

DEMOCRACY: RULE OF THE IGNORANT? (PHIL 253)

Spring 2014
St. Olaf College

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Office Hours: Wednesday and Friday, 3-4:30, or by appointment

Introduction

It is widely assumed that democratic citizens are largely selfish and ignorant, ill-equipped to appreciate the nuances of complex policy issues, and hopelessly swayed by the media-games of professional spinmeisters. And yet, oddly, it is also widely held that democracy is a triumph of liberal civilization, something to be sought and implemented wherever possible. These two perspectives on democracy are typically reconciled with the thought that, for all its flaws, democracy is superior to its alternatives. In Churchill's famous words, "democracy is the worst system of government except for all the others that have been tried." But whether or not that claim is true, we ought to be able to offer some good evidence for it in light of democracy's numerous and glaring flaws. And we might even aspire to claim, not merely that democracy is less bad than some saliently horrible alternatives but, indeed, that it is actually good, that there is something genuinely virtuous about the kind of society it sustains.

What is the proper justification for democracy, and what makes it a genuinely desirable form of social organization? What sort of a citizenry is required to make democracies successful, and what are the moral obligations of citizens to fulfill the demands that democracy makes of them? Is democracy a universal ideal, or is it only applicable in particular cultural contexts? Does democracy promote equality, or does it merely entrench advantages of class, race, and gender? These are the questions that we will pursue in this course. We will consider important elitist challenges to "rule by the people" and the responses given to them, and we will frame this dispute through attention to differing philosophical accounts of the underlying democratic ideal. We will assess a number of distinct philosophical accounts of democratic citizenship. And we will consider empirical findings from political science and economics that bear on our analysis.

Although no prior background in philosophy is required, students will be expected to display a substantial capacity for analytical reasoning and critical thought.

This course fulfills a WRI requirement and will therefore aim to integrate the development of students' writing skills into the curriculum. Specifically, over the course of the semester we will work on: (a) writing effectively in a philosophical style and format, (b) writing as a means to philosophical inquiry, learning, and communication, and (c) improving written work through the process of draft and revision.

Links to St. Olaf's academic integrity policy and honor code can be found at the following links. All students are expected to know and abide by these. Violations of these policies will result in failure of the course in all cases and will be reported to the Dean's Office.

<http://www.stolaf.edu/stulife/thebook/academic/integrity.html>

<http://www.stolaf.edu/stulife/thebook/academic/honor.html>

If you have a documented disability for which accommodations may be required in this class, please contact Connie Ford (ford@stolaf.edu) or Laura Knobel-Piehl (knobel@stolaf.edu) in the Academic Support Center (507-786-3288, Buntrock 108) as soon as possible to discuss accommodations. If you have already arranged accommodations through Student Accessibility Services, please arrange for the submission of your accommodation letter within the first two weeks of class. Accommodations will only be provided after the letter is submitted to me and with sufficient lead-time for me to arrange testing or other accommodations. Although I will receive the letter electronically, I expect you to initiate a conversation with me about the accommodations.

Attendance, Late Assignments, and Deadline Extensions

Attendance: If you miss more than a few classes, I will mark you down in accord with the extent of your absences. Attending class is a minimum requirement for completing the course and will have no positive effect on your grade. In other words, missing class hurts you but showing up does not help you. If you are having personal issues that interfere with your ability to attend class, come see me as soon as possible and I will do my best to find a way to accommodate you.

Late Assignments: Late papers will be marked down one fraction of a letter grade once the deadline passes, and an additional fraction for every 48 hours that have passed beyond the deadline. The maximum deduction for lateness is two full letter grades; beyond that, no additional penalty will be imposed. Final exams and blog posts will not be accepted after the deadline.

Extensions: I always grant extensions, but only under the condition that the extension is requested at least one week in advance of the deadline. I normally grant no more than a week of extra time unless you have a special reason for needing more than that.

Course Texts

The following texts are required for the course and are available for purchase in the bookstore. All other readings will be posted on moodle. The Plato, Rousseau, and J.S. Mill texts are also available for free online at <http://oll.libertyfund.org/>, though translations are different in the case of the first two. I encourage you to use the editions below since they are inexpensive (<\$10), but you may use a different version if you prefer.

