Pol484S/2026S
Democratic Theory
(Fall Term 2021)

Professor: Melissa S. Williams
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Office hours: Wednesday, 2-4 PM, Sidney Smith Hall, Room 3040 or online
Seminar: Monday, 2-5 PM, Larkin Building, Room 340

Course description

This seminar examines the idea of democracy from a range of historical, normative and theoretical perspectives. Although it is not a comprehensive survey of democratic theory, the course seeks to expose students both to some of the classic debates in the history of democratic thought and to some influential contemporary works in democratic theory. Throughout the course, we will explore the authors’ answers to three questions that all theories of democracy implicitly or explicitly address:

1. What is “democracy”? (the definitional or semantic question)
2. What is democracy’s value? (the normative question)
3. What are the practices that are constitutive of democracy? (the institutional question)

As we will see, the institutional question is the point at which the normative foundations of democracy meet the empirical or descriptive claims about the contexts in which democracy is possible or desirable, and one of the goals of the course is to help you refine your skills at analytically distinguishing normative and empirical claims as they operate in a particular theory.

Our seminar unfolds at a moment when representative democracy as we know it in Western societies is undergoing significant disruption, even crisis. Although it is beyond the scope of the course to delve deeply into this crisis, my hope is that our studies will equip you with some theoretical tools that will help you to make sense of democracy’s current condition and its possible futures.

Course readings:

All course readings are available through Quercus or online through UofT Libraries.

Although they are not assigned texts, you may find the following overviews of democratic theory helpful:


For each week, I have added a number of suggested further readings to the required readings for the course. These are not meant to be exhaustive of the relevant literature for each theme – the
literature in democratic theory is voluminous – but just to point you to some additional sources that might help to deepen your thinking about a particular set of debates. These suggested readings might be a good place to begin filling out your bibliography for your research paper. The syllabus includes both some “classics” in 20th and 21st century democratic theory (marked with an asterisk) and important contemporary contributions to this vast literature.

Course requirements:

- Reading and participation. This is a reading-intensive course and you will need to adopt strategies for reading all of the assigned material before class. Each member of the seminar is expected to attend every class having carefully studied the readings and having read response essays on the Quercus portal. Active, informed, and thoughtful participation in class discussion, based on a thorough reading of the assigned works, will count for 20 percent of your mark in the course. Should you be unable to attend class because of illness, please let me know in advance, via the Quercus email facility.

- Response essays and presentations. Twice during the semester, each student will prepare a 2-page (500 word) critical response to the week’s readings and should be prepared to present a brief summary in class. These essays must be posted on the course portal no later than 6:00 PM the evening before class. Each essay will be worth 10 percent of your final mark, for a total of 20 percent. Late response essays will not be accepted.

- Term paper proposal, due on Quercus by 2:00 PM on Monday, October 25. Write a brief (800-1200 words) proposal for your term paper, stating your thesis question and including a bibliography of the main sources you will be relying upon (the bibliography is not included in the word limit). Your bibliography should be comprised of at least two or three major works from the syllabus, but should also include sources from the wider literature to which you have been guided through your research and through discussion with the professor. This proposal is worth 10 percent of your final mark. Late penalties will accrue at the rate of 1 percent per day, including weekends.

- Term papers, due by 11:59 PM on Thursday, December 9, via turnitin.com on the Quercus portal. Undergraduate term papers should be 3750-5000 words in length; graduate papers should be 5000-6250 words. Do not exceed the maximum word limit. Papers should be written in 12-point type, double spaced. Make sure to use a standard style guide (e.g., MLA, Chicago) for references. The term paper is worth 50 percent of your final mark in the course. Late penalties will accrue at the rate of 1 percent per day, including weekends.

Academic integrity:

Academic integrity is fundamental to learning and scholarship at the University of Toronto. Participating honestly, respectfully, responsibly, and fairly in this academic community ensures that the U of T degree that you earn will be valued as a true indication of your individual academic achievement, and will continue to receive the respect and recognition it deserves.

Please make sure you are familiar with the University of Toronto’s Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters (http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/policies/behaveac.htm). It is the
rule book for academic behaviour at UofT, and you are expected to know the rules. I take plagiarism very, very seriously.

Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to turnitin.com for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the turnitin.com reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University’s use of the Turnitin.com service are described on the turnitin.com web site.

Schedule of Class Meetings and Course Readings

Week 1: Introduction
September 13, 2021

Suggestions for further reading:

Week 2: Ancient Democracy as a Model
September 20, 2021

Suggestions for further reading:

**Week 3: Representative “democracy”**

September 27, 2021


Suggestions for further reading:


**Week 4: Pluralist democracy**

October 4, 2021


Suggestions for further reading:


**October 11, 2021: No class (Thanksgiving Holiday)**

**Week 5: Participatory democracy**

October 18, 2021

Suggestions for further reading:

**October 25, 2021, 2:00 PM: Proposal due**

**Week 6: Deliberative democracy**

**October 25, 2021**

Suggestions for further reading:

**Week 7: Inclusive democracy**

**November 1, 2021**


Suggestions for further reading:

**November 8, 2021: No class (Reading Week)**

**Week 8: Agonistic democracy**

**November 15, 2021**


