in politics. They show how Americans have struggled with the fundamental questions of governance and political life. The answers they have offered have not always been persuasive, but they have influenced how American political institutions and political culture have developed and provide insights into the kinds of problems they have tried to solve.

This volume can also help dispel easy assumptions that Americans have always agreed about the political fundamentals and have primarily fought over resources rather than ideas. Although there has been substantial agreement over many basic issues—the divine right of kings has gained little traction in the United States—these areas of agreement can obscure substantial areas of disagreement. While Americans have almost universally endorsed popular government, for example, there have been heated disagreements over what popular government requires. Participants in those debates have approached these questions from a

wide range of perspectives—religious and secular, liberal and conservative, egalitarian and inegalitarian. This volume gives space to those disparate voices, avoiding the crackpot and outlandish but including the diverse array of figures who have wielded some influence over public opinion and political movements over the course of American history.

HISTORY AND HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Contemporary American political thought is the product of numerous arguments and decisions made by historical actors working within the political, legal, and intellectual constraints of their political eras. *American Political Thought* is organized historically so as to better reveal the nature of those constraints and how they have evolved over time. The historical organization highlights the connections between different types of disputes and arguments, as well as the terms of debate between opposing parties. The thematic organization within chapters helps tie together arguments across time and shows how conversations evolve over time and build on what has come before.

The historical institutionalist turn within the study of American political thought, and American politics more broadly, has focused our attention on the ways in which ideas and actions are connected and the extent to which American politics is characterized by critical junctures and path dependencies that help structure political thinking at any given moment. This book is sensitive to these historical intersections, revealing the distinctive quality of contemporary political ideas and developing an appreciation for alternative conceptions of the political future.

The volume divides the history of American political thought into several distinct chapters organized by time period. The chapters encompass the colonial period (before 1776), the founding (1776–1791), the early republic (1792–1828), the Jacksonian Era (1829–1860), the Civil War and Reconstruction period (1861–1876), the Gilded Age (1877–1900), the Progressive Era (1901–1932), the New Deal (1933–1950), the civil rights era (1951–1980), and recent politics (1981–present). The separation of these periods is certainly not hard and fast, but they serve to break American history into more digestible portions and highlight the intertwined debates that are distinctive to different historical eras. The historical approach highlights the fact that Elizabeth Cady Stanton was in dialogue with Frederick Douglass and Horace Greeley rather than Gloria Steinem, and Herbert Croly was in conversation with William Graham Sumner and Theodore Roosevelt rather than Milton Friedman. Later writers have had much to learn from earlier ones, but they also worked within their own intellectual and cultural milieu and responded to their own distinctive political problems and constraints.

PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Most readers in American political thought have been not much more than anthologies, providing little of the additional content that is now common for texts designed for classroom use and offering minimal guidance for a student being tossed into an unknown sea. While emphasizing the excerpted text from the primary sources, this book tries to offer

some additional context. The text presents a consistent pedagogical framework across the chapters:

- An opening chapter introduces the study of American political thought and highlights some general themes and vocabulary that make a frequent appearance in the literature.
- Each substantive chapter is divided into a consistent set of topical sections.
- Each chapter begins with a brief introduction to the political, social, and intellectual context of the period. Sections within each chapter summarize major themes, with a bulleted list of major developments for ease of reference.
- All readings are prefaced with explanatory headnotes, which contextualize the reading, indicate its importance, and provide questions for consideration as the student reads the material.
- Period illustrations help provide further context for the materials.
- Timelines throughout the volume summarize major events in the period and place source materials relative to those events.
- All chapters end with guidance for primary readings for further study and suggested readings in the secondary literature.

For ease of use, the readings in the text are modernized (except where the writer was intentionally archaic in his or her language). Footnotes appearing in the excerpts are from the original source, unless otherwise indicated. The sources from which the readings are drawn are consolidated in a section at the end of the book.

SUPPLEMENTS

We live in a time in which a wider range of once-difficult-to-find source materials in American political thought are now more readily available to students and researchers. Nonetheless, even amidst this plenty, some important works are hard to find. More fundamentally, confronted with such a vast sea of information, even experts can easily become lost. The value of a text of this sort is that it can bring together the familiar and the less familiar, separate the wheat from the chaff, reduce long texts to their core components, and provide necessary contextualization to help readers make sense of what is before them.

I have made every effort to produce a one-volume text that is flexible enough to support a range of teaching approaches and emphases while compact enough to be easily useable. Nonetheless, these pages only sample the richness of the many contributions to American political thought—a sample that I hope will be illuminating, thought-provoking, and captivating. I have made many more readings, similarly edited and introduced, available on a supplemental website. For those who want to read more deeply or to find a particular item that could not be included in the text, I hope that those materials will open the door to the wide range of contributions to American political thought. The website also includes useful tools for both instructors and students, including sample syllabi and self-study quizzes.

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I would not have embarked on this project without the inspiration provided by many valued teachers and students, some perhaps more distant than others. My eyes were first opened to American political thought by a second-hand copy of Alpheus Mason's pioneering *Free Government in the Making*,¹ and I hope this volume does justice to the tradition that he did so much to initiate. Happily, I found further encouragement in the field as an undergraduate studying with J. Budziszewski at the University of Texas and managed to wander into a graduate program at Yale that was filled with lively discussions at the intersections of political theory and American political history and a supportive community for American political thought. Perhaps less obviously, I am grateful to Howard Gillman and Mark Graber, who have not only been invaluable in their writing and conversations on American constitutional history but who also suffered with me through the process of learning how to produce a book of this sort. Without the experience with *American Constitutionalism*,² I am not sure that I would have attempted this book. My editor at Oxford University Press, Jennifer Carpenter, with the able assistance of Matt Rohal, was suitably encouraging in starting this project and appropriately stern in bringing it to more-or-less timely completion.

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1 Alpheus Thomas Mason, *Free Government in the Making: Readings in American Political Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949).

2 Howard Gillman, Mark A. Graber, and Keith E. Whittington, *American Constitutionalism*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

