

Democracy in the Early Republic

Professor Andrew Robertson

Spring 2025

Course Description

Spanning the period from the 1790s to the eve of the Civil War, this course traces the development, evolution, and practice of democracy in America. During this pivotal era, the possibilities of the Revolution were explored and tested. The bounds of suffrage contracted and expanded as politicians and voters learned to wield their political power. Americans continued to develop an identity distinct from their British forebears. Partisanship led to the establishment of political parties. Inchoate American print culture matured into a powerful tool able to disseminate information, and misinformation, to a nation that was growing apace. These developments shaped the American political landscape and cemented democracy as a viable system of governance.

Course Readings

1. Allen, Danielle. *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2014.
2. Holzer, Harold. *Lincoln at Cooper Union: The Speech That Made Abraham Lincoln President*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007.
3. Waldstreicher, David. *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
4. Zagari, Rosemarie. *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Course Requirements

- Contribute to nine discussion boards
- Complete five short papers (1–2 pages)
- Participate in at least three Q&As
- Complete a 15-page research paper or project of appropriate rigor

Learning Objectives

1. Define and analyze key terms, ideas, and concepts in the history of democracy,

political participation, and print culture in the United States in the era of the early republic.

2. Demonstrate an understanding of the interplay of terms, ideas, and concepts in the history of the United States during the era of the early republic.
3. Examine, appraise, and contribute to selected scholarly debates on the history of the United States in the era of the early American republic.

Class Schedule

Week One: February 6: Contours of Modern Democracy

Readings

- John Dunn, *Democracy: A History* (2006), 71–118.

Assignments

- Discussion Board One
 - First post due: Sunday, February 9
 - Second post due: Wednesday, February 12
-

Week Two: February 13: The Declaration of Independence

Readings

- The Declaration of Independence, National Archives. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Two module.](#))
- Allen, *Our Declaration*, 47–106.

Assignments

- Discussion Board Two
 - First post due: Sunday, February 16
 - Second post due: Wednesday, February 19
 - Short Paper One due: Wednesday, February 19
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
-

Week Three: February 20: Print Culture in the American Revolution

Readings

- Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, Internet Archive. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Three module.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board Three
 - First post due: Sunday, February 23
 - Second post due: Wednesday, February 26
- Final Paper/Project Question due: Wednesday, February 26
 - In roughly 1–2 pages, outline the question your final project or paper will attempt to answer. This should include a description of the paper or project you are proposing, some background information and historical context on your topic, a brief description of your research plan, and a justification for why your particular project or paper is worth pursuing.

Q&A Session One: Tuesday, February 25, at 8:00 p.m. ET

Week Four: February 27: Newspaper Politics in the 1790s

Readings

- Jeffrey Pasley, *The Tyranny of Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (2001), Chapters 1, 3–4. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board Four
 - First post due: Sunday, March 2
 - Second post due: Wednesday, March 5
 - Short Paper Two due: Wednesday, March 5
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
-

Week Five: March 6: Democracy and National Identity

Readings

- Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 1–107.

Assignments

- Discussion Board Five
 - First post due: Sunday, March 9
 - Second post due: Wednesday, March 12
- Revised Question and Proposed Bibliography due: Wednesday, March 12
 1. Revise your initial proposal to incorporate your section professor's feedback, AND
 2. Create an annotated bibliography containing at least five sources. Each of these sources should be followed by a short paragraph describing the source and what it will contribute to your final paper/project.

Q&A Session Two: Tuesday, March 11, at 8:00 p.m. ET

Week Six: March 13: A New Nation Votes

Readings

- Articles by Donald Ratcliffe, Philip Lampi of the American Antiquarian Society, Rosemarie Zagari, and Andrew Robertson in special issue of the *Journal of the Early Republic* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 219–334. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board Six
 - First post due: Sunday, March 16
 - Second post due: Wednesday, March 19
 - Short Paper Three due: Wednesday, March 19
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
-

Week Seven: March 20: Shifting Gender Borders in the Early Republic

Readings

- Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 1–81.

