# Civic Thought 101

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*October 5, 2024*

Is governing ourselves worth the trouble? Should we try to wrap our minds around our country's complex problems, its checkered history, and its creaky political machinery? Should we strive to negotiate with people who seem to see *everything* differently? Why bother, given that every effort at self-government eventually seems to dissolve into civil war or despotism? It is tempting to abandon the effort to live in civic community—and simply force our own preferred outcomes through, turn things over to a strong ruler, or give up and go with the inevitable drift of history.

Such doubts and frustrations about civic life are nothing new. As the first theorist of civic life, Aristotle, remarked in 350 BC: "to live together and be partners in any human matter is difficult." Living together is hard in part because it requires acting in common with those with whom we disagree about what is "good and bad and just and unjust."

What makes civic life difficult, however, also makes it valuable. The need to act together with others who see things differently causes us to see aspects of goodness and justice we would otherwise miss. Civic argument and effort can summon forth immense creative energies that drive history and beget unprecedented improvements in our common life.

This course investigates the human capacity for *living civically*—constituting communities of citizens who share power and responsibility for common action. It will introduce you to ways the human potential to think and act as a citizen has been realized in different historical forms. Because citizenship is always exercised in a particular context, we will pay special attention to our own context—the history and practice of the American self-government, with its distinctive shortcomings and accomplishments. And because civic life is always developing in response to new challenges and opportunities, this course aims to cultivate the civic habits of thought that will help you better play your own, unprecedented role in this distinctively human undertaking.

## Weeks 1-2: What does it mean to think civically?

The fundamental question of civic life is "what should we do?" Asking this question well requires that we cultivate distinctive civic habits of mind: (1) an ethic of responsibility, (2) a capacity for considering the civic community as a *whole*, (3) the ability to "read the situation" and imagine the consequences of action, both intended and unintended, and (4) the deliberative and persuasive habits of speech that make common action possible. These habits of thought constitute *forms of knowledge* distinct from the *scientific knowledge* to which many forms of university study aspire. This section of the course will explore the fundamental task of civic life and the *mode of thought* citizens need to cultivate to engage it in well.

**Readings:**

- Peter Levine, *What Should We Do? A Theory of Civic Life*
- Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Education"

- Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," and "Science as a Vocation"
- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI, and *Rhetoric*, Book I
- Jennifer Frey, "On Practical Wisdom in Statecraft"

The next four sections of this course will consider different forms of civic life in turn, and the kinds of civic virtues and vices each cultivates in and demands of its citizens. In each section, we will study these forms of civic life and citizenship by reading primary texts, and then try to better understand the experience of citizenship of that time and place by one or more of the following assignments:

- Writing a paper, organized around a question of your own choosing, aimed to help you understand better the particular kind of civic action and civic virtues distinctive to that historical period
- Practicing the arts of civic speech, deliberation and persuasion, in a manner appropriate to the historical period under study;
- Practicing the use of written forms of civic engagement and decision-making appropriate to the period under study, such as the judicial decision, the newspaper op-ed, the petition, etc.;
- Simulating some aspect of collective-decision making in a classroom setting.

Weeks 3-5: The *Polis*

This section will consider the origin and character of what many scholars hold to be the first political community, the Ancient Greek *polis*. How did the Greeks themselves understand their distinctive form of human community? How did they think it compared other human communities, such as the tribe and the empire? What can we learn from the Greek experience about the nature of civic life?

**Readings**:

- Aristotle, *The Politics* and *The Constitution of Athens*, selections
- Herodotus, *The History*, selections
- Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, selections
- Plutarch, *Life of Solon*

Weeks 6-7: The Roman Republic

The Roman Republic was in some ways akin to the Greek *polis*, but proved far more expansive, inclusive, and enduring. What did the Romans learn from the Greek *polis*, and how did they seek to improve upon it? Why were the Romans empire-builders, and how did they handle the opportunities and challenges to self-governance brought on by their imperial activities? How did the Romans understand citizenship, and institutionalize the roles of common citizens, senatorial elites, and powerful individual leaders? How did the Romans educate for citizenship, and how did they understand the art of civic oratory they perfected?

**Readings:**

- Polybius, *The Histories,* selections
- Livy, *History of Rome*, selections
- Cicero, *On the Orator*, selections

Weeks 8-9: The Modern Republic

How does the development of a centralized, modern nation-state change the experience of civic life, particularly in England? How has monarchical power been combined with republican forms of government? Why were forms of parliamentary representation developed, and how did they change the perspective and experience of citizens? How do modern, commercial republics compare to ancient military republics?

**Readings:**

- Thomas Hobbes, *De Cive*, selections
- John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*
- Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws,* selections
- Benjamin Constant, "The Liberty of the Ancients and the Liberty of the Moderns Compared"

Weeks 10-13: The American Republic

How do America's political institutions seek to organize the energies of civic life? In what does the American republic draw on, and differ from, other models of civic life, both ancient and modern? What have been the greatest divisions of American political life, and how have we sought to overcome them? What are the distinctive possibilities and demands of American citizenship?

**Readings:**

- Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, selections
- Mayflower Compact
- Declaration of Independence

- Constitution of the United States
- *Federalist Papers*, Selections
- Susan B. Anthony, 1872 Speech on Women's Right to Vote
- Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?," "Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln"
- Abraham Lincoln, "Address at Cooper Union," "Gettysburg Address," "Second Inaugural Address"
- Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, selections
- Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" and "I Have Seen the Promised Land"
- Presidential addresses; congressional speeches; judicial decisions

Week 14: Contemporary Challenges to Civic Life

This week will consider one challenge to our civic life that we face today—for example, the manner in which civic deliberation has been affected by the decline of local newspapers and the rise of social media; the alignment of conservative and progressive opinions with political parties and with educational attainment; the role that the expert knowledge required to administrate a complex state should play in the formation of prudential decisions about collective courses of action.

Final assignment: Identify one contemporary challenge to civic life, and, drawing on what you learned about modes of civic engagement from your historical studies, suggest one or more plausible adjustments to policy, institutional arrangement, or custom that would help to revitalize an important dimension of civic practice. Reason through the steps it would require to make one of these adjustments a reality, and the several possible consequences of its introduction.