

# Course Designs for Critical Thinking in Online Courses in Political Theory: A Comparative Analysis

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## Introduction

E-learning is now an established part of the higher education landscape. Its potential for delivering appropriate learning outcomes has been extensively examined. As Learning Management Systems (LMS) evolve and a new wave of digital natives reaches college campuses, educators around the world face an ongoing challenge to provide effective teaching methods for the 21st century college e-classroom. Critical Thinking (CT) has long been one of the primary goals of institutions of higher learning, prized by both educators (Bok 2008; Paul 1991; Resnick and Peterson 1991) and future employers (Survey of National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE] 2016).

Political scientists and political theorists also widely endorse the view that their mission is to cultivate critical thinking skills among their majors. In Moore's (2011) survey, "How (and What) Political Theorists Teach: Results of a National Survey," fully 96.3% of political theorists surveyed thought that inculcating CT skills in their courses was either "important" or "very important." This is unsurprising, since a wide range of viewpoints in political theory converge on the importance of CT.

In political science, multiple articles have outlined and evaluated strategies for promoting CT in the classroom. These include: opportunities for critical self-reflection through writing (Cavdar and Doe 2012), engaging with social science methodology (Marks 2008, Olsen and Statham 2005), group discussion (Blings and Maxey 2016, Williams and Lahman 2011), group debate (Omelicheva 2007, Oros 2006), the avoidance of political controversy (Fitzgerald and Baird 2011), and the appropriate calibration of assignment stakes (Phillips 2018).

However, relatively few of these studies focus on the online classroom and, of those that do, none explicitly address political theory. Furthermore, these articles tend not to explicitly compare different strategies against one another to establish their relative merits. We know that some things work, but not how well they work *relative* to one another. Efficiency is an important consideration when student attention is limited, particularly in an e-learning context that attracts non-traditional students, for whom work and family compete with higher education studies for their attention.

None of this would be an insuperable difficulty in a world where teaching CT in one field was much like teaching CT in another. Political theorists and political scientists wishing to teach CT in their courses could consult meta-analyses of e-learning strategies for CT such as those by Chou, Wu, and Tsai (2019), Lee, Lee, Gong, Bae, and Choi (2016), Huber and Kuncel (2016), or Niu, Behar-Horenstein, and Garvan (2013) for ideas about what works and what does not.

However, there is evidence that CT has subject-specific components (McPeck 1981; Smith 2002) and that, furthermore, moral reasoning skills differ from other kinds of reasoning skills (Mason 2007; Phillips and McMillian 2010). In other words, the literatures on CT, e-learning, and political science education are places to start, but do not offer definitive answers for political theorists seeking to inculcate critical thinking skills in the online classroom.

This paper aims to fill this gap by comparatively examining the effectiveness of several kinds of assignments and course designs across 11 online sections of a Junior-level Introduction to Political Theory course at a mid-size American public university.

One noteworthy result is that controlling for a student's background abilities, online discussions do not seem to be effective vectors for CT relative to more traditional quizzes and reading. Exams and specially designed "critical thinking exercises" also seem relatively ineffective at eliciting subsequent increases in CT. Implications for future course designs are discussed.

### **Conceptualizing and Operationalization Critical Thinking**

Though competing conceptions of critical thinking abound, most agree that critical thinking skills include the ability of individuals to construct and evaluate conclusions from available evidence and assumptions. (Williams and Worth 2001). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) analyze different conceptualizations and find the following broad regions of agreement. "Most attempts to define and measure critical thinking operationally focus on an individual's capability to do some or all of the following: identify central issues and assumptions in an argument, recognize important relationships, make correct references from the data, deduce conclusions from information or data provided, interpret whether conclusions are warranted based on given data, evaluate evidence of authority, make self-corrections, and solve problems" (156).

The presence of generic or general CT skills is usually measured through standardized tests like the California Critical Thinking Disposition Inventory (CCTST) and the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). Discipline- or domain-specific CT skills are more often measured through rubrics used to assess written materials, such as discussion posts or essays. Here the Washington State University CT rubric

(Kelly-Riley et. al. 2008) and the VALUE rubric (Pike & Drezel McConnell 2018) are some of the many rubrics used to try and assess the CT content of student work.

CT in this study was measured using a modified version of the Washington State University critical thinking rubric. Over a period of nine semesters, 415 1,000- to 1,500- word essays were assessed in a required political theory course aimed at junior political science majors at a midsize American public university. Six categories are independently assessed. The Focus score measures how well a student conceptualized the question being asked. The Interpretation score asks how fairly students interpreted their sources. The Thesis score looks at the logical consistency of the argument presented. The Objections score measures how well a student understood and responded to the arguments raised by alternative perspectives. The Evidence score examines whether appropriate sources, facts, and normative principles were marshaled in support of the thesis. Finally, the Conclusion score measures a student's capacity to assess the significance and implications of the argument made (for public policy, political theory, and so on). The main dependent variable in this study is Aggregate CT, an additive index of the six dimensions of CT just outlined. For the purposes of the study, the scores were converted to a 100 point scale for ease of interpretation.

Several checks on the reliability of the CT measures were conducted as a posttest using a random sample of 24 essays scored by three different graders. Most students also take the CCTST as a university exit exam, though no stakes are attached to it. Though they purport to measure different aspects of CT, CCTST scores and essay rubric scores are highly significantly associated. A summary of the reliability checks is available in Appendix A.

### **Stimulating Critical Thinking**

Across these 11 sections, different types of assignments were used to try and stimulate critical thinking prior to its evaluation through essays. The main types of assignments tested for their ability to produce improved CT are: guided Critical Thinking Exercises (CTEs), formal essays, online discussions (computer-mediated communication or CMC), subject-matter quizzes, and the threat of a final exam.

- **CTEs**

CTEs are case studies on normative or conceptual issues consisting in guided questions encouraging students to apply some concepts from the class or analyze a moral distinction using formal logic. CTEs are an attempt to scaffold student CT by guiding the breakdown of complex concepts into simpler component parts or by asking students to make a series of simple inferences that lead to a more complex and nuanced judgment. An example can be found in Appendix B. The idea of problem-based learning is often advanced as a successful method for stimulating CT in students. (e.g. Oja 2010) as is the idea of scaffolding assignments by guiding students from simpler questions to more complex ones (Sharma and Hannafin 2004; Brookfield 2013). In a meta-analysis, Abrami et. al (2015) found that “the exposure of students to authentic or situated problems and examples” appeared to consistently improve CT outcomes across different fields and CTEs are an attempt to put this into practice.

Only two (of 11) online semesters in the sample used CTEs. CTEs were always administered prior to the first essay (5 for one semester, 3 for the other). The decision was therefore made to create a dummy variable for semesters where CTEs were administered. Two alternatives were considered and tested: the number of CTEs a student turned in prior to their essays (which would be the same for each student, but some students might have not turned in one or more assignments and therefore not benefited from the treatment effect) and the percentage of the final grade made up by CTEs. In the end, the dummy variable was chosen, largely to avoid a multicollinearity with some of the other variables that also measure the number of assignments completed prior to an essay.

- **Formal Essays**

A second stimulus to critical thinking is the essay. Two types of essays were required in these courses. All sections had between 2 and 4 persuasive essays, which form the basis for CT scoring in this paper. In addition, all but one of the sections required at least two critical review essays (CREs), which asked students to write an essay critically assessing the strengths and weaknesses of essays written by fellow students.

Successful essays require sustained concentration and are typically worth a larger portion of the final grade than CTEs or discussions. Students therefore need to engage with higher order organizational skills and planning skills for longer writing projects. Essays are not guided activities, like CTEs nor are they interactive, like discussion boards, so there is a reason to treat them separately from other preparatory exercises. Indeed, writing has often been tabbed as a vehicle for the practice and improvement of CT skills. (e.g. Quitadamo and Kurtz 2007; Cavdar and Doe 2012; Lister 2016; Siti et.al. 2017; August and Trostle 2018)

Because formal essays and CREs usually alternated throughout the semester, measures of the two are highly correlated ( $r=.58$ ). Thus, the number of prior essays and CREs were added to form a single measure of writing practice so as to avoid the problem of disentangling their effects. Both are formal, persuasive, and critical writing assignments. Both are longer and are generally given more structured feedback than discussion posts. Both serve as an adequate proxy for a kind of writing often associated with increase in CT.

- **Discussions (CMC)**

The study of computer mediated communication (CMC) as pathway to improving CT is well-developed across many disciplines. According to a meta-analysis of 42 studies of critical thinking in the e-learning environment between 2006 to 2017, Chou, Wu, and Tsai (2018) found that 19 studied the impact of discussions on critical thinking. Most of these found positive associations between online discussion and gains in CT. In Political Science, Williams and Lahman (2011) find that “when instructors employ effective questioning and moderating skills, students can show higher levels of critical thinking in online discussion.” This focus on instructor interaction and guidance in the discussion process as key to CT promotion is also found in several other studies (e.g. Garrison and Cleveland Innes 2005).

