

INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN DEMOCRACY AND CITIZENSHIP

RICHARD HAASS

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES

This course is designed to foster/provide:

- 1. an understanding of the fundamental tenets of democracy;**
- 2. an appreciation of the particular characteristics as well as the strengths and weaknesses of American democracy;**
- 3. a grounding in the basic documents, texts, speeches, writings, and ideas that inform American democracy;**
- 4. an introduction to the rights and obligations central to American citizenship;**
- 5. an opportunity for discussion of good citizenship not just in the political space but in the academic environment in which students find themselves;**
- 6. exposure to some of the critical issues at the heart of contemporary domestic and foreign policy debates; and**
- 7. reinforcement of many of the basics of a classical, liberal arts education, including critical thinking, writing and oral expression, civil discourse, and the ability to work alone and in teams.**

The course is divided into two parts. The first part is an introduction to American democracy. It can be understood as a basic civics education. The syllabus also explores some of the challenges facing American democracy. A good deal of material is covered, and the amount of classroom time could easily be expanded to fill the available time. The second part emphasizes the obligations of citizenship. Again, the time allocated to this topic can easily be expanded.

CIVICS SYLLABUS

The course as presented runs on the order of forty-two hours and is structured as fourteen, three-hour sessions once weekly over a traditional semester. It could, of course, be structured to meet twice a week for 75–90 minutes each time. The material presented here in individual sessions would simply be taught over multiple sessions.

One potential activity, “Beyond the Classroom” (described in session 13), needs to be mentioned to students at the outset (session 1) if it is to be included as it requires the students making arrangements for a nonclassroom, practical experience centered on a particular obligation. There would need to be a process by which students would propose their experience to the teacher/professor for approval. The experience would be carried out in parallel to the course and would be the subject of an essay and class presentation toward the end of the course.

A course could also be packaged for fewer sessions. A 12–14 hour, one-credit course, for example, would require substantially reducing the number of simulations, perhaps only keeping the first (“Simulated Constitutional Convention”) and last (“Simulated Student Senate/Campus Bill of Obligations”). Assuming each simulation would require two sessions, the other 8–10 sessions could be evenly divided between those devoted to covering the material on American democracy and those on obligations.

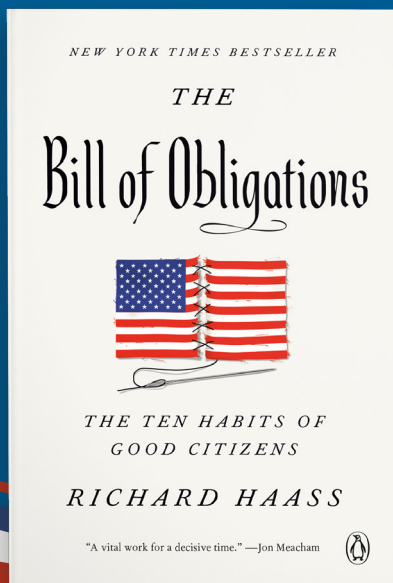
Yet another possibility would be a concentrated, one week, first-year experience or orientation program of the sort held on many campuses. This could be accomplished by devoting 1–2 days to American democracy, 1–2 days to citizenship/obligations, and one day to a discussion of obligations of students to one another and the school.

The course is intended for students in college as well as the eleventh and twelfth grades, but can be adapted to fit the knowledge students bring to the classroom, the capacity of the students to handle work outside the classroom, and the time available for the course.

Suggested assignments take several forms. Questions provided in this syllabus can be the basis for classroom discussion, the subject of short written assignments, or preferably both. Written assignments should be kept relatively short, say 500–750 words. Also provided are a number of simulations, likely to require an entire three-hour session or several shorter sessions. All are meant to provide opportunities for students to gain a better understanding of institutions and processes, to strengthen skills, and to learn about relevant issues. Performance can be assessed and graded.

