# POSC 4811-101: The Best Constitution

Professor Darrell Dobbs
Office Hours: by appointment
Office: 421 Wm. Wehr Physics

Marquette University, Fall 2026
Class time: 12:30-1:45 pm T TH
Classroom: Wehr Physics 418

## Course Rationale

Different governments prioritize different ends. Some rank imperial hegemony above everything else; others champion economic self-sufficiency, or individual freedom, or ethnic supremacy, or religious conformity. Whether we favor the goal or not, we can agree that governments can and do overreach. When that happens, even one's fellow citizens are damaged. So, a good constitution, while empowering government to pursue its ends, must also make provision "to guard us from our guardians." Such constitutional safeguards may be *pedagogical*, by aiming to foster righteousness, servant-leadership, and worldly prudence in the political elite. Alternatively, they may be *institutional*, by relying on certain general rules of procedure, norms of social practice, and countervailing powers to mitigate conflicts of interest between elites and the people they rule. It is the purpose of this class to examine and compare the two most venerable examples of these approaches: 1) the *politeia* outlined in Plato's *Republic*; and 2) the federal constitution of 1787 as put into effect in the American democratic republic.

## Expectations

Students are expected to attend every meeting of class and to arrive on time prepared to discuss the assigned readings. Use of electronic devices during class is prohibited, except by permission of the instructor. So, physical copies of the readings will be needed. A list of required texts is posted on D2L. Grades will be based on attendance (20%) and on the written composition and oral presentation of four Text Detective Memos (80%). Plan to study about 3 hours per week outside of class in preparation for class discussions. Of course, additional time will be required to prepare the Memo assignments. Absences from class may be excused, provided a request is made via email on the day you miss prior to the start of class.

## Class Schedule

9/1, 9/3 **Introduction & Group Assignments**; **Discussion of Some Preliminary Questions**

9/8, 9.10 **I. The *Politeia* and human happiness**: *Declaration of Independence* (**A**); Aristotle *Politics* I.1, *Ethics* I.1-2 (**B**)

**II. Constitutional retrogression breeds human misery**

9/15, 9/17 **A. Timocracy declines to oligarchy, oligarchy to democracy:** *Republic* 544d-555b (**C**); 555b-562a (**D**)

9/22, 9/24 **B. Democracy declines to tyranny, the most wretched of all:** 562a-569c (**E**); 571a-580c (**F**)

**III. Degradation originates in the guardian class, so "who will guard us from our guardians?"**

**A. The Socratic safeguard: liberal education, equal opportunity & communism for the ruling class**

9/29 - 10/8 **1. Training in music & gymnastics**: 369a-383c (**A**); 386a-403c (**B**); 403c-412b (**C**); 412b-427d (**D**)

10/13, 10/15 **2. Merit rewarded regardless of sex, The communal family, Just war**: 449a-459b (**E**); 459c-471b (**F**)

10/20, 10/22 **Open Discussion; Fall Break**

10/27, 10/29 **3. Education in Mathematics:** 519c-526b (**A**); 526b-533a (**B**)

**B. The American safeguard: an extended, federal, and limited government within a civic culture**

**1. An extended compound republic mitigates the threat of factions to the common good**

11/3, 11/5 *The U.S. Constitution & Bill of Rights* (**C**); *Federalist* #10 (**D**)

11/10, 11/12 *Federalist #51* (**E**); Martin Diamond, "Ethics & Politics: The American Way" (**F**)

**2. But democracy, i.e., social equality, naturally tends to centralization and majority tyranny**

11/17, 11/19 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* pp. 3-15, 639-45, 661-76 (**A**); pp. 235-49, 403-10, 479-84 (**B**)

11/24, 11/26 **Open Discussion**; **Thanksgiving Break**

12/1, 12/3 **a. Tyranny is resisted by local self-government, civic engagement, and legal professionalism**
Tocqueville, pp.27-53 (**C**); pp.82-93, 250-64 (**D**)

12/8, 12/10 **b. Also by religion, skill at association, and the doctrine of enlightened self-interest**
Tocqueville, pp.274-88, 417-24, 517-24 (**E**); pp.485-506 (**F**)