In this study, all measured discussion is asynchronous. Some course designs (3 of the 11) had no required discussion component at all. One section had optional extra-credit discussions. Among the remaining 7 sections where discussions were required, the number of required discussion posts and responses varied widely (from 9 to 70) as did the amount of instructor involvement in the discussions (from 2 to 150 replies)<sup>1</sup>. This variation should enable us to test whether or not discussion helps, how much instructor engagement is helpful, and whether more discussion is better, relative to other exercises. As a consequence, several measures of discussion are tested (though not simultaneously because of multicollinearity issues). The number of available discussion topics was collected as was a dummy variable for discussion. The total number of instructor replies for the semester was also computed from the LMS to provide a rough measure of interactivity in the course. Instructor interaction was highly variable ranging from 0 replies per semester to 150 replies..

The literature on discussions in the e-learning environment sometimes also distinguishes between two pathways through which discussions might impact CT. Students might improve their CT either by being repeatedly challenged to post in response to questions laid out by the instructor or by repeatedly having to read and react to the viewpoints of their fellow classmates (Greenlaw and DeLoach 2007; Hamann et.al 2009). By collecting the quantity of posts a student contributed but also collecting the quantity of posts read (or at least clicked on) by each student, this paper tests which mechanism, if any, helps students develop their CT over the course of the semester.

- **Quizzes**

Subject matter quizzes might be thought to enhance subject-specific CT by increasing the quantity of subject-specific knowledge a student has to draw on in subsequent essays (see for example McPeck 1990). Regular quizzing is a way to try and increase subject-specific knowledge.

Although quizzes are not generally assumed to stimulate critical thinking, their absence (or the absence of an equivalent incentive to learn some of the basic facts about the debates in the history of political ideas) might well depress measured CT.

- **Final Exam Threat**

Final exams loom large at the end of many courses. The effects of including a final exam in a course on political theory, particularly an exam that requires remembering various arguments made by authors, explaining concepts or debates, and placing various ideas or debates in their proper historical and intellectual context are in principle ambiguous.

Exams can distort a student's learning by making them focus on retaining facts or arguments from the course materials rather than trying to think through the material for themselves. On the other hand, the threat of a final exam might also improve subject matter knowledge and through this demonstrate

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<sup>1</sup> A full list of the discussion questions used in the 11 sections of the course studied is available in Appendix D.

subject-specific CT. Five of eleven sections, comprising 53% of students faced the prospect of a comprehensive final exam. The threat of a final exam was recorded as a dummy variable.

- **Assignment Stakes**

Instructors have control over the weight of each assignment in the final grade. The literature on test taking and student effort suggests that the stakes of the test impact scores. If a small number of points are in play, many students reduce their effort and assignments scores fall (Barry et al. 2010; Wise and Demars 2005; Elbow 1997; Frank and Pearce 2016). But CT scores are often thought of as measures of ability, not effort, so assignment stakes are rarely considered in studies of CT. Phillips (2018) finds that the percentage weight of the CT essays students had to write was positively associated with their CT content. The value of each essay to the final grade was therefore computed, ranging from 5 to 15% in the sample.

- **Assignment Quantity**

Phillips (2018) finds that the number of assignments in a semester for on ground sections of a political theory class exercises a negative influence on CT. Course designs must balance rigor with the time and attention spans of students. Online students might be relatively more burdened with families and employment than students on campus. With more competing imperatives, a large number of assignments might depress measured CT even more. The total number of assignments for each online section was calculated by adding the total number of: graded discussion boards, CTEs, CREs, CT Essays, Quizzes, Exams, and other ad-hoc assignments such as summaries and reading questions.

## **Methods**

The study is divided into two stages. The first stage is to use forward stepwise regression to identify important control variables and get a handle on the sizes of *within*-semester effects and *between*-semester effects. This helps us understand whether we should expect to find important and significant *course-level* variables such as the value of an essay to the final grade (which remains constant throughout the semester) or important *assignment-level* variables which vary for each essay collected, such as the number of prior assignments of a particular type (CREs, CTEs, etc.)

The second stage is to remove the dummy variables separating within- and between-semester variation, exclude non-significant controls, and use forward stepwise regression to identify important sources of variation in order of their effect size from among the potential treatment variables identified in the literature to which this study had access (CTEs, Quizzes, CREs, etc.). Once no further significant variables are found, at least one measure for each category of interest was added to the model in order to better understand the comparative effects (and make sure that adding them does not diminish the robustness of the analysis.)

Finally, the initial controls are re-added to the model one by one, to make sure that no important intermediating effects have been prematurely discarded.

The control variables for the first stage of the analysis are taken from meta-analyses of CT studies in higher education (Abrami et al. 2015; Pithers and Soden 2000; Tiruneh, Verburgh, and Elen 2014) as well as recent quantitative studies of CT in political science (Phillips, 2018). Students select themselves into online courses non-randomly, so it is important to control for possible sources of non-random variation that could conceivably be connected with observable CT.

The list of controls in this study includes: Age at the beginning of the semester (Median=24), Credit Hours of college instruction (Median=91), GPA at the beginning of the semester (Median=3.13), Composite ACT Score (Median=22.9)<sup>2</sup>, Major (POLS=341/Non-POLS=69), Race (coded as a dummy variable White=271/Non-White=126), and Gender (Men=152/Women=259).

The percentage of readings posted on the LMS that a student accessed (prior to a given essay) was also included as a proxy for student engagement (Mean=84.25%). To be sure, not all readings were posted on the LMS and the fact that a student clicked on a link to a reading is only weak evidence that the student read it, let alone understood it. However, not clicking on the reading is a pretty strong indicator that the student did not complete the reading assignment. If instructors believe that they can move the needle on how much students read in their classes, this could also be a variable of interest.

The impact of essay topics on CT scores obtained from writing samples is intuitively plausible and has found some support (Phillips 2018). Including a dummy variable for all topics in the data set produces far too much multicollinearity in the model, however<sup>3</sup>. A perusal of the list of essay topics and mean scores suggests that some topics are indeed more challenging than others, even after controlling for the quality of the students in the sample. Two topics stand out as particularly challenging and both share the quality of being topics for which students had no specific reading they could use as preparation. A dummy was created to control for the outsized effect of these outlier topics<sup>4</sup>.

To all of these control variables, a dummy variable for each semester was added to check whether there were in fact statistically significant differences between sections of the course. This gives us a rough sense of the possible effect sizes of changing course designs on measured CT (controlling for individual characteristics of the students). Also added to this initial list of control variables was a nominal variable for each essay assignment recorded in the course. This helps us understand whether measured CT improves throughout the semester or stays relatively constant.

Finally, to deal with autocorrelation related to collecting multiple essays from each student in a given semester, a lag variable of the dependent variable was added to the model.

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<sup>2</sup> A deterministic imputation process for missing ACT scores in the data set was implemented. This process is described in Appendix C.

<sup>3</sup> A full list of topics used for the essays in this project can be found in Appendix E.

<sup>4</sup> One of these topics was “Can you have a theory of justice without a theory of politics?” which the instructor thought was a great topic, but for which students had no specific readings to draw upon (except for the entire class!)

A Durbin-Watson test and an analysis of the residuals check for autocorrelation. Variance inflation factors (VIF) are calculated to check for multicollinearity.

### Stage 1 Results

Table 1 shows the results of the regression validating the control variables against the measure of Aggregate CT produced by the WSUCT rubric. Several surprises emerge from stage 1. Neither time in college nor student age are significantly associated with Aggregate CT. Furthermore, semester-level effects appear not to be significant, which means that we should not expect variables at the course-level to much impact critical thinking. However, holding other major sources of variation in CT constant, the assignment-level variable is positive and significant. Other things being equal, the average student picks up 2.8 percentage points of CT per CT essay in the course. We can therefore reasonably hope that some of the assignment level interventions will prove to be significantly associated with higher measured levels of CT.