TEXTS/REQUIRED READING

The principal book is Richard Haass, *The Bill of Obligations: The Ten Habits of Good Citizens* (Penguin Press, 2023; available in hardcover, paperback, audio, and ebook editions). Students will also need to read selected documents, speeches, etc., all of which are available for free online, as well as selected parts of *The Federalist Papers*. Students can get a physical copy, although it, too, can be found online. No other textbook is assigned in part for reasons of cost and time constraints, in part because of the large number of required or recommended shorter readings and videos. That said, if an additional text is desired, consider one of the following: Akhil Reed Amar, *The Words That Made Us: America's Constitutional Conversation 1760–1840*; Jill Lepore, *We the People: A History of the U.S. Constitution*; and/or Gordon S. Wood, *Power and Liberty: Constitutionalism in the American Revolution*.



Session 1: Course Overview and Introduction to Democracy

This first session is centered around the importance of the topic and allows the teacher/professor to summarize the layout of the course and explain what is expected of students (including the out-of-classroom project) and how they will be assessed. This session also provides a useful opportunity to discuss guidelines for the use of artificial intelligence (AI). It also provides an opportunity to hold an initial conversation about democracy.

RESOURCES:

- Richard Haass, *The Bill of Obligations* (Penguin Press, 2023), obligation IX.
- “Introduction to Democracy and Its Variations,” virtual lecture, posted November 26, 2017, Khan Academy, khanacademy.org/humanities/us-government-and-civics/us-gov-foundations/us-gov-types-of-democracy/v/introduction-to-democracy-and-its-broad-variations.

QUESTIONS:

- What makes a democracy a democracy?
- What do all democracies have in common? How do they differ?
- What distinguishes democracy from other forms of government/systems?

Be prepared to discuss the following: Winston Churchill famously remarked that democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.

Session 2: American Democracy

An introduction to the essential elements of the signature features of American democracy, including republicanism, limited government, divided government, checks and balances, federalism, and individual rights.

RESOURCES:

- Declaration of Independence.
- Articles of Confederation.
- The Constitution (articles I–III).
- *The Federalist Papers* (numbers 10 and 51).
- “Democratic Ideals in the Declaration of Independence,” virtual lecture, posted November 23, 2017, Khan Academy, [khanacademy.org/humanities/us-government-and-civics/us-gov-foundations/us-gov-ideals-of-democracy/v/democratic-ideals-in-the-declaration-of-independence](https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-government-and-civics/us-gov-foundations/us-gov-ideals-of-democracy/v/democratic-ideals-in-the-declaration-of-independence).
- “The Preamble to the Constitution,” virtual lecture, posted February 2, 2018, Khan Academy, [khanacademy.org/humanities/us-government-and-civics/us-gov-foundations/us-gov-ideals-of-democracy/v/preamble](https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-government-and-civics/us-gov-foundations/us-gov-ideals-of-democracy/v/preamble).

QUESTIONS:

- What is significant about the Declaration of Independence?
- What are three principal characteristics of the Articles of Confederation?
- What is the case for a republican form of government?
- How is the U.S. government limited?
- What checks and balances can be found in the U.S. government?
- Why are checks and balances significant?
- What is the relationship between the states and the federal government?
- What is the relationship between citizens and the federal government?

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT/DISCUSSION TOPIC:

Why did the Articles of Confederation fail and the Constitution succeed?

Session 3: The Structure and Processes of American Democracy

The powers and structure of the three branches of the federal government; how people in those branches come to hold their positions; and the interaction among the branches, including judicial review, vetoes, electoral college, etc.

RESOURCES:

- The Constitution (articles I–III).
- *The Federalist Papers* (number 47).
- “The US Constitution,” virtual lecture, posted July 3, 2017, Khan Academy, [khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/road-to-revolution/creating-a-nation/v/the-us-constitution](https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/road-to-revolution/creating-a-nation/v/the-us-constitution).
- “Walk through of the Constitution | Constitution 101,” virtual lecture, posted August 30, 2022, Khan Academy, [khanacademy.org/humanities/constitution-101/x7a03a96a83aa80ff:civil-dialogue-the-constitution-and-constitutional-interpretation/x7a03a96a83aa80ff:the-constitution/v/walkthrough-of-the-constitution-constitution-101](https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/constitution-101/x7a03a96a83aa80ff:civil-dialogue-the-constitution-and-constitutional-interpretation/x7a03a96a83aa80ff:the-constitution/v/walkthrough-of-the-constitution-constitution-101).
- “Separation of Powers | Constitution 101,” virtual lecture, posted August 30, 2022, National Constitution Center, YouTube, youtu.be/6bF3JsrV_yM.
- “Marbury v. Madison,” virtual lecture, posted April 10, 2018, Khan Academy, [khanacademy.org/humanities/us-government-and-civics/us-gov-the-national-constitution-center/us-gov-landmark-supreme-court-cases/v/marbury-v-madison](https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-government-and-civics/us-gov-the-national-constitution-center/us-gov-landmark-supreme-court-cases/v/marbury-v-madison).

