

Democracy: What's the Big Idea?

PSCI 210 - Spring 2023

A team-taught seminar offered by the members of the Political Science Department

Lead instructor: Jim Simeone, CLA 251

Course overview

Democracy is easy to overpraise in theory, and it is often disappointing in practice. It frustrates our hopes and frequently thwarts even modest expectations. All this makes the study of democracy messy. Yet, it is a governmental system most of us can't flourish without. Winston Churchill called it the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time. Robert Escarpit perhaps had it best when he said democracy is when you hear knocking at your door at five in the morning and presume it's the milkman.

The proposition that Abraham Lincoln advanced in his Gettysburg Address -- that government of the people, by the people, and for the people should not perish from the earth -- rests on several assumptions that we will turn over and examine carefully throughout this semester. There are several big ideas we will consider in this course. We will ask: What do ordinary citizens really know about politics? Do elections matter? What do they determine if not citizen preference? And, how educative is political participation? We focus on citizens because while capitalism produces consumers, it often weakens citizenship; and, as Benjamin Barber asks, how can there be democracy without citizens? Finally, we will also investigate the decisions involved in the transition to democracy and the factors which lead democracies to die. The evidence we examine in this course may encourage or discourage you. That's one way the messiness comes in.

The Western canon of democratic literature covers a lot of ground, and we will sample generously from it. Students will gain an understanding of some of the big ideas that motivated the American Founders to write the Constitution as they did. We will grapple with the ideas that some observers refer to as protective democracy, participatory democracy, and elite-driven democracy. We will seek to understand how democracies gain footholds in post-authoritarian environments, and we will consider the fraught circumstances that lead to democratic collapse.

This will be a wide-ranging seminar that prepares you for your continued studies in political science, regardless of your areas of particular interest. We in the Political Science Department are excited to offer you this opportunity to read alongside us and to consider both the normative and the empirical puzzles surrounding this messy business we call democracy.

Course outline

We begin with **three models of democracy**: citizens can be viewed primarily as governors, intermediaries, or electors. We will associate these models with Rousseau, J.S. Mill, and Schumpeter, respectively. Each model expresses a distinct, overarching value: protection, deliberation, and competition. Such value pluralism, written into the very DNA of democratic aspiration, is another dimension of messiness.

Next, we will consider some of the most important **democratic institutions**: elections and political parties. These vehicles for the aggregation of public preferences can be more or less effective as vote mobilizers, candidate recruiters, policy formulators, and value defenders. Beyond the strengths and weakness of parties, we will also discuss how different electoral systems shape and channel voters' preferences, and empower or marginalize groups of citizens.

Citizens come next. **Robust citizen engagement faces at least three major obstacles**: a dearth of opportunities, a lack of interest, and cognitive shortcomings. While conceptually separate, these three often work in concert to limit citizen input. The silver lining - in something of a paradox - is that the absence of strident and continuous citizen engagement is probably our salvation about as often as it is a source of lament and hand-wringing by good-government advocates. Some amount of slippage provides a pressure-relief valve, diffusing or blunting the loads that could otherwise overwhelm democratic institutions.

With a framework for thinking about values, institutions, and citizens, we then turn to an examination of the **conditions (causal factors or independent variables) that produce democracies**, including macro-structural theories that focus on the relationships between modernization and democracy and actor-process theories that focus on the decision-making matrices of political actors in transition contexts. Finally, we will read about **conditions (causal factors) that tend to foster democratic breakdown**. Historic and contemporary cases (indeed, right now) of transitions to and from democracy offer an opportunity to understand how we in advanced democracies got here, but also how this progress can be a two-way street.

Course structure

This seminar consists of guided reading and plenty of group discussions. In order to allow students to make significant contributions to our experience, student duets will share class presentations, often on Thursdays. Discussion co-leaders should prepare well framed questions for the group to discuss. On those days, the other students will also bring to class one or two questions on the readings. Posing your discussion questions during class will contribute to your grade. **Student participation does not necessarily mean knowing all of the answers, but it is important to display an understanding of the relevant questions based on the readings.**

The faculty will share the teaching roles. However, one instructor (in this iteration, Simeone) will take the lead and will be responsible for assignments, grading student work, office hours, and other administrative matters. Others will take turns visiting class for one or two weeks at a time. Often, more than one instructor will attend class meetings. This rotating structure will offer many points of view for students to consider as the semester progresses, but the lead instructor should be the students' first stop when seeking help.

After the first month of the semester, you will produce a short persuasive paper that identifies a meaningful claim, the evidence for this claim, and an objection, all based on the syllabus readings. This project will also involve instructor-based and peer review on Google docs. After the first draft has been reviewed, you will revise and resubmit a final draft in a separate Google folder. Both the final draft and the peer review will be graded for quality.