Term	Significant Controls			All Potential Controls			
	Estimate	Std Error	Prob> t	Estimate	Std Error	Prob> t	VIF
Intercept	-12.00	7.18	.09	-9.94	7.92	0.21	
ACT Average	0.63**	0.31	0.04	0.65**	0.33	0.04	1.61
Beginning GPA	5.04***	1.47	0.00	5.13***	1.54	0.00	1.77
Age				-0.04	0.11	0.71	1.39
Gender[F]				0.68	0.83	0.41	1.15
Non-White[Y]				-1.16	0.94	0.21	1.23
Major[Y]	-1.73*	0.99	0.08	-2.22**	1.11	0.04	1.26
Hours				-0.01	0.03	0.57	1.28
Essay Number	2.82***	0.77	0.00	2.86***	0.83	0.00	1.20
Aggregate CT Lagged	0.28***	0.04	<.0001	0.26	0.05	<.0001	1.25
Hard Topics[Y]	-6.73**	2.72	0.01	-7.10**	2.88	0.01	1.15
Overall Reading Percentage	0.12***	0.03	0.00	0.11***	0.04	0.00	1.33
Semester ID[20131]				2.13	2.94	0.47	1.43



Semester ID[20132]				1.54	2.21	0.48	1.30
Semester ID[20133]				0.49	2.59	0.85	1.30
Semester ID[20141]				-2.49	3.27	0.4472	1.45
Semester ID[20142]				-2.77	3.34	0.4075	1.56
Semester ID[20152]				2.16	2.22	0.3308	1.35
Semester ID[20154]				-1.85	2.48	0.4567	1.31
Semester ID[20164]				3.05	3.73	0.4133	1.65
Semester ID[20174]				-2.73	2.11	0.1955	1.23
Semester ID[20192]				1.34	1.91	0.4843	1.20
N=411	R <sup>2</sup> =.298; Adj R <sup>2</sup> =.287			N=408 R <sup>2</sup> =.314; Adj R <sup>2</sup> =.277			
*:p<.10; **:p<.05; ***p<.01							

The Shapiro-Wilk test is negative for autocorrelation and the analysis of residuals cannot reject the hypothesis that their distribution is normal. (See Methodological Appendix C)

## Stage 2 Results

Table 2 shows the results of the stepwise regression process and a model with non-significant interventions added. We can see that the coefficients in the model on the left are robust to the introduction of the non-significant variables (in the model on the right). This increases our confidence that the model is not misspecified. The Variance Inflated Factors (VIF) move a little bit, to indicate increased collinearity in the model on the right, but stay well under the standard threshold of 5.

The main assignment-level variables found to be significantly correlated with Aggregate CT are the number of prior essay assignments and the number of prior online discussion boards. The signs are positive and the effect sizes modest. Every essay assignment adds an average of 1.3 percentage points to a student's Aggregate CT score. Every discussion board available adds about .3 percentage points. Surprisingly, one semester-level variable is associated with Aggregate CT (negatively so). Each added semester assignment takes off about .4 percentage points of CT.

Neither prior quizzes, nor the threat of final exams, nor CTEs, nor increasing the stakes of the CT essays appear to be significantly associated with CT scores. Alternative measures of these variables do not change these results.

	Stepwise Model				Stepwise Model with Comparisons			
	Estimate	Std Error	Prob> t	VIF	Estimate	Std Error	Prob> t	VIF
Intercept	-6.43	7.18	0.37		-3.82	7.61	0.62	
ACT Average	0.68**	0.31	0.03	1.51	0.68**	0.32	0.03	1.55
Beginning GPA	5.24***	1.47	0.00	1.66	5.14***	1.48	0.00	1.67
Major [Y]	-2.07**	1.00	0.04	1.04	-1.95*	1.01	0.05	1.06
Aggregate CT Lagged	0.26***	0.05	<.0001	1.22	0.26***	0.05	<.0001	1.23
Hard Topics	-6.78**	2.68	0.01	1.03	-6.38**	2.79	0.02	1.11
Overall Reading Percentage	0.10***	0.03	0.00	1.21	0.11***	0.03	0.00	1.25
Prior Essay & Prior Critiques	1.34***	0.46	0.00	1.13	1.47**	0.55	0.01	1.60
Prior Online Discussion Boards	0.28***	0.09	0.00	1.24	0.31**	0.12	0.01	1.93
# of Assignments	-0.38**	0.19	0.04	1.15	-0.51**	0.23	0.02	1.71
Final Exam [Y]					0.78	0.99	0.43	1.80
Prior Quizzes					-0.23	0.30	0.43	2.83
CTE Dummy[Y]					1.31	1.86	0.48	3.63
Essay Value					0.09	0.24	0.72	1.68
	N=407 ; R <sup>2</sup> =.315; Adj R <sup>2</sup> =.300				N=407 ; R <sup>2</sup> =.318; Adj R <sup>2</sup> =.295			
*:p<.10; **:p<.05; ***p<.01								

As for the stage 1 models, the Shapiro-Wilk test for the stage 2 models is negative for autocorrelation and the analysis of residuals cannot reject the hypothesis that their distribution is normal. (See Methodological Appendix C)

## Discussion

When it comes to assessment of critical thinking through writing, prior practice at writing appears to matter, since prior discussion boards and prior essay work appear to be the main contributors to increases in CT throughout the semester. However, further examination of the channels through which discussion board work influences CT, suggests that it is the quantity of reading students do in those discussions that dominates the quantity of posting and the instructor's intervention. When Instructor Replies, Prior Student Posts, and Prior Student Reading are substituted for Prior Online Discussion Boards in the Stepwise Comparison model above, only reading is significant. When we add that to the fact that the overall percentage of readings a student does has one of the largest effect sizes in the model, we should amend our initial conclusions. Structured writing and reading seem to be the best vectors for increases in CT in political theory.

When thinking about what sorts of course designs work best for eliciting CT in political theory online, this study suggests that persuasive essays and regular reading outpace testing or critical thinking assignments. However, having too many assignments might backfire. If we substitute prior discussion boards for a discussion dummy variable in the comparison model, the variable is not significant, the number of assignments also turns non-significant, and the variables associated with reading and writing assignments get stronger.

Despite the positive and significant effect of discussion boards, semesters with and without discussion have very similar average CT scores (54.08 vs. 54.68). One possible interpretation of this is that more discussion posts means more assignments and these variables can off-set somewhat. Because semesters without discussion boards have more reading and writing<sup>5</sup>, we can speculate that there is no significant difference between the overall CT scores in the two types of courses because each type of course harnesses different but equally effective strategies for raising CT<sup>6</sup>.

## Conclusion

Although the sample sizes in this study are fairly good for this kind of project and the results quite statistically robust, there are reasons to be cautious about quantitative analyses of this type in general. Reading the literature on political science education and critical thinking, one cannot help but be impressed by the creative course designs and assignments faculty have created to enliven their online courses. There is nothing in this study that should give the reader reason to think that very well moderated discussions with fascinating topics or more carefully designed preparatory critical thinking assignments

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<sup>5</sup> In fact, semesters without discussion posts were usually opportunities to try out reading questions and reading summaries. These were only ever done once each and therefore were not especially suitable for inclusion in a comparative investigation.

<sup>6</sup> In case the reader is wondering, student evaluations of teaching are not meaningfully different for online theory courses with or without discussion boards. Courses without discussion are rated a little better, but response rates are low across the board.

could not make a meaningful difference in subsequently measured CT. For that matter, online quizzes could be designed for more critical thinking practice.

Each CTE and each discussion board was treated equally in this study, whereas a qualitative analysis might be able to finely distinguish between assignments that work well at stimulating CT and assignments that fall a little flat. This could be work for a future project. Certainly, as the dummy variable for hard topics suggests, some essay prompts for which students have little support in the course materials significantly depress CT. Again, trying to understand what kind of topics work and do not work at eliciting CT is an important project, a subject which Fitzgerald and Baird (2011) have made some interesting hypotheses on, but for which this data set is not well suited.

What we can say is that at least on the surface, asynchronous discussions are not automatically better than reading and writing practice at eliciting CT from students. There also is much to be gained by having students read more and write more structured essays. This is consistent with Cavdar and Doe (2012) and others in political science who see writing as a vehicle for the practice of CT. Consistent with Phillips (2018), we can also say that more is not always better when it comes to online courses. Even though higher stakes essays were not predictors of higher CT scores, packing a course shell with more low stakes assignments seems to diminish the capacity of students to produce higher CT.

Finally, quizzes and final exams might be alright if instructors need to meet certain content-oriented student learning outcomes in political theory, but there is no evidence of spillover benefits from exams and quizzes to CT. Indeed, given the negative sign on the total number of assignments in the course, one could worry about a trade off between content mastery and CT promotion in political theory (and beyond). More data can be collected on quiz and exam performance to try to see whether such a trade-off is real or not. Some work in psychology education has already been done in this direction (Williams, Oliver, and Stockdale 2004).

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## Appendix A: Intercoder Reliability Check

### Methodology

A post-test study of intercoder reliability was conducted between the original grader and two senior undergraduates applying to graduate school in political science. Although ideally a fully random and sample of papers would be used, time and budget constraints led to choosing a random sample of 4 topics – each of which had been used over multiple semesters. The topics used were Topics 103, 107, 110, and 112. It was felt that using the full range of topics would make the burden of grading unduly onerous on the undergraduates. Instead, three random semesters were selected and two anonymous random papers from each semester were selected using an online random number generator. The test therefore comprised a total of 24 papers per grader (6 per topic).

In this instance, the principal worry is about overall agreement between different coders (especially that high rating and low ratings were consistent). Two measures are created. Mean Absolute Differences (MAD) and Pearson's  $r$ . The first establishes how far away, on average, each rating is from another. The second is a measure of correlation for each of the dimensions of critical thinking (as well as overall).

