

Brooklyn Institute for Social Research
Fall 2018, Tuesdays 6:00-9:00 pm
Chapterhouse, 620 S 9th Street
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Introduction to Democratic Theory

Democracy, as an idea, is everywhere in contemporary life. But how democratic is our society and what does this ambiguous and contested concept in our political vocabulary actually mean? Although the history of democracy in the West dates back to classical Greece, it is only over the last two hundred years that this idea—that political authority ultimately rests in the people, the demos—has been adapted to modern conditions like the nation-state, capitalism, and constitutional government. Not surprisingly, this has also raised many questions about the meaning of democracy and its potential as the form of government most conducive to human flourishing, equality, and freedom. How is majority rule reconciled with representative government? What antagonisms are contained within the modified concept of “liberal democracy”? How do democratic ideals and economic conditions come into conflict? How can democratic government best be organized within a modern state? Can a sense of the public, common good be preserved under such conditions? And, how should we define the boundaries of the demos, the people, itself?

In this course, we’ll attempt to answer these questions through an examination of key works in classic and contemporary democratic theory. We’ll begin with selections from classical and modern accounts, including writings by Aristotle, Rousseau, Publius, and Tocqueville. Following that, we’ll bring our focus onto debates from the mid-twentieth century to the present, comparing and contrasting different normative models of democracy, including elite (Joseph Schumpeter), pluralist (Robert Dahl), participatory (John Dewey, Carole Pateman), deliberative (Jurgen Habermas), and agonistic (Sheldon Wolin, Chantal Mouffe) schools of thought. Along the way, we’ll consider questions such as: the prerequisites for a political regime to be considered democratic; the conditions under which public life, political participation, and rights and interests can be balanced; how democratic procedures and institutions relate to democracy as a normative ideal; and the relationship between the (related but not identical) philosophies of democracy and liberalism.

Format and Requirements

This course is a seminar! The only basic requirements are completing the reading assignments, coming to our meetings, and participating in our discussion.

I have assigned a set of readings intended to be manageable for people who are not full-time students; we aim for less than 100 pages per week. Some of them will be more difficult than others, but don’t let that scare you off! Instead, make a note and post your thoughts and questions on our Google Group (below), and we will work through these parts together in class. I will direct the discussion, and do my best to answer your questions, but this class is a collaborative effort and it will only benefit from your ongoing participation and engagement.

All readings can be downloaded from the [BISR Intro to Democratic Theory](#) folder.

I have set up a class Google group, [BISRDemocraticTheory](#), that we can use for communication. Each week, I will use this feature to post questions and things to pay attention to in the readings. These will be meant as reading guides, and you do not have to respond to any of the questions I pose. But don't shy away from posting your own excerpts from the readings—anything you find interesting, problematic, or just difficult to wrap your mind around! Also feel free to ask questions and to respond to each other's posts. During our meetings, we will use these conversations as launching points or incorporate them into our discussion.

Feel free to email me if you would like to share any thoughts, comments, questions, or would like suggestions for additional readings.

Course Schedule

Session I, November 13: What is Democracy? Some Classic Views

Aristotle, *Politics*, pp. 77-85, 106-113, 176-184
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Social Contract*, pp. 147-150, 156-159, 179-180, 205-207
Publius, *The Federalist*, No. 10 (pp. 42-49), No. 51 (pp. 267-272), No. 63 (pp. 325-332)
Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 235-242, 248-249, 479-488

Session II, November 27: Visions of Democracy: Elite, Pluralist, Participatory

Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, pp. 250-273 (optional: 284-302)
Robert Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory*, pp. 133-135, 145-151
Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, pp. 1-44

Session III, December 4: Deliberation and Power in the Public Sphere

John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, pp. 143-184
Jurgen Habermas, "Three Normative Models of Democracy", pp. 21-30
Iris Marion Young, "Communication and the Other", pp. 120-135
Chantal Mouffe, "Democracy, Power, and 'The Political'", pp. 17-35

Session IV, December 11: The Boundaries of the Democratic Community

Sheldon Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy", pp. 31-45
Chantal Mouffe, "Feminism, Citizenship, and Radical Democratic Politics", pp. 369-384
Jan-Werner Muller, "The People Must be Extracted from within the People: Reflections on Populism", pp. 483-493
Juliet Hooker, "Black Lives Matter and the Paradoxes of U.S. Black Politics: From Democratic Sacrifice to Democratic Repair", pp. 449-469
Elizabeth Anderson, "Democratic Ideals and Segregation", pp. 89-111 (optional)