Plato, *The Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, 2nd ed., Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1992

Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, trans. Donald A. Cress, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987

J.S. Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991

(we will in fact be reading *Considerations on Representative Government* and not *On Liberty*, but this is the cheapest volume containing *Considerations*)

John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 1954

Grading and Course Requirements

Class participation + 8 short (at least 130 words) blog posts: 15%
Paper 1 (5-6 pages/1500-1800 words, 2 drafts): 25%
Paper 2 (7-8 pages/2100-2400 words): 30%
Final Exam: 30%

All assignments (other than blog posts) must be completed in order to pass the course.

Provisional Schedule of Readings and Assignments

This will be subject to revisions during the term which will be posted on moodle

2/10: Introduction (no reading)

The Classical Critique

2/12: Plato, *The Republic*, Book 1: entire, Book 2: 368e-377e
2/14: *The Republic*, Book 3: 412b-end, Book 4: beginning-435e, Book 6: 484b-503e
2/17: *The Republic*, Book 7: 535a-end, Book 8: entire

The Republican Ideal

2/19: Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, Book 1: Chs. 1-8
2/21: *On the Social Contract*, Book 2: Chs. 1-7
2/24: *On the Social Contract*, Book 2: Chs. 7-12, Book 4: Chs. 1-2

Designing Democratic Institutions

2/26: J.S. Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, Chs. 3, 6 (in J.S. Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays*)
2/28: *Considerations on Representative Government*, Chs. 7-8
3/3: James Madison, *Federalist Papers* 10, 14, 39, 48, 49, 51 (moodle)

Rule of the Ignorant?

3/5: Bryan Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter*, Ch. 3 (moodle)
3/7: Jason Brennan, "Polluting the Polls: When Citizens Should Not Vote" (moodle)
3/10: WRITING DAY
3/12: Joseph Schumpeter, excerpts from *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (moodle)
3/14: Anthony Downs, excerpts from *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (moodle)

The Great Democratic Public?

3/17: John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, Ch. 1
3/19: *The Public and Its Problems*, Chs. 3-4
3/21: *The Public and Its Problems*, Ch. 5

First draft of first paper due by 11 PM via moodle

SPRING BREAK

The Wisdom of Crowds

3/31: Elizabeth Anderson, "The Epistemology of Democracy"

4/2: WRITING DAY

4/4: NO CLASS (I will be attending a conference in London)

4/7: Philip Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment*, Ch. 2 (moodle)

4/9: Ben Saunders, "Democracy, Political Equality, and Majority Rule" (moodle)

4/11: Joshua Cohen, "Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy" (moodle)

4/14: Bruce Ackerman and James S. Fishkin, "Deliberation Day" (moodle)

Second draft of first paper due by 11 PM via moodle

4/16: Kenneth Shepsle, *Analyzing Politics*, pp. 22-30, 39-77 (other pages useful but not necessary) (moodle)

4/18: Thomas Christiano, "Public Choice vs. Democracy" (moodle)

4/21: WRITING DAY

Justice, Equality and Democracy

4/23: Elizabeth Anderson, "What is the Point of Equality?" pp. 312-337 (moodle)

4/25: Carol Pateman, "Feminism and Democracy" (moodle)

4/28: Robert Dahl, excerpt from *A Preface to Economic Democracy* (moodle)

First draft of second paper due for peer feedback by 9 PM

4/30: WRITING DAY

5/2: Andrew Altman, "Democratic Self-Determination and the Disenfranchisement of Felons" (moodle)

5/5: Elizabeth Anderson, "Democratic Ideals and Segregation" (moodle)

5/7: Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres, excerpts from *The Miner's Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy* (moodle)

Religion and Democracy

5/9: Christopher Eberle, "Religion, Pacificism, and the Doctrine of Restraint" (moodle)

5/12: Khaled Abou El Fadl, "Islam and the Challenge of Democracy" (moodle)

Second draft of second paper due

5/14: Concluding discussion (no reading)

Final Exams due no later than 4 PM, May 21, submitted via moodle