**Table A1**  
**Measures of Intercoder Reliability: Mean Absolute Deviations (MAD) and Correlation Coefficients (Pearson's  $r$ )**

	Undergraduate Grader #1		Undergraduate Grader #2		Faculty Regrade		Mean Overall	
	MAD	Pearson's $r$	MAD	Pearson's $r$	MAD	Pearson's $r$	MAD	Pearson's $r$
<b>Focus</b>	1.27 (18.22%)	0.55***	1.27 (18.10%)	0.35	1.09 (15.62%)	0.60***	1.21 (17.31%)	0.50***
<b>Interpretation</b>	0.97 (13.89%)	0.59***	1.27 (18.10%)	0.57***	1.30 (18.59%)	0.55***	1.06 (15.22%)	0.57***
<b>Evidence</b>	0.78 (11.22%)	0.20	0.92 (13.17%)	0.25	0.89 (12.78%)	0.30	0.87 (12.41%)	0.25

<b>Objections</b>	1.47 (21.07%)	0.42**	1.20 (17.15%)	0.65***	1.07 (15.31%)	0.70***	1.25 (17.84%)	0.59***
<b>Thesis</b>	1.33 (19.02%)	0.29	1.63 (23.32%)	0.15	1.41 (20.11%)	0.30	1.46 (20.82%)	0.25
<b>Conclusion</b>	1.22 (17.51%)	0.39*	0.96 (13.73%)	0.53***	0.50 (7.09%)	0.81***	0.89 (12.78%)	0.57***
<b>Overall</b>	5.38 (12.81%)	0.56***	4.57 (10.87%)	0.57***	3.18 (7.58%)	0.70***	4.38 (10.42%)	0.61***
*: p<.1; **p<.05; ***:p<.01								

## Discussion

The Aggregate CT score is satisfactory (considering that two of the graders were not subject matter experts) with a MAD score of 4.38 out of a possible 43 points (10.42% deviation) and an overall Pearson's r of .61. The thesis category appears to be the most problematic. For that category, Pearson's r correlations are weak and Mean MAD for the graders are over 20%. The evidence category has weak correlations but much better MAD scores, indicating close scores but uneven co-variation between the graders – which is somewhat puzzling. All other categories exhibit statistically significant covariation and acceptable MAD scores.

## Appendix B: A Sample Critical Thinking Exercise

### Instructions

Please answer the following questions as thoroughly and thoughtfully as you can. Make sure you clearly label each question you answer (either by copying and pasting the question or numbering it). Each question is worth the same number of points. Spelling & grammar do count.

Consider the story of two guys:

### Ben's story

Ben and his friends are smoking marijuana at a party. Since they are running out of food in the house, Ben volunteers to go to the grocery store to get snacks. He gets into the car, drives to the store, collects the desired victuals and starts driving home. He waves to a couple of girls as he drives home. But as a result he does a rolling stop at a stop sign, and a police officer stops pulls him over. Given the smell of weed in the car and the copious amount of snacks in the back seat, the officer puts two and two together and gives

Ben a field sobriety test, which he fails. The officer then arrests Ben for Driving Under the Influence. A blood test later confirms the officer's suspicion. Since it's his first offence, the judge gives Ben 6 months probation and suspends his license for a year.

### Jerry's story

Jerry and his friends are smoking marijuana at a party. Since they are running out of food at the house, Jerry volunteers to go to the grocery store to get snacks. He gets into the car, drives to the store, collects the desired victuals and starts driving home. On the way home though, Jerry's story takes a different turn from Ben's. The two laughing young girls run across the road in front of Jerry. Jerry tries to brake but his reflexes are slowed by the fact that he's stoned. He hits the girls and one of them dies. Jerry is charged with vehicular manslaughter while under the influence and convicted. The judge sentences him to 8 years in prison.

### Questions

By hypothesis, Ben and Jerry's situations are identical except for the fact that Jerry has two girls run across the street unexpectedly, while the girls in Ben's story stay on the sidewalk. Further, let's assume there is no difference between Ben and Jerry's reflexes. If Ben had been at the wheel and two girls had jumped in front of the car like they did to Jerry, Ben would have run them over just the same. And Jerry would have rolled through the stop sign and gotten pulled over if he'd waved at the girls on sidewalk. The difference between Ben and Jerry's situation is purely a matter of luck and circumstance.

The example is intended to highlight a difference between deontological and consequentialist moral reasoning. Remember that on the consequentialist view, what matters is the consequences of one's actions. On the deontological view, it's one's intent and state of mind that matters most.

#### Question 1 (20 points)

On the deontological view, is Jerry more to blame than Ben? Why?

#### Question 2 (20 points)

On the consequentialist view, are Jerry's actions worse than Ben's? Why?

#### Question 3 (20 points)

Consider the different punishments Ben and Jerry have received from the legal system. Ben gets probation and a suspended license. Jerry gets 8 years in prison. Based on this information, are the moral principles underlying our legal system more consequentialist or deontological? Explain

#### Question 4 (20 points)

Now imagine that instead of accidentally running over the girls while high, Jerry had stalked the girls and run them over in a premeditated fashion because they had rejected his sexual advances. If Jerry's state of mind could have been proven to the satisfaction of a jury, would our legal system (as you understand it to function, no need to do legal research for this part of the assignment) would have punished him more or less for his intentional killing of the girls than for his negligent killing? Why?

Question 5 (20 points)

Is the scenario in question 4 evidence of consequentialism or deontology in our legal system? Explain.

Question 6 (Extra credit 10 points)

Consider the issue raised by Questions 1, 2 & 3 again. What do you think of a legal system that can distribute very unequal punishments to two individuals where the only difference between the two is a set of circumstances beyond the control of either individual? Would you feel differently if the only relevant difference were other circumstances beyond their control (their social class at birth, their gender, or the color of their skin) or is the problem substantially the same?

## Appendix C: Methodological Appendix

### **Missing Data Imputation: ACT Average**

Because many online students are non-traditional or transfer students, ACT scores that would normally be required for admissions are not required and therefore not available through the university's office of institutional research. This creates a large missing data issue for the data set. 56% of the data set drops out of the study if we want to use ACT scores as a control, and there is every reason to think that GPA is not sufficient as a control for initial student ability. Sacrificing that many data points impacts the power of the model, the accuracy of the estimators, and generally makes it more difficult to test the number of independent variables in the study.

ACT scores were therefore imputed to students using a deterministic imputation by creating a regression to predict ACT scores based on three variables with most relationship to ACT scores: GPA, the student's essay communication score (not part of Aggregate CT) and the percentage of readings a student clicked on in the module prior to the CT essay (a discarded control variable).

To check to see whether this biases the model, the final comparison model is run with an added dummy variable for the rows where ACT scores were imputed. The results of that model are in the table below.

<b>Parameter Estimates</b>				
<b>Term</b>	<b>Estimate</b>	<b>Std Error</b>	<b>t Ratio</b>	<b>Prob&gt; t </b>
Intercept	-5.36652	8.089187	-0.66	0.5075
ACT Average	0.6506881	0.318845	2.04	0.0419*
Beginning GPA	5.4485172	1.506354	3.62	0.0003*
Aggregate CT Lagged	0.2563346	0.046489	5.51	<.0001*
Hard Topics 125, 113[0]	6.4787717	2.807756	2.31	0.0216*
Overall Reading Percentage	0.1140537	0.035112	3.25	0.0013*
Major[0]	1.9059606	1.059543	1.80	0.0728
Prior Essay & Prior Critiques	1.4750864	0.55137	2.68	0.0078*
# of Assignments	-0.5038	0.230302	-2.19	0.0293*
Final Exam Threat[0]	-0.592908	1.059933	-0.56	0.5762
Prior Quizzes	-0.221659	0.300723	-0.74	0.4615
CTE Dummy[0]	-1.341539	1.87573	-0.72	0.4749
Essay value	0.0987547	0.245309	0.40	0.6875
Act Dummy 2[0]	-0.767444	0.76469	-1.00	0.3162
Prior Online Discussions 1	0.3190063	0.121125	2.63	0.0088*

The ACT dummy is not significant, suggesting no statistically significant difference between the rows that were imputed and the rows that were not. Furthermore, none of the independent variables are significantly altered by the presence of this dummy variable. If anything, the model's overall fit improves slightly. This verification was done for all the models with identical results, suggesting a successful imputation process.