By semester's end each student will also **produce a principal paper** that applies the readings to a particular case. This will give you an opportunity to learn more about a particular nation at a particular moment in time. Again, a prompt will provide guidance. Before launching into the work, each student will produce a **one-page, skillfully-written prospectus** that presents the question and briefly describes the literature that will be used to support the paper's central claim and objections. You will receive timely feedback, including a grade, on this prospectus.

Course grading breakdown

Persuasive essay (1000 words)	10%
Persuasive essay peer-review	5%
Prospectus for principal paper	5%
Principal paper (3000 words)	15%
Principal paper presentation	10%
Turn at discussion co-leadership	5%
Class participation and attendance	15%
Quizzes	15% (5% each)
Final exam	20%

Because the seminar format requires active participation, please prioritize attendance. After three absences, for whatever reason, deductions will be made to your class participation grade. There will be no make-up quizzes.

Required texts

The following texts will be available for purchase at the IWU bookstore:

A. C. Grayling, *Democracy and Its Critics*. One World, 2017

Adam Przeworski, *Why Bother with Elections?* Polity Press, 2018

Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*, Princeton University Press, 2016

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt: *How Democracies Die*. Crown Press, 2018

Pdfs of the other class readings can be found on our Moodle page. **Background readings**, in their own Moodle page folder, will be especially useful as you prepare the principal paper. Each paper must cite and apply the ideas of at least one background reading.

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Class schedule

Introduction

1-12 Receive syllabus; review course structure and assignments; get acquainted

Class reading: Grayling: *Democracy and its Crises*, 1-32

Background Reading: Renske Doorenspleet: *Democratic Transitions*, 1-32

Part 1: Models of democracy [Simeone]

1-17 The citizen as governor

Class reading: Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, 17, 23-27; 36-41; 54-56; 79-84

1-18 Martin Luther King Day Teach-In 11-12:45

1-19 The citizen as intermediary and elector

Class reading: Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, 179-198
Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 250-283

Background reading: Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, 22-35

1-24 Against democracy and for epistocracy

Class reading: Brennan, *Against Democracy*, 1-18; 25-53

Student discussion leaders #1 and #2 guide class discussion

1-26 **Class debate: Is epistocracy feasible?**

Class reading: Brennan, *Against Democracy*, 54-88; 109-111; 140-143

Moraro, "Against Epistocracy," *Social Theory and Practice* 44 (2018):199-216

Background reading: Kinder and Herzog, "Democratic Discussion" in *Reconsidering the Democratic Public*, Marcus and Hanson, eds., 347-373

Shapiro, *Democracy's Place*, 79-108

**DUE 1-30 Draft paper on epistocracy due in Google docs folder by 4pm
(peer reviewers have until 2-3 to add comments on Google)**

Part 2: Political parties and elections [Renner]

1-31 "Democracy is unthinkable save in terms of political parties"

Class reading: Dalton, *Citizen Politics*, 137-156

Morlino, *Political Parties*, 212-225

Background reading: Dalton, *Citizen Politics*, 157-203

- 2-2 Westminster, PR, McGovern-Frazer reforms, and oppositions
Class Reading: Rosenbluth and Shapiro, *Responsible Parties* 1-41
Student discussion leaders #3 and #4 guide class discussion

DUE 2-6 Final version of epistocracy paper due in Google docs folder by 4pm

- 2-7 SMD and PR systems and how electors and incumbents shape who governs
Class reading: Przeworski, *Why Bother with Elections?*, 1-27; 47-74

Background reading: Erikson, Stimson & McKuen, *The Macro Polity*, 237-263; 272-276

- 2-9 What elections can and cannot do
Class reading: Przeworski, *Why Bother with Elections?*, 77-134
Student discussion leaders #5 and #6 guide class discussion

Background reading: Phillips, *The Politics of Presence*, 1-56

Part 3: Citizens and democratic culture [Shaw]

- 2-14 Do electorates select candidates based on ideology?
Class reading: Kinder and Kalmoe, *Neither Liberal nor Conservative: Ideological Innocence in the American Public*, 11-43
View Shaw video on Moodle

Background reading: Converse, “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics,” in David Apter (ed.) *Ideology and Discontent*, 206-256

- 2-16 Assessing the retrospective theory of democratic accountability
Class reading: Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*, 116-145; 267-296
Student discussion leaders #7 and #8 guide class discussion

Background reading: Gilens, “Two-Thirds Full? Citizen Competence and Democratic Governance,” in Berinsky (ed) *New Directions in Public Opinion*, 2nd edition, 52-76

DUE: 2-17 Prospectus in Google docs folder by 4pm

- 2-21 Civil society and democratic trust: social capital
Class reading: Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*, 121-185