QUESTIONS:

- What are the powers of Congress? The executive branch? The Supreme Court?
- How is each branch of government structured?
- How are people in each branch of government chosen?

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT/DISCUSSION TOPIC:

Presidential historian Richard Neustadt remarked that “The Constitutional Convention of 1787 is supposed to have created a government of ‘separated powers.’ It did nothing of the sort. Rather, it created a government of separated institutions sharing powers.” Discuss.

Session 4: Challenges to American Democracy

American democracy as it reaches its 250th birthday is clearly facing multiple challenges. The country is increasingly divided. Many Americans are not politically involved and do not vote. Polls show many Americans are uninformed about their

political system and current issues. The country (i.e., the federal government) appears unable to successfully contend with many other challenges. This session is meant to expose students to this situation and initiate a conversation about remedies, which will be developed in the simulation of a new constitutional convention and in the sessions on obligations.

RESOURCES:

- V-Dem Institute, *Case for Democracy: Report*, v-dem.net/documents/34/C4DReport_230421.pdf.
- Jack Goldsmith, “We Have to Deal with Presidential Power,” *The New York Times*, May 5, 2025, nytimes.com/2025/05/05/opinion/trump-obama-biden-presidency.html.
- “Runaway Presidencies,” interview by Bob Bauer, posted May 5, 2025, Executive Functions, execfunctions.org/p/runaway-presidencies.
- Michael Wines, “A Democracy with Everything but a Choice.” *The New York Times*, September 4, 2024, nytimes.com/2024/09/04/us/missouri-uncontested-races-elections.html.
- Aaron Zitner, “America Is Fracturing Into Red and Blue Nations, Redistricting Fight Shows,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 8, 2025, wsj.com/politics/us-gerrymandering-political-divide-a2a83a28?st=ji5zcD&reflink=article_email_share.
- “The Supreme Court Gives a Free Pass to Trump and Future Presidents,” Opinion, *The New York Times*, July 1, 2024, nytimes.com/2024/07/01/opinion/supreme-court-presidential-immunity-trump.html.

QUESTIONS:

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of American democracy?
- Should American democracy be blamed for growing inequality?
- Why do you think the country is more divided?
- Why is it so hard to get things done?

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT/DISCUSSION TOPIC: (choose one of the three)

- Explain and justify a change that could be made to American democracy (other than a constitutional amendment) that in your view would have a beneficial impact (e.g., open primaries, ranked choice voting, founding a strong centrist party, requiring that any redistricting be carried out under the authority of public commissions, requiring proof of citizenship to vote).

- Choose a historical moment or era (for example the Civil War, the Great Depression, Watergate, the Civil Rights Movement, or another) when American democracy came under pressure. Explain why and how democracy survived and the lessons learned for today.
- To what degree and how does AI constitute a challenge to American democracy, and how should that challenge be met?

Session 5: Simulated Constitutional Convention

Each student would be a delegate to a new constitutional convention (or if the class is large, students would be members of small teams). Each student/team would prepare a proposed amendment to the Constitution to be introduced and advocated for. Each student would also have to be prepared to join the debates on the amendments put forward by others. Consistent with article V of the Constitution, all delegates would vote after each debate on whether the proposed amendment would be adopted.

RESOURCES:

- Article V and amendments XI–XXVII of the Constitution.
- Richard Haass, *The Bill of Obligations* (Penguin Press, 2023), 17–35.