### Stage 1 Models

- Durbin-Watson Tests

#### Longer Model

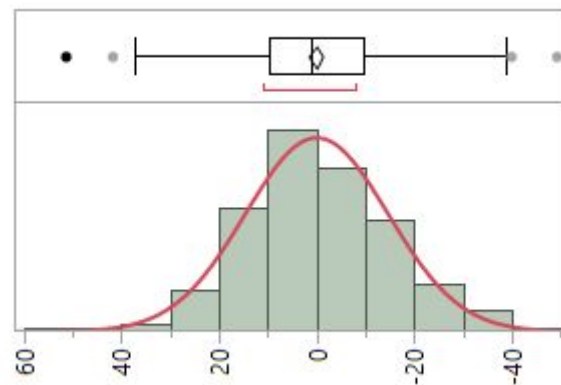
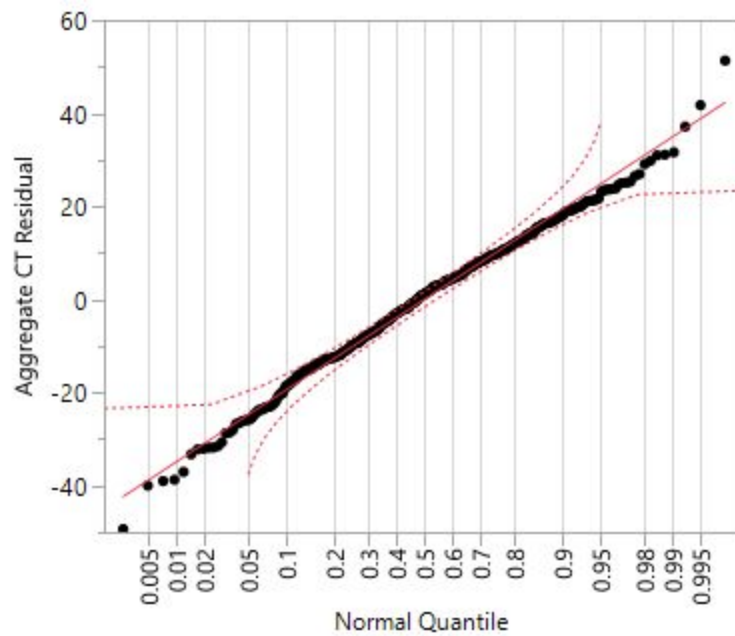
<b>Durbin-Watson</b>	<b>Number of Obs.</b>	<b>AutoCorrelation</b>	<b>Prob&lt;DW</b>
<b>1.9485723</b>	<b>408</b>	<b>0.0250</b>	<b>0.1132</b>

#### Shorter Model

<b>Durbin-Watson</b>	<b>Number of Obs.</b>	<b>AutoCorrelation</b>	<b>Prob&lt;DW</b>
<b>1.958044</b>	<b>411</b>	<b>0.0206</b>	<b>0.2896</b>

- Analysis of Residuals

#### Longer Model



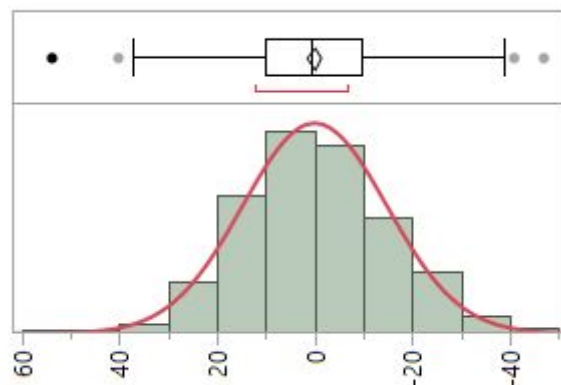
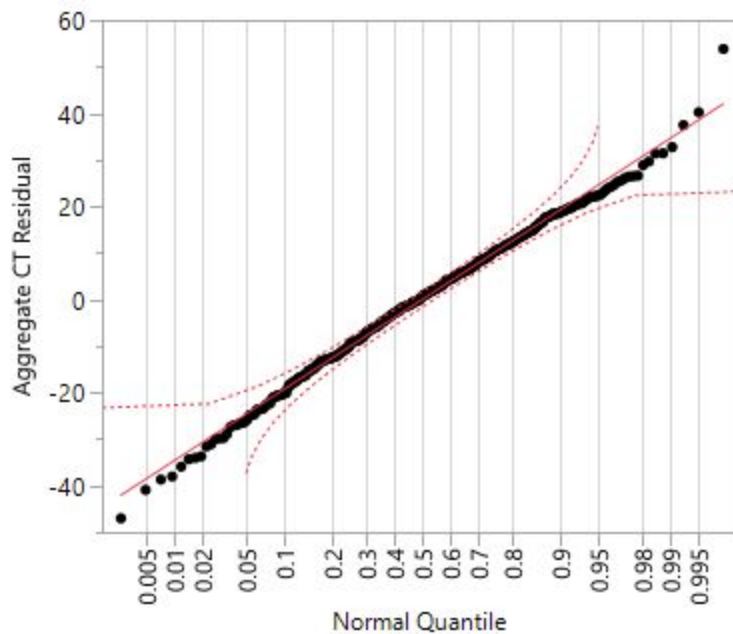
### Goodness-of-Fit Test

Shapiro-Wilk W Test

W	Prob<W
0.995371	0.2677

Note:  $H_0$  = The data is from the Normal distribution. Small p-values reject  $H_0$ .

**Shorter Model**



### Goodness-of-Fit Test

Shapiro-Wilk W Test

W	Prob < W
0.996559	0.5284

Note:  $H_0$  = The data is from the Normal distribution. Small p-values reject  $H_0$ .

## Stage 2 Models

- Durbin-Watson Test

## Longer Model

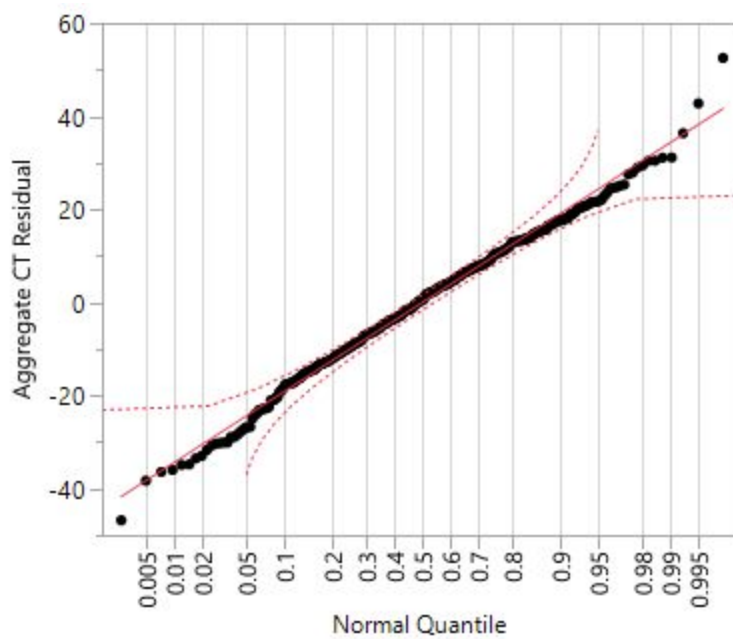
<b>Durbin-Watson</b>	<b>Number of Obs.</b>	<b>AutoCorrelation</b>	<b>Prob&lt;DW</b>
1.9420075	407	0.0284	0.1744

### Shorter Model

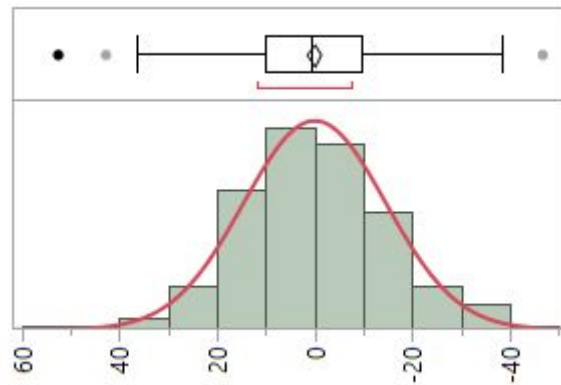
<b>Durbin-Watson</b>	<b>Number of Obs.</b>	<b>AutoCorrelation</b>	<b>Prob&lt;DW</b>
1.9356238	407	0.0316	0.1986

- Analysis of Residuals

### Longer Model







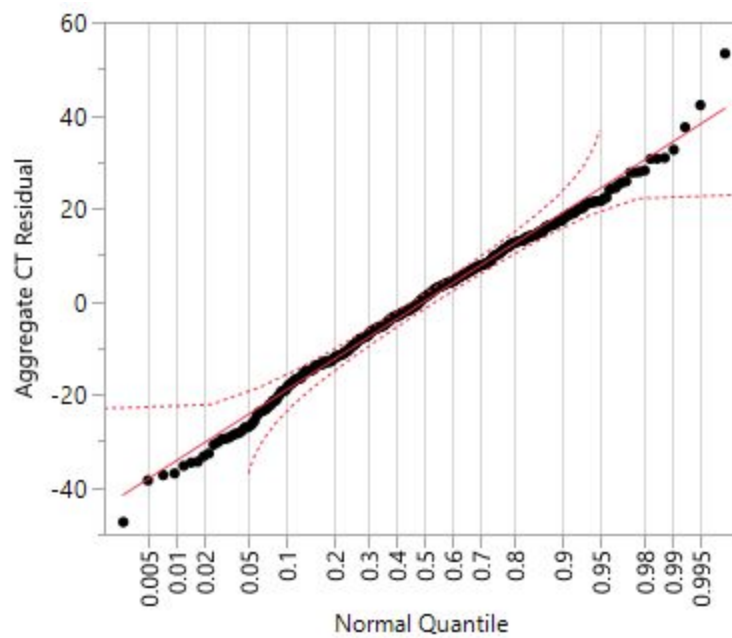
### Goodness-of-Fit Test

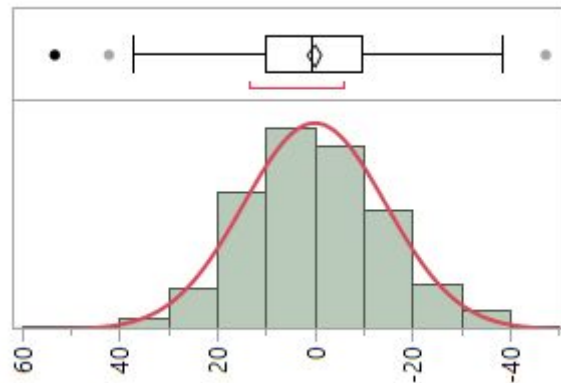
Shapiro-Wilk W Test

W	Prob<W
0.995298	0.2573

Note:  $H_0$  = The data is from the Normal distribution. Small p-values reject  $H_0$ .