Background reading: Tilly: “Trust and Rule,” *Theory and Society* 33 (2004):1-30
della Porta, *How Social Movements Can Save Democracy*, 1-23

- 2-23 The impact of modernization: Institutions or values?
Class reading: Inglehart and Welzel: *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy* 1-47; 173-209

Student discussion leaders #9 and #10 guide class discussion

Background reading: Dalton, *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation is Reshaping American Politics, 2nd edition*, 21-59

Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*, 1-44

Pateman, *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory*, 141-178

DUE 2-24 Revised prospectus in Google docs by 4pm

- 2-28 Democracy and responsiveness [Simeone]
Class reading: Soroka and Wlezien, *Degrees of Democracy*, 1-30, 145-182

Quiz #1

- 3-2 Is retrospective voting on economic performance rational?
Class reading: Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*, 146-176

Student discussion leaders #11 and #12 guide class discussion

Part 4: Transitions to democracy: Consolidation and breakdown [Simeone]

- 3-7 Wealthy societies tend to stay democratic but modernization does not produce democracy
Class reading: Przeworski and Limongi, “Modernization: Theories and Facts,” *World Politics* 49 (1997): 155-83

Quiz #2

Background reading: Reuschmeyer, Huber Stephens, and Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy*, 12-39

- 3-9 Modernization and economic development do tend to produce democracy after all
Class reading: Boix and Stokes, “Endogenous Democratization,” *World Politics* 55 (2003):517-49

Student discussion leaders #13 and #14 guide class discussion

Background reading: Doorenspleet: “Reassessing the Three Waves of Democratization,” *World Politics* 52 (2000):385-406

- 3-11/3-19 Spring Break

3-21 Democratic fragility

Class reading: Haggard and Kaufman: “Inequality and Regime Change: Democratic Transitions and the Stability of Democratic Rule.” *American Political Science Review* 106 (2012):495-516

Background reading: Haggard and Kaufman: “Democratization during the Third Wave.” *Annual Reviews of Political Science* 19 (2016):125-144

Munro: “The Political Consequences of Local Electoral Systems: Democratic Change and the Politics of Differential Citizenship in South Africa.” *Comparative Politics* 33 (2001):295-313

Slater, Smith, and Nair: “Economic Origins of Democratic Breakdown? The Redistributive Model and the Postcolonial State.” *Perspectives on Politics* 12 (2014):353-374

3-23 Transitions to democracy

Class reading: Przeworski: *Democracy and the Market*, 51-99

Student discussion leaders #15 and #16 guide class discussion

Background Reading: Bratton and van de Walle: *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective*, 19-48

O’Donnell and Schmitter: *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*, 3-14

Bermeo: “Interests, Inequality and Illusion in the Choice for Fair Elections.” *Comparative Political Studies* 43 (2010):1119-1147

3-28 Incomplete or broken or disrupted consolidation

Class reading: Svobik: “Polarization versus Democracy.” *Journal of Democracy* 30 (2019):20-31

Linz and Stepan: *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 3-15

Quiz #3

Background reading: Linz: *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Crisis, Breakdown, and Re-equilibration*, 3-13; 14-49

Svobik: “Which Democracies Will Last? Coups, Incumbent Takeovers, and the Dynamic of Democratic Consolidation.” *British Journal of Political Science* 45 (2015):715-738

Part 5: Democratic demons and collapse

3-30 Democratic contradictions

Class reading: Grayling, *Democracy and Its Crisis*, 1-32; 131-188

Student discussion leaders #17 and #18 guide class discussion

Background reading: Pabst: *The Demons of Liberal Democracy*, 1-33; 73-99

4-4 Authoritarian behaviors and the gatekeepers containing them

Class reading: Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 1-52; 72-96

Background reading: Page and Gilens, *Democracy in America? What Has Gone Wrong and What We Can Do About It*, 53-177

4-6 Democratic guardrails under attack

Class reading: Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 97-203

Student discussion leaders #19 and #20 guide class discussion

Background reading: Manuel Castells, *Rupture: The Crisis of Liberal Democracy*, 35-86

4-11 The consequences of membership: Partisan rationalization and its implications

Class reading: Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*, 267-296

Background reading: Fishkin and Mansbridge, "Introduction," *Daedalus* 146 (2017):6-13

4-13 A realist theory of democracy (given all the ways the folk theory doesn't work)

Class reading: Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*, 297-328

Student discussion leaders #21 and #22 guide class discussion

Conclusion

4-18 Student presentations

4-20 Student presentations

DUE 4-24 Principal paper in Google docs by 4pm

4-25 Student presentations

4-27 Reading Day

4-28 Final Exam 8-10am