Session 6: Simulated Congressional Hearing

Students are assigned the role of either senators/representatives on a committee panel or of witnesses appearing before it. The range of potential topics is unlimited, but one to consider is whether to provide a support payment (universal basic income) to every American. Preparing for and participating in such a hearing would require students to learn about the likely effects of AI and other productivity enhancements on hiring, demographic projections, the impact of payments on the national debt, political issues surrounding payments, and so on. Witnesses would need to prepare an opening statement reflecting their understanding of the challenge and their recommended policy approach as well as answer questions; those

students portraying members of Congress would prepare short opening statements and questions as well as be prepared to challenge witnesses on their statements and answers to questions.

RESOURCES:

- Hearings in the U.S. Senate: A Guide for Preparation and Procedure (2010), everycrsreport.com/reports/RL30548.html.
- Other resources dependent on topic of congressional hearing.

Session 7: Simulated Domestic Policy Council (DPC) Meeting

The DPC is the body inside the executive branch that formulates and coordinates domestic policy. (This distinguishes it from bodies assigned responsibility for either economic policy or foreign policy.) The DPC is headed by the assistant to the president for domestic policy (AP/DP). Students would be assigned roles as the staff of the AP/DP or as representatives of other agencies (e.g., Departments of State, Treasury, Justice, Commerce, Labor, Housing and Urban Development, Homeland Security; the Office of Management and Budget [OMB]). The number of agencies can be adjusted to the number of students. Either a student or the teacher would play the role of the AP/DP. The purpose of the meeting is to examine a particular issue and make a recommendation to the president, one that reflects either consensus and/or differences. Again, there is an unlimited number of potential issues, but one to consider would be comprehensive immigration reform. The students playing the staff of the AP/DP could prepare the discussion paper providing background and options, and others would come to the meeting prepared to discuss the pros/cons of various approaches.

RESOURCES:

- Exec. Order No. 12859, 58 Fed. Reg. 44101 (August 19, 1993), archives.gov/files/federal-register/executive-orders/pdf/12859.pdf.
- Other resources dependent on topic of council meeting.

Alternative Session 7: Simulated National Security Council (NSC) Meeting

The NSC is the executive branch body that formulates and coordinates matters of foreign policy and national security policy more broadly. It is headed by the assistant to the president for national security affairs (APNSA), often known as the national security advisor (NSA). Students would be assigned roles either as staff to the APNSA or representatives of other agencies (e.g., the Departments of State, Defense, Justice, and Treasury; the CIA; the OMB). The teacher or a student could be the APNSA. A real-world issue involving the possible use of military force might be especially valuable (e.g., possible U.S. responses to a Chinese attack on/blockade of Taiwan, a Russian attack on a NATO country, an Iranian attack on Saudi Arabia). Those on the staff of the APNSA would prepare a discussion paper with background and policy options. The CIA would prepare an intelligence brief. Others would be ready to weigh in from either a general perspective or that of the particular agency they were representing.

RESOURCES:

- “Explainer: The U.S. National Security Council (NSC),” Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, published April 7, 2025, belfercenter.org/research-analysis/explainer-us-national-security-council-nsc.
- Other resources dependent on topic of council meeting.

Session 8: Simulated Press Conference

The students would be divided into two groups. One group would consist of a student portraying an official or, at most, two students as two officials holding a press conference; the other group would consist of students portraying journalists. The officials would need to give an opening statement and be prepared to answer questions. Those playing journalists would have to prepare questions and be ready to ask follow-ups. One or more subjects would be set beforehand so all could prepare.

RESOURCES:

- “The Role of the Media in American Politics,” Bridgewater State University, published July 26, 2024, bridgew.edu/stories/2024/role-media-american-politics.
- Other resources dependent on topic of conference.

Session 9: The Case for Obligations: Valuing Norms, Promoting the Common Good, and Putting the Country First

RESOURCES:

- Richard Haass, *The Bill of Obligations* (Penguin Press, 2023), 3–16; obligation VI, VII, and X.
- “A Citizen’s Guide to Preserving Democracy,” online documentary, posted January 2, 2024, PBS, pbs.org/video/a-citizens-guide-to-preserving-democracy-hcrswk. This is a 52-minute documentary that tracks *The Bill of Obligations*.