### Shorter Model





### Goodness-of-Fit Test

Shapiro-Wilk W Test

W	Prob<W
0.995099	0.2265

Note:  $H_0$  = The data is from the Normal distribution. Small p-values reject  $H_0$ .

## Appendix D: Discussion Questions

Summer 2019

1. Should we use the same moral standards to evaluate public officials and private citizens?
2. Is it possible to engage in politics and keep one's hands clean?
3. Do you think that the benefits American citizens receive from their Federal government create political obligations to the Federal government? Explain.
4. Was Socrates foolish in refusing Crito's offer to escape his death sentence?
5. Equal wages for equal work is a rallying cry for women and other categories of citizens who face discrimination in employment. Most recently, in the context of the FIFA Women's World Cup (soccer), the American players have filed a lawsuit against the US Soccer Federation to demand equal pay with the US men's team. What do you think? Are the female players right? Which principle of equality is relevant here? Does the answer for the women's soccer team have implications for US women's national teams in other sports?
6. What does luck have to do with egalitarianism? Should your government try to nullify the effects of bad luck? What is your reasoning?
7. "Freedom is an artifact of society: a creation of laws and man, maintained only by credible threats of force." Is this sentence (taken from a long ago lecture of mine summarizing Hobbes's view) right? Is the measure of freedom we possess only possible because of the benevolence of our federal sovereign?

8. Berlin believes that governments pursuing positive liberty is dangerous. Why is that? And do you agree with his analysis?
9. Can an individual own too much private property in a capitalist economic system?
10. Does the protection of private property rights harm the poor?

### Spring 2019 (No discussions)

### Fall 2017

1. In the Republic, Thrasymachus challenges Socrates, claiming that justice is nothing more than a tool for social control. Only the feeble-minded would voluntarily choose to be just. Do you agree with Thrasymachus? Why or why not?
2. Justice is a famously fraught subject. In free societies people disagree about whether justice requires things like free healthcare, affirmative action, the right to bear arms, or open borders - just to name a few. Why do people disagree so much about what justice requires?
3. How (using what sorts of criteria) can we judge a theory of justice to be mistaken or wrong? What makes it wrong or mistaken? (Conversely, what makes a theory right or plausible?)
4. What is the point of principles of equality? What purpose do they serve?
5. Is the traditional institution of marriage (as it is often practiced and as it is treated by law) unjust as Okin claims?
6. When is inequality of income a problem of injustice?
7. If you choose to buy a new watch or a new handbag (when you don't really need it) thereby failing to donate to charities that can (with 100% certainty) save several lives with that money, are you committing an injustice - as Singer suggests? Are you like the passer by failing to haul the child out of the shallow pond because you don't want to ruin your new shoes?
8. Which do you think is better as an ideal: a society where people do all they can to meet the needs of those who cannot fend for themselves or a society where people do all they can to develop talents and foster excellence?
9. Schmidtz and Patterson point to some of the dangers with institutionalizing (or even giving too much moral weight) to principles of distribution according to need. What can go wrong with a theory of justice that requires a lot of attention to the needy? Do you think this is a big or a small problem? Explain.
10. Do you agree with Socrates' decision to accept his death sentence?
11. Schools tend to teach children that governments are good and that they should follow the law. This is called "civic education." (Interestingly perhaps, all schools in all countries do this) Should students at a middle school or high school level be encouraged to be more critical? Do schools do something wrong by teaching students to be obedient and unquestioning of the laws they live under?
12. Do you have a political obligation to vote in all the elections you can?
13. In responding to Hobbes, French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau quipped: "Tranquility is found also in dungeons; but is that enough to make them desirable places to live in?" The point is clear, security cannot excuse all measures a government might take. Think of areas of American

public policy where an appeal to security is used as a justification. Do you agree? Are there particular abuses we should look out for?

14. Give an original example of a rule in society that influences the behavior of individuals but is not codified or intentionally followed by most of the people who nevertheless order their actions according to it. For this post, you don't have to engage in a full conversation unless someone else's example seems problematic.
15. Hobbes wants the sovereign to keep order in society and prevent the war of all against all. How can individuals keep the sovereign in line - and make sure it does not violate the peace through arbitrary and capricious rule? What features of a constitutional design could help prevent the sovereign becoming a predator on its people?
16. Some people strongly feel that the US government is made legitimate by a social contract. Do you agree? Why or why not?
17. It was suggested in my lectures and in the readings that mere residence was not enough to establish the consent of citizens to be governed. Where is the problem and what might a government that took this problem seriously do to make it go away?
18. My lectures and the readings also suggest the voting (or the presence of elections) by itself cannot count as consent to government (and therefore serve as the sole basis for political authority). It does not follow, however, that elections could not play some supporting role in a theory of political authority. What might that role be?
19. There is a wide consensus, at least in the western world, that democracy is better than dictatorship. Why is that, do you think?
20. As Waldron points out (and others have before him) moral disagreement is an ineradicable feature of free societies. Is democracy (as Waldron suggests) a uniquely respectful way of handling such disagreements? Are there other ways?
21. Do you think democracies get any of their moral worth from their tendency to get the right answers on important social questions? If we could find a system that tended to come up with better answers, should we switch to it?
22. How do you think liberalism has changed since the time of Locke and Mill? Why do you think it has evolved in this way?
23. What does it mean to tolerate a view? Are there views we should not "tolerate"?
24. Everything you do in some sense "affects" others in some way. Can the harm principle survive this objection? How can Mill and his followers rescue the harm principle from this objection?
25. What real problems does socialism seek to address? How do liberal and democratic views address them differently? Which is more successful do you think?
26. Is conservatism more supportive of weak central government or strong centralized state rule? How can we make sense of this apparent tension in conservative thought?
27. Is communitarianism a view more on the left or on the right?

## Fall 2016

1. Should the government play a role in making sure people get what they deserve? If so should they treat desert as a value or as a constraint? What kinds of policies treat desert as a constraint? What kinds of policies treat desert as a value?
2. Is your government doing its citizens any favors? What are they? How should good citizens reciprocate?
3. Of the 4 kinds of affirmative action policies cited by Hoffman and Graham, which ones (if any) do you think are justifiable and why?
4. What should the Federal government's role be in financing, facilitating, or directing the flows of humanitarian aid? Explain your view.
5. Is the government responsible for your well-being? Explain.
6. Mill thinks that individuals need protection from "the tyranny of the majority." He also thinks they need protection from the "tyranny of public opinion." What counts as "tyranny of public opinion." Do you agree with him that we need protection from the tyranny of public opinion? Why or why not?
7. Mill thinks that individuals need protection from "the tyranny of the majority." What counts as "tyranny" from the majority? Do you agree that individuals need this protection?
8. People who don't understand the relationship between theory and practice often say of Socialism (and other ideologies) that it is attractive in theory but not in practice. For this discussion, I want to focus on whether it is attractive in theory. If so, why? If not, why not?
9. Should governments attempt to nullify the effects of morally arbitrary contingencies?
10. Is the difference principle unfairly biased towards the least favored class?
11. Is one of the purposes of government (or good government) to help the people live happy lives as Aristotle suggests? Should it try to maximize aggregate happiness (as Bentham argues)? What do you think?
12. Is social and political order antithetical to liberty or necessary to liberty? Discuss with reference to Hobbes, Hayek, Axelrod, and any other authors you think might be relevant.
13. Is it ever morally permissible not to follow the law? If so when?
14. Is democracy to be valued because of the outcomes it produces for citizens (health, wealth, happiness, etc.) or for the way it treats its citizens (equally, with respect, etc.)?
15. Does justice require Americans giving more priority to the rights and interests of non-citizens than they currently do?

