Contemporary Democratic Theory
Isak Tranvik

Is liberal democracy dying? Many pundits seem to think so—and they think “populist” groups are the culprit. Many “populist” groups hold a different view; they often blame liberalism, among other things, for democracy’s demise. These debates raise several questions about the past, present, and future of liberal democracy.

- First, what is liberal democracy? Is it an institutional arrangement, a practice/way of life, a mix of both or something else entirely? Is it intrinsically valuable or is it merely, as Churchill once said, the least worst form of government? Perhaps it is not valuable?
- Third, what might the future of democracy look like? More concretely, how might recent economic, social, technological, and ecological developments influence our ideas about democracy’s value (or lack thereof)?

This course provides an overview of some historical, theoretical, and empirical answers to these questions. After motivating our inquiry by reading some reflections on the current state of democracy, we will briefly survey ancient and modern origins of the idea of liberal democracy. In the next section, we turn to more contemporary contributions to democratic theory to explore the relationship between democracy and rights, voting, inequality, the market, empire, race, gender, and the “people.” In the third and final section, we will consider how mass migration, mass media, and climate change, among other things, might shape our judgments about the future of democracy.

Course Objectives

This is an intermediate level course in comparative political theory. Some academic background in political theory, political philosophy, and/or political science is helpful, but it is not required. If you have questions about your preparedness for the course, please contact me.

By the end of the course, successful students will be able to:

- Identify and evaluate the historical origins of the idea of democracy
- Articulate and assess diverse critiques of the ideal of democracy
- Critically evaluate contemporary theories of democracy

Course Expectations

The course meets once a week for two hours, which will be divided between lecture and discussion. The readings are designed to be short enough that you can actually do them (less than 50 pages per class session), and you will be expected to have finished them before the class period in which we are discussing them. To help you meet this expectation, there will be
randomly distributed reading quizzes throughout the semester. The other components of your grade will be weekly written reading responses and two short papers.

For 3 ECTS Credits:
- 35% x 2: Short papers (op-eds)
- 15%: Take-home exam
- 15%: In-class participation (reading quizzes)

For 5 ECTS Credits:
- 25% x 2: Short papers (op-eds)
- 20%: Out-of-class participation (reading responses)
- 15%: Take-home exam
- 15%: In-class participation (reading quizzes)

Short papers (op-eds)

You will write two op-ed style short papers (otherwise known as opinion pieces) during the semester. Each will be about 1000 words (four to five double-spaced pages). The first is due on **Friday, June 23 at 10:00 p.m.** The second is due on **Friday, July 28 at 10:00 p.m.** These pieces will be uploaded to our class Moodle site and you will receive extra credit (one quiz worth) for submitting one of them to an outside website, newspaper, magazine, blog, etc. by the end of the term. We will discuss how to write an op-ed during class.

- First topic: You will respond to the too much/too little democracy debate that has been taking place in recent months. You will argue that a particular area/region/place you have chosen to write about currently has too much or too little democracy. You may also argue that it has the right amount of democracy.
- Second topic: Anything that relates to contemporary democratic politics (see me if you have any questions about what topics satisfy this requirement).

Take-home Exam

The cumulative final exam (**available on Moodle on Monday, July 24**) will consist of three essay questions regarding material from the entire course. You will have some choice about which questions to answer, but all questions will ask you to demonstrate your proficiency in the first three course objectives: i.e., identifying and evaluating the historical origins of the idea of democracy; articulating and assessing diverse critiques of the idea of democracy; and critically evaluating contemporary theories of democracy.

Exam logistics:

- You will have three hours to complete the exam once you open it.
- You cannot copy and paste text into the text box—you must write directly in the text box on the Moodle site.
- You may use your course notes and course texts.
The exam must be completed by **Monday, August 21** (exactly one month after it is made available). While you may take the exam whenever you would like, I would recommend doing so later rather than sooner (so that you have more time to prepare).

**In-class participation**

There will be a handful reading quizzes distributed randomly throughout the semester, which will be graded on a four-point scale. They will test basic knowledge of the reading, and should be very easy if you have done the reading carefully. They also serve as a mechanism to incentivize attendance and timeliness, and cannot be made up under any circumstances. This means that if you are absent or too late to class on a day when there is a quiz, you will receive a zero for that quiz, unless you have a note from your academic dean, in which case you may submit an extra reading response for the week as a replacement. I will, however, drop your lowest quiz score.

**Out-of-class participation**

Those taking the course for 5 ECTS credits will submit a **total of eight** (including the response due on April 27) written reading responses of 300-500 words on **Thursday at 10 p.m.** each week. These will also be graded on a four-point scale, and in order to be considered for full credit, they must be uploaded to Moodle by 10 p.m. Late responses uploaded before class begins will be given a maximum score of three; responses received any time after that (i.e., any time until the end of the semester) will be given a maximum score of two. I will drop your lowest score.

Writing is intimately connected to thinking and practicing analytic writing is one of the best ways to absorb an argument and clarify your thinking about it. These papers can take a variety of forms. You may want to set two or three different authors in conversation with one another; analyze and pursue an argument you liked, playing out its implications; think about how an author’s argument applies (or doesn’t) to a particular worldly example; present a thoughtful criticism; and so on. You can be creative here, but your response paper must respond to a main line of argument in one or more of the readings.