QUESTIONS:

- What are the potential vulnerabilities of a democracy solely built on rights?
- How are the rights of the majority and minorities protected?
- What is the role of obligations in sustaining a healthy democracy?
- What is a norm? What is the difference between a norm and a law?
- Why are norms valuable in a democracy?
- What is the common good?
- Who gets to decide what is the common good?
- Why should we in a society care about others?
- What does the phrase “loyal opposition” mean?
- How can one be both loyal and in opposition?
- Why is prioritizing national interests over individual or partisan agendas an essential obligation in a functioning democracy?

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT/DISCUSSION TOPIC:

“Rugged individualism is not sufficient to constitute a democracy; democracy also is fraternity and cooperation for the common good. . . . When union is stressed to the exclusion of freedom we fall into totalitarianism; but when freedom is stressed exclusively we fall into chaos.” Discuss.

Session 10: Being Informed

RESOURCES:

- Richard Haass, *The Bill of Obligations* (Penguin Press, 2023), obligation I.
- Thomas B. Edsall, “The Rise of the Smartphone and the Fall of Western Democracy,” Opinion, *The New York Times*, October 14, 2025.

QUESTIONS:

- Why is it important for a democracy that its citizens be informed?
- What does it mean to be informed?
- Where does one go and what do they do to become and remain informed?
- What should one avoid?

Session 11: Getting Involved/Public Service

RESOURCES:

- Richard Haass, *The Bill of Obligations* (Penguin Press, 2023), obligation II and VIII.
- Jonathan Alter, “How National Service Can De-Polarize America,” *Washington Monthly*, October 16, 2025.

QUESTIONS:

- Why bother to get involved?
- What are the ways in which citizens can get involved?
- Should voting be mandatory as it is in Australia?

- Should public service be mandatory?
- How can we cultivate respect for individuals in government service?
- How does public service contribute to a stronger democracy?

Session 12: Civility, Compromise, and Avoiding Political Violence

RESOURCES:

- Richard Haass, *The Bill of Obligations* (Penguin Press, 2023), obligation III–V.
- “Remain Civil: From Political Opposites to Friends—How the Civility Project Was Born | A Citizen’s Guide to Preserving Democracy,” educational video, PBS, ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/remain-civil-political-opposites-to-friends-video/a-citizens-guide-to-preserving-democracy.
- Spencer Cox, “Disagree Better,” educational video, posted July 14, 2023, National Governors Association, governor.utah.gov/disagree-better-2.
- “How-To Guide,” Disagree Better, accessed February 17, 2026, disagreebetter.us/how-to.
- “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom’ Martin Luther King, Jr., May 4, 1966 (abridged),” Teaching Literacy Through History, gilderlehrman.org/sites/default/files/inline-pdf/mlk_nonviolence_abridged.pdf.

QUESTIONS:

- What is civility?
- Why is civility important?
- When is it right to compromise and when to stand firm?
- What are the advantages of agreements reached through compromise? The drawbacks?
- Why is violence a risk to a democracy?
- Is violence ever justified?
- What are the alternatives to political violence?
- Where does the right of free speech end and inciting violence begin?

Session 13: Beyond the Classroom

Each student is to undertake a project during the semester outside the classroom that puts to use one or more obligation. It can take place in school, in the community, or in the larger world (e.g., in some nongovernmental organization [NGO], media organization, political operation). This session will provide an opportunity in the classroom for students to discuss what they have been doing and lessons learned, as well as to answer any questions. Each student could be tasked with submitting an essay to this effect.

Session 14: Simulated Student Senate/Campus Bill of Obligations

The class will be constituted as a student senate to consider obligations that ought to shape campus life. Each student or team will be expected to advocate for a new obligation (be it to fellow students, faculty, the school, or the community) and to debate those put forward by other students. Students will be asked to vote on whether the particular obligation ought to be adopted and forwarded to the administration.

RESOURCES:

- Student/School Code of Conduct.