## Fall 2015 (No discussions)

## Spring 2015

1. What do you think a perfectly just world would be like?

2. What consequences do you think the fact of widespread disagreement about what justice is/requires has for the way we should think about how to live together?
3. "Either you can have happiness or you can have justice, but you cannot have both." Is that right?
4. Do public decision makers systematically undervalue freedom when deciding what to do?
5. Most of us think that government should protect us from (some) external threats to our liberty (from other people, other countries, or the government itself). Should the government also try to protect us from threats to our freedom that come from within us, as Aristotle thinks? Are our passions, addictions, and vices sufficient threats to our freedom that governments should try and liberate us from them?
6. Would you hook yourself up to Nozick's experience machine? Why or why not?
7. Why let people be free?
8. Why do we value order? What's good about it?
9. Which freedoms do you value most? Which do you use most often and which have the greatest impact on your life?
10. "Freedom is an artifact of society: a creation of laws and man, maintained only by credible threats of force." Is this sentence (taken from a long ago lecture of mine summarizing Hobbes's view) right? Is the measure of freedom we possess only possible because of the benevolence of our federal sovereign?
11. How far are you willing to tolerate? And at what point are you no longer willing to tolerate views or behaviors that you find either unjust or repugnant? How does one decide such questions in a principled manner?
12. Can one be tolerant and still have integrity (defined as being consistent to a set of principles)?
13. Do people have a right to an equal opportunity in the United States? If so, what kind?
14. Is Schmidtz right to think that you have not necessarily been wronged if someone else at a different company makes more money than you for the same job? Why or why not?
15. Do Superheroes have a right to fight crime outside the law? Do you?
16. Milgram uses Hannah Arendt's term "the banality of evil" to refer to the behavior of his test subjects. Do you agree with him (and Arendt) that much evil is perpetrated by ordinary people without malice? If so, what can we do about it?
17. Do you have political obligations? If so what are they, and to whom?
18. The US government no doubt confers benefits upon us, but does it do us any favors?
19. When living in society, are we always indebted or is it possible to say that we have done our fair share? What might count as doing your fair share?
20. Do you think reciprocity is a promising avenue for justifying political obligations? Why or why not?

## Spring II 2014

1. So what makes a good paper?
2. What makes someone foolish (vs wise)? Discuss.
3. How do people, laws, or governments acquire authority?

4. What makes a statesman good? Discuss. You are not limited to one post and should feel free to respond to one another, if appropriate.
5. Does a legal right to have an abortion imply a duty for the state to fund abortions for those women who cannot afford one?
6. Supporters of racial equality both support and reject racial preference in college admissions. Does the value of equality demand racial preference towards disfavored minorities or blindness to race in college admissions?
7. A long description of Rawls' Original Position precedes the following set of questions: Would you try to maximize the average position? Would you make everyone exactly equal? Would you minimize the chances of living the worst sort of life (whatever that is)? If you knew this was going to happen, what kinds of rules would you design for society?
8. Does LeBron James deserve his salary?

#### Winter 2014 (No discussions)

#### Summer 2013

1. Which is most compelling to you: Deontology, virtue ethics, or consequentialism? Why do you pick one over the other?
2. Where do your political ideas/principles/values come from? In what sense, if any, are they your own?
3. Is it the government's job to care for your personal happiness?
4. Is it the government's job to make you a better person?
5. What kind of equality should the state try and maintain among its citizens? In other words, "equality of what"? I will note that like anything else, the fact that some kind of equality might be desirable is not yet an argument for its political supremacy. An argument for any kind of equality is going to have to emphasize not just its moral salience but its political salience.
6. Do we have natural (pre-political) rights that it would be wrong for the government to take from us (Barnett's view, also Locke's) or are our rights just what the government/constitution says they are (Hobbes' view)? (There are, of course, other views. Feel free to explore these as well)
7. Does a legitimate government have permission to enforce all your duties? If so, why? If not, what makes some duties enforceable and others not?
8. Which duties are more important: duties to family, duties to country, duties to all human beings? (or some other category of duties)
9. What (universal) duties, if any, do you have to other human beings?
10. [This questions follows a current events video]Is it unjust for the government to prohibit Kimber van Rye from drinking on his doorstep? What reasons might be given in favor of such a policy?
11. Do your political obligations arise from duties of reciprocity? (favors that you received that you must now repay in the form of obedience)
12. Have you ever "consented" to the rule of your government?
13. What do you think a fair bargain is? Does Rawls model the situation in the right way?



14. Is it unjust that people get things that they don't deserve? (If you answer yes, what are the consequences for the role of the state? If you answer no, can you explain how people can be due things that they don't deserve?)
15. Nozick says that any attempts to centrally engineer a distribution of goods necessarily infringes on liberty. Is he right? Does it matter?
16. Is government morally permitted to use you as a means to achieve some socially desirable end? (If yes, are there limits? If no, are you committed to something like Nozick's minimal state?)

### Spring 2013

1. What do you think? Are there things that are moral absolutes or is morality a matter of perspective?
2. A separate but related question to the one above: even if some things are morally true, does that have an impact on what our laws should be? What about if there are no moral truths - can we justifiably coerce through law if our coercion is based on nothing more than opinion?
3. So what do you think? Is it morally okay to flip the switch in the Trolley problem, killing one to save five? Why or why not?
4. Is there a morally relevant difference between the case of the doctor who sacrifices one patient to save five and the trolley person who flips the switch to kill one and save five? If so what is it?
5. How does the United States government try to justify its jurisdiction over you? Are these justifications successful in your opinion? Why or why not?
6. Many people believe the state should play a role in educating citizens. What (if anything) justifies this role?
7. Are there any sacred beliefs the state should punish people for even verbally contesting? Why or why not?
8. Are there some people incapable of setting ends for themselves and for whom it would be better if others told them what to do? If so, does anything follow from that fact about the world?
9. Is the point of government to make us lead happy lives, as Aristotle seems to think? If not, what are other possible candidates?
10. When the declaration of independence says "All men are created equal" what do you understand that to mean? Aristotle clearly thinks this is nonsense, at least in any descriptive sense. What do you think?
11. Are acts committed out of ignorance of the facts really involuntary acts, as Aristotle thinks? (presumably his thinking is that if they had known the facts, they would have acted differently)
12. Is being a good citizen just about showing up and voting when you are asked? If not, what else makes a good citizen and why?
13. In the United States, we like to think we have a lot of freedom. Which freedoms do you cherish most? (and why are they so important)
14. Should states be judged according to ordinary rules of morality (those that we commonly apply to individuals)? If not, how/why are the rules different?



15. What qualities of a good person should a good statesman have? Are there any qualities of a bad person he/she should also possess?
16. When someone says "so and so is a great statesman," what are the qualities that would make him or her great?
17. After seeing the video, which do you think is more important to your life: Negative or Positive Liberty? Why?
18. Are the people now on Capitol Hill your agents, or are they your masters?
19. Locke's defense of private property in Chapter 5 of the Second Treatise on Government remains influential. What do you think a right to private property is? (If I say "I own this" what does that actually mean?)
20. In his defense, Locke says labor can ground a right to private property, but that this right is limited by the requirement to a) use it minimally productively (the spoilage clause) and b) that an individual must leave enough and as good in common for others (the sufficiency proviso) What do you think he means by all this? And do you agree?
21. Rousseau says: "the human species is divided into so many herds of cattle, each with its ruler, who keeps guard over them for the purpose of devouring them." Is this an accurate depiction of political society? Or has democracy remedied this problem where it has taken root?
22. Rousseau and Locke both agree that "No man has natural authority over another"? What do they mean and are they right? If they are, what are the implications for the way we should set up our political institutions?
23. Metaphysics for Kant is the branch of philosophy of philosophy that deals with knowledge that doesn't come from the senses (also known as "a priori" knowledge). Do you think there's anything we can say about the way we should treat each other without consulting the real world (evidence from our senses)?
24. If anyone stands behind the saying that "the ends don't justify the means" it's Kant. From this angle, Kant is the anti-Machiavelli. What does that phrase mean to you though, and do you agree? What else could justify the means if not the ends?
25. Is there such a thing as a tyranny of public opinion? If so, what, if anything, should be done about it?
26. Do you agree with Mill's harm principle or are there other reasons a person's freedom may justly be restrained?
27. What does Marx mean when he says capitalists (or capitalism) exploits the workers"? Is his analysis sound?
28. Is it appropriate to analyze the justice of background institutions rather than just individual actions?
29. Do you agree with the difference principle? Why or why not?
30. Are inequalities and injustices within the family unit something the government should try and remedy?
31. One of Susan Okin's more controversial arguments is that after a divorce the human capital of the male partner be taxed heavily and given to the ex-wife as compensation for human capital not developed by the wife during the years they were married. What do you think about this suggestion?
32. Is marriage more problematic for women than for men?

33. Do you believe, as Nozick does, that as long as they are not harming any third parties individuals ought to be free to enter into any voluntary relationships with one another that they wish?
34. Nozick's entitlement theory argues that individuals are morally entitled to justly owned property transferred justly. He thinks this means taxation of justly acquired property/income is unjust, even if the ends pursued by government are generally desirable on other grounds. If you agree with him, how would you defend his argument from the usual objections? If you disagree, then what is the problem with his argument?