Reading responses are also your best opportunity to practice the skills you will need on the exam and papers, and to receive feedback from me about your work.

**Required Books**


**Course Policies**

Use of cell phones and laptops in class is prohibited, unless I give you special permission. This is for your benefit! Well-designed studies have demonstrated that taking notes by hand improves
retention.\textsuperscript{1} Moreover, a wealth of human experience reveals that we are weak beings forever subject to temptation, and must be restrained in order to achieve our own best interests.\textsuperscript{2} However, there are exceptions, and if you feel that you are among them, please contact me. Cheating or plagiarism will result, at a minimum, in failure on the assignment, and very likely more serious consequences at the hands of the Dean’s office. More information about what constitutes plagiarism can be found at the links below, but as a general rule, if there is any question about whether something is plagiarism, it probably is. If you have questions about any of this, please feel free to contact me.

What counts as cheating? [http://integrity.duke.edu/new.html](http://integrity.duke.edu/new.html)
What is plagiarism? [https://plagiarism.duke.edu/](https://plagiarism.duke.edu/)
How do I cite sources? [http://library.duke.edu/research/citing/](http://library.duke.edu/research/citing/)

Currently, the university does not have a formal policy on children in the classroom. The policy described here is thus, a reflection of my own beliefs and commitments to student, staff and faculty parents.

- All exclusively breastfeeding babies are welcome in class as often as is necessary to support the breastfeeding relationship. Because not all women can pump sufficient milk, and not all babies will take a bottle reliably, I never want students to feel like they have to choose between feeding their baby and continuing their education. You and your nursing baby are welcome in class anytime.
- For older children and babies, I understand that minor illnesses and unforeseen disruptions in childcare often put parents in the position of having to choose between missing class to stay home with a child and leaving him or her with someone you or the child does not feel comfortable with. While this is not meant to be a long-term childcare solution, occasionally bringing a child to class in order to cover gaps in care is perfectly acceptable.
- In all cases where babies and children come to class, I ask that you sit close to the door so that if your little one needs special attention and is disrupting learning for other students, you may step outside until their need has been met.
- Finally, I hope that you will feel comfortable disclosing your student-parent status to me. This is the first step in my being able to accommodate any special needs that arise. While I maintain the same high expectations for all student in my classes regardless of parenting status, I am happy to problem solve with you in a way that makes you feel supported as you strive for school-parenting balance.

\textsuperscript{2} See, e.g., Homer, (~750 BCE), \textit{The Odyssey}. In Book XII, Odysseus famously binds himself to the mast of his ship, instructing his crew to plug their own ears with wax and refuse to untie him until after they have passed the island of the Sirens. This allows him to experience their seductive song without steering his ship into the rocks, as every other sailor to pass by the island has done. Not having laptops in class is just like that.
Finally, you are invited and encouraged to talk with me about your questions, thoughts, papers, or whatever. As noted above, I’m available before class or by appointment. You can contact me via email at isak.tranvik@duke.edu. I normally respond to emails within 24 hours.

**Class Schedule** (subject to change as we go)

**Introduction**

*Why is democratic theory important? Is it important? Why study it?*

April 21: Course overview (I will not be in class)
- Syllabus distribution
- **Respond to prompt (due by Thursday, April 27 at 10 p.m.)**

April 28: Democracy in the Age of Trump

*(Some) Historical Origins*

*What is democracy? Why was it valued? Who valued it? Who didn’t?*

May 5: *(Some) Historical Origins of Democracy*
- Pericles’ Funeral Oration ([https://online.hillsdale.edu/document.doc?id=355](https://online.hillsdale.edu/document.doc?id=355))

May 12: The Social Contract
- John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (chapters 2-4, 7-9, 11)

May 19: Constitutional Democracy

**Contemporary Theories of Democracy**

*What versions, if any, of democracy are best suited for contemporary political communities?*

May 26: Liberal Democracy
Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* pp. 250-283 (posted on Moodle)


June 2: Participatory Democracy

- Ben Barber, *Strong Democracy*, pp. 3-25.
- Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”

June 9: Deliberative Democracy


June 16: Radical Democracy

- Sheldon Wollin, “Fugitive Democracy,” *Constellations*

The Critics

*Is something called democracy, either as a system of government or a “way of life,” worth defending? Or is it too inefficient, inevitably corruptible, or feckless? If so, what are the alternatives?*

June 23: Meritocracy

- Daniel Bell, *The China Model* (pp. 1-10, 14-64)

June 30: The Left

July 7: The State of Exception
- Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology* (pp. 5-16)
- Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (pp. 19-37)
- Donald Trump, “Inaugural Address”

**Democracy in Future**

How can/should democratic theories account for “difference,” the changing climate, and globalization? What are the limits of approaches surveyed earlier? And what does this tell us about our theories of democracy?

July 14: Democracy and “Difference”
- Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question”
- Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (selections)

July 21: Democracy and Inequality
- Jed Purdy, “To Have and To Have Not,” *Los Angeles Review of Books* ([https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/to-have-and-have-not/](https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/to-have-and-have-not/))
- Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration* (pp. 89-111)