Assignments

- Discussion Board Seven
 - First post due: Sunday, March 23
 - Second post due: Wednesday, March 26
- Short Paper Four due: Wednesday, March 26
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.

Q&A Session Three: Tuesday, March 25, at 8:00 p.m. ET

Week Eight: March 27: The Age of the Common Man: A Revisionist Perspective

Readings

- Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 82–186.

Assignments

- Paper/Project Preview due: Wednesday, April 2
 - Paper: Turn in a rough draft of the first five pages of your final paper
 - Project: Submissions of the project preview will differ from project to project according to type. Determine an appropriate portion of your final project to turn in with your section professor.
-

Week Nine: April 3: The Rise of Sensationalism

Readings

- Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union*, 1–104.

Assignments

- Discussion Board Eight
 - First post due: Sunday, April 6
 - Second post due: Wednesday, April 9

- Short Paper Five due: Wednesday, April 9
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
-

Week Ten: April 10: Lincoln and the Transformation of American Rhetoric

Readings

- Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union*, 119–239.

Assignments

- Rough Draft due: Wednesday, April 16
 - Paper: Turn in a rough draft of the first ten pages of your final paper.
 - Project: Submissions of the project rough draft will differ from project to project according to type. Determine an appropriate portion of your final project to turn in with your section professor.

Q&A Session Four: Thursday, April 10, at 8:00 p.m. ET

Week Eleven: April 17: Radical Activism and Social Policy in the Civil War

Readings

- James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery In The United States, 1861-1865* (2012), preface and 49–144.

Assignments

- Discussion Board Nine
 - First post due: Sunday, April 20
 - Second post due: Wednesday, April 23
-

Week Twelve: April 24: The Legacy of Early American Democracy

Readings

- No readings

Assignments

- Final Project/Paper due: Wednesday, April 30

Q&A Session Five: Thursday, April 24, at 8:00 p.m. ET

Course and Program Policies

It is the responsibility of students to know, understand, and abide by course and program policies.

For a full overview of program policies, review the Gettysburg College–Gilder Lehrman Institute Student Handbook.

Course correspondence

Correspondence with faculty and administrators should be formal. Include a subject line, addressee, and closing. Put the name and number of your course in the subject line.

Plagiarism and AI

This program uses Turnitin to check for instances of plagiarism and AI. Plagiarism and papers composed fully or in part by AI will not be tolerated. This includes self-plagiarism. A student caught plagiarizing or composing papers with AI for the first time may receive a zero on the assignment. A student caught plagiarizing or composing with AI for a second time may be permanently removed from the program.

Your section professor will set the policies for use of AI for research or purposes other than composing your papers.

Late work

Assignments should be submitted no later than 11:59 p.m. Pacific Time on the due date unless otherwise specified by your section professor. If you think you will be unable to submit an assignment on time, it is your responsibility to contact your section professor to ask for an extension before the assignment's due date. Late assignments will be docked 5% if less than a week late, 10% if one week late, and an additional 10% for each subsequent week.

Grading scale

Letter Grade	Number Grade	Grade Points
A	95%–100%	4

A-	90%–94%	3.67
B+	87%–89%	3.33
B	84%–86%	3
B-	80%–83%	2.67
C+	77%–79%	2.33
C	74%–76%	2
C-	70%–73%	1.67
D+	67%–69%	1.33
D	64%–66%	1
D-	60%–63%	.67
F	0%–59%	0

Assignment Descriptions

Short Papers (25% of grade – 5% per short paper)

Students will complete five short papers. Each should be approximately 500 words long. The purpose of these papers is not to merely summarize weekly readings but to demonstrate that you have read them analytically and contextually. Students have the option of responding to a prompt created by their section professor or to one of their own design. Student-created prompts should reflect the themes discussed in course readings and be included at the beginning of the paper. If you need help getting started, you can complete one of the options listed below.

Complete a thesis identification - Select one of your assigned readings and focus on identifying the thesis as well as the evidence the authors use to support that thesis.

Complete a primary source evaluation - Evaluate a primary source from the Gilder Lehrman Collection or elsewhere. Primary sources must be relevant to that week's readings. Keep the following questions in mind:

- Who is the author of this document?
- Who was their intended audience?
- How might both author and audience impact the content of the document?
- For what reason was this document created?