### Winter 2013

1. So what do you think? Is it morally okay to flip the switch or pull the level in the Trolley problem? Why or why not?
2. Every time there is a mass shooting in the US, we hear calls to rethink all kind of laws: mental health laws, gun control laws, laws to arm educators, even laws mandating that all classrooms have two exits...Most of these proposals focus on the consequences these laws and so are consequentialist in one way or another. What do you think (if anything) deontology or virtue ethics can bring to the table in these discussions?
3. What are some worries one might have when the state claims a monopoly on how children should be educated?
4. Are there any sacred beliefs the state should punish people for even verbally contesting? Why or why not?
5. What (if anything, Anarchism is always available!) do you think justifies the US government having the right to make laws for you? Are there cases where disobedience is okay? (or even mandatory?)
6. Are acts committed out of ignorance of the facts involuntary acts, as Aristotle thinks? (presumably his thinking is that if they had known the facts, they would have acted differently)
7. Is the point of government to make us happy, as Aristotle seems to think? If not, what are other possible candidates?
8. Are there some people incapable of setting ends for themselves (who mostly act on instinct) and for whom it would be better if others told them what to do? If so, what follows from that?
9. When the declaration of independence says "All men are created equal" what do you understand that to mean?
10. Is being a good citizen just about showing up and voting when you are asked? If not, what else makes a good citizen and why?
11. In the United States, we like to think we have a lot of freedom. Which freedoms do you cherish most? (and why)
12. Should states be judged according to ordinary rules of morality? If not, should they be judged at all? And if so, how/why are the rules different?
13. To be a good politician, must a statesman be a good person?
14. Is Machiavelli's advice generally good advice for a statesman? Why or why not?
15. Is the Hobbesian sovereign the agent or the master of his people? Are the people now on Capitol Hill your agents, or are they your masters?

16. After seeing the video, which do you think is more important to your life: Negative or Positive Liberty? Why?
17. Other than the ones mentioned in the video can you think of instances where you have noticed or been confronted with a principal agent problem?
18. Do you agree with Hobbes, that the state of nature is a pretty terrible place that we must be rescued from at all costs or with Locke that's it's just full of "inconveniences" that make government helpful but not a savior?
19. Are there any topics discussed by Locke you thought helped shed light on political debates we are having today?
20. Obama's nominations for Secretary of Defense and Director of the CIA seems to be causing a lot of fuss in the capitol. Do you think these nominations for such important roles in our government should be given to the people, or because Obama is our president, and this goes to the senate for vote, must we automatically consent to these choices?
21. Metaphysics for Kant is the branch of philosophy of philosophy that deals with knowledge that doesn't come from the senses (also known as "a priori" knowledge). Do you think there's anything we can say about the way we should treat each other without consulting the real world (evidence from our senses)?
22. If anyone stands behind the saying that "the ends don't justify the means" it's Kant. What does that phrase mean to you and do you agree? What else could justify the means if not the ends?
23. Is there such a thing as a tyranny of public opinion? If so, what, if anything, should be done about it?
24. Do you agree with Mill's harm principle or are there other reasons a person's freedom may justly be restrained?
25. What does Marx mean when he says "capitalism exploits the workers"? Is his analysis sound?

## Appendix E: Essay Questions

<b>Online Topics by Semester and Frequency Distribution</b>			
Topic #	N	Semester	Wording
101	32	20164	Can capitalism be just?

101		20192	Can free-market capitalism be justified? Strong essays will examine both intrinsic and instrumental justifications for the free market and their critics.
102	5	20164	What would it mean for America to be “great”?
103	54	20131	Socrates’ commitment to justice led to his death by public execution. Was Socrates a fool to think he must accept that fate?
103		20132	Socrates’ commitment to justice led to his death by public execution. Was Socrates a fool to think he must accept that fate?
103		20141	Socrates’ commitment to political authority and the ideal of a just man led to his death by public execution. Was Socrates a fool to think he must accept that fate?
103		20142	Socrates’ commitment to political authority and the ideal of a just man led to his death by public execution. Was Socrates a fool to think he must accept that fate?
103		20154	Socrates’ commitment to political authority and the ideal of a just man led to his death by public execution. Was Socrates a fool to think he must accept that fate?
103		20164	Socrates’ commitment to justice led to his death by public execution. Was Socrates a fool to think he must accept that fate?
105	20	20131	Mill says the only thing that can warrant infringing a person's liberty is harm to another: Do you agree? Why or why not.
105		20132	Mill says the only thing that can warrant infringing a person's liberty is harm to another: Do you agree? Why or why not.

105		20154	Should governments prohibit adults from engaging in activities that are highly likely to cause harm to themselves? (For example: taking out a loan they are unlikely to be able to repay, use dangerous recreational drugs, drive without a seatbelt, ride a motorcycle without a helmet, self-medicate, smoke tobacco, offer themselves for prostitution, duel, etc.)
106	9	20154	If you knew you were going to grow up poor, would it be better to do so in a capitalist or a socialist economic system? Explain.
106		20162	If you knew you were going to grow up poor, would it be better to do so in a capitalist or a socialist economic system? Explain.
107	35	20141	Should the government be in the business of trying to make you happy?
107		20152	Is the highest purpose of government to cater to the happiness of its citizens?
107		20154	Are countries good places to live in proportion to how happy their citizens are?
107		20174	Should we evaluate political systems by how happy the citizens living in them are?
110	26	20131	Does the US Federal government have authority over you?
110		20132	Does the US Federal government have authority over you?
110		20141	Does the US Federal Government have authority over most of its citizens? (If you decide you want to write about this topic, it's a good idea to read ahead for Monday and Tuesday)
110		20142	Does the US Federal Government have authority over most of its citizens?

111	24	20152	What does Locke mean when he says that appropriation from the commons is justified “at least where there is enough and as good left in common for others?” What counts as leaving “enough and as good” in the commons? What duties does Locke think this imposes on property owners? What duties might it impose on the state?
		20193	What does Locke mean when he says that appropriation from the commons is justified “at least where there is enough and as good left in common for others?” What counts as leaving “enough and as good” in the commons? What duties do you think this might impose on the state, in a modern context, if any?
112	46	20133	Should the state try to make you a better person?
112		20141	Should the government be in the business of trying to make you a better person?
112		20142	Is it the government’s job to try and help you become a better person?
112		20192	Both Aristotle and Plato make the inculcation of civic and private virtue a key function of government. Do you agree? Should the Federal, State, or local governments of your country take an interest in shaping your moral character?
113		20142	When we disagree about what rights we have, should we give the benefit of the doubt to freedom or democracy?
115	24	20131	To be a good politician, must a statesman be a good person?
115		20132	To be a good politician, must a statesman be a good person?

115		20142	Aristotle believes that to be a good statesman you have to be a good person. Machiavelli appears to take the opposite view: a completely good person is likely to make a bad statesman. What do you think? What is the relationship (if any) between good character and good statesmanship?
115		20192	Both Aristotle and Plato make the inculcation of civic and private virtue a key function of government. Do you agree? Should the Federal, State, or local governments of your country take an interest in shaping your moral character?
116	3	20142	“Equal freedom” is an attractive ideal – endorsed by both conservatives and liberals. Yet at the same time, few can agree on what equal freedom means. Should we endorse some version of a commitment to “equal freedom”? And if so, which one?
117	4	20142	John Rawls attaches little weight to desert in his theory of distributive justice. David Schmitz thinks desert is central to questions of distributive justice. What do you think? Should we give up on desert as Rawls suggests, or should governments consider what people deserve when thinking about what people are entitled to?
118	23	20133	Does a concern for political equality mean that we should treat individuals as political equals or does it mean we should try to make them more equal (by equalizing their life chances, certain opportunities, or certain outcomes)? Remember, you cannot (always) have both. So you must either choose or find a way to reconcile the opposing values.
118		20154	Should our governments take steps to make economic opportunities more equal?
121		20131	Is the Hobbesian sovereign the agent or the master of his people? Are the people now on Capitol Hill your agents, or are they your masters?

121		20132	Is the Hobbesian sovereign the agent or the master of his people? Are the people now on Capitol Hill your agents, or are they your masters?
121		20152	Are the politicians on Capitol Hill our masters or our servants?
121		20193	Are your representatives on Capitol Hill your masters or your agents?
122	5	20131	Is wage labor harmful to the working class as Marx claims?
122		20132	Is wage labor harmful to the working class as Marx claims?
123	16	20152	Write an essay on global justice either addressing the claims of Kant, Beitz, or Carens. Make sure you have a single clear thesis about one or more of the claims they advance.
125	6	20152	Can you have a theory of justice without a theory of politics?
127	32	20154	How do Hobbes and Locke's respective accounts of the state of nature influence their thinking on the nature and purposes of government?
127		20192	Hobbes imagines the state of nature as a terrible place. Locke imagines it to be somewhat less awful. Rousseau and Kant have other views still. What do you think a state of nature might be like? How could your view inform your ideas about the proper size and scope of government?
128	1	20154	Is Socialism necessarily authoritarian?
130	19	20174	Is there room for desert in a theory of distributive justice?
132	18	20174	Can democratic rule in early twenty-first century America still be justified?



