

Mission Statement: American Political Thought, Organized Division

The American Political Thought Section aims to organize and energize the scholarly literature relating to the political theory, broadly construed, of the American political experience. Intrinsically connected to the new journal *American Political Thought*, this division would be centered partially on the study of classic texts within American politics such as the Declaration of Independence, the Federalist Papers, the writings and speeches of Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Herbert Croly, to name just a few. The Division would also integrate the study of great American literature such as the works of Mark Twain, Herman Melville, Harriet Beecher Stowe, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Don DeLillo, Maya Angelou, Harper Lee, Marilynne Robinson, and Tom Wolfe. The Division will seek to produce scholarship that is both theoretical and rooted in the actual American political experience, both today and historically. Although a singular focus on classic American texts would be welcome, the Division will also seek work that investigates, summarizes, and classifies some of the unifying (or fragmenting) ideas in American politics. The Division will also sponsor awards for things such as the best dissertation, the best conference paper, and the best paper in the journal. It will seek to provide support and guidance for both graduate students in the field and recent PhDs. Because the field of American Political Thought is both theoretical and practical, it will provide unification between the otherwise relatively disparate fields of American Politics, Political Theory, Politics and Literature, and Politics and History.

There are, we think, six tasks that will animate this division because they define American Political Thought.

1. American Political Thought, like American political science, describes and analyzes the institutions of constitutional democracy in the United States. Unlike contemporary political science, however, American Political Thought also often justifies and criticizes those institutions.
2. American Political Thought is concerned with first principles and how these ground our constitutionalism and our way or ways of life. The deep justification of constitutional democracy is a task for American political thought, and it will of necessity be performed in plural ways. Insofar as it is still grounded in some form of political analysis, it is not theology or philosophy itself, but it may draw upon these in their many forms and varieties.
3. The phrase *American Political Thought* can be applied to studies of the mentality of the American people, the characteristic ideas and sentiments to which politicians appeal and in the terms of which they speak. Even principles that seem perennially American, such as liberty and equality, prove on closer inspection to shift and alter, showing sometimes a path of linear development, sometimes a cyclical pattern. Evidence of American political thought in this sense requires a broad sweep, not analysis of single texts; the terms of discourse themselves are often at issue, not specific ways of stating an argument. In this way, American Political Thought will

sometimes draw on and/or resemble the field we now call American Political Development. APT's focus on ideas should supplement and enrich APD's focus on the connection between ideas, institutions, and institutional change.

4. American Political Thought will also be concerned with the works of American literature, which often interpret and explore the implications of abstract principles through imaginative portrayal of American life in its concrete particularity. American political principles such as equality and natural rights gave rise to a subsequent national literature, with characters from Cooper's Natty Bumppo, Stowe's Uncle Tom, and Melville's Ahab to Twain's Huck Finn, Cather's Antonia, and Fitzgerald's Gatsby exemplifying the American character in ways that have political meaning and sometimes even political effect.
5. Building on the notion of a popular mind, American Political Thought concerns the invention and elaboration of the clusters of ideas that define political parties in the United States and outline the public policies they characteristically promote. Here political thought is fluid: now appealing to first principles, now providing rhetorical cover for deep difference among those who are politically allied. Not every partisan tract qualifies; consider instead what Lincoln called "public sentiment," the formation of which makes it possible for laws to be enacted and enforced.
6. American Political Thought includes reflection on the way we present our national character to the world at large in the projection of American power and influence and in the formulation of long-term foreign policy. Here again the issue is not the particular details of foreign relations, but the larger beliefs that speak, or profess to speak, for the country as a whole.
7. By investigating, organizing, and classifying these ideational components of American politics, American Political Thought will contribute significantly to the political science studying the United States. American politics has always been distinctly ideational to a degree that perhaps surpasses any other political regime. For this reason, the understanding of American politics requires that we understand the political thought that animates it.