Complete a book review - Focus on one of the secondary sources assigned in this course and critique it. Keep the following questions in mind:

- What is the author's argument?
- Does the author adequately support their argument?
- Are you convinced of their argument? If not, why not?
- How does this source fit into the larger discussion of its topic?

Discussion Board Posts (18% of grade – 2% per discussion board)

Students will interact in nine discussion boards in this course. Discussion boards are led by section professors, who will provide specific instructions for participation in their section. You are required to make at least one post to each discussion board and respond to **at least two other students**.

Question-and-Answer Sessions (15% of grade – 5% per reaction)

Throughout the semester the lead professor of each course will conduct five Q&As. Students **MUST** attend at least three of these sessions for each course they are taking. **In order to receive credit for attending each Q&A, you must attend the session live and complete a 1–2-paragraph Q&A Reaction within 24 hours of participation.** Note: If you cannot attend three of the five Q&As, you may receive credit by viewing archived Q&As and completing a 500-word review of topics covered for each missed Q&A. **Makeup assignments must be completed within two weeks of the missed Q&A.**

Final Project/Paper (42% of grade)

For the final assignment of each course, you will choose to complete either a research project or 15-page research paper. Research projects are a public-education tool designed for the general population, teachers, and/or students of varying ages. Sample projects include (but are not limited to) vodcasts and podcasts, documentary editing and transcription, websites, annotated readers, walking tours, or museum exhibits. Lesson plans *will not* be accepted. A 5-page paper narrative must accompany the project. Your section professor must approve research projects.

The research paper can be a traditional position paper that uses original research to prove a thesis statement or a historiography paper that critically examines how American historians have interpreted the same event differently and why shifts in historical debates may have occurred.

Both final assignment options require you to ask an open-ended historical question (something that does not have an easy yes or no answer) that you do not yet know the answer to. You will then use the research process (pulling from a variety of resources, mostly primary source documents) to explore that question and create a thesis-driven answer. Regardless of whether you choose to pursue a project or paper, finals are scaffolded throughout the semester. This method breaks up a large grade into smaller constituent grades and allows time to incorporate instructor feedback into assignments.

Scaffolded Assignments

- Final Project/Paper Proposal (2%)

In roughly 1–2 pages, you should outline the main question, topic, or purpose of your final project or paper. This should include a description of the project or paper you are proposing, some background information and historical context on your topic (answer the questions who, what, where, and when), a brief description of your research plan (this does not need to be super specific, but should outline how many weeks you plan to research, if you need to schedule research trips or if your sources are published or available digitally, and when you plan to begin writing) and a justification for why your particular project or paper is worth pursuing (what is the significance of this topic? What does it add to our historical knowledge? Are you filling a gap that other historians have overlooked such as considering race, ethnicity, or gender?).

- Revised Proposal and Annotated Bibliography (3.5%)

This assignment will give you the opportunity to incorporate the feedback you received on the first draft of your proposal. In addition to incorporating your section professor's comments, you will also submit a proposed bibliography listing five sources you plan on utilizing in your research for your final product. Each of these sources should be followed by a brief summary (3–5 sentences) of the source and what it will contribute to your research process.

- Project or Paper Preview (5%)

This will give you the opportunity to show the progress you have made on your final project or paper and get some early-stage feedback from your section professor. For a final project, determine with your section professor an appropriate portion of your final submission to turn in. For a final paper, this should be roughly the first five pages of what will ultimately be your final submission.

- Rough Draft (10.5%):

For a final project, determine with your section professor an appropriate portion of your final submission to turn in. For a final paper, this should be, at minimum, the first ten pages of what will ultimately be your final submission.

- Final Product (21%):

Final Project: Much like the final paper option, a final project is meant to prove that you have mastered the content covered by this course. We encourage you to be creative in your approach to this project, though it should be equivalent in rigor and workload to a final paper.

Final Paper: Final papers should be at least fifteen pages in length. These can take the form of research papers or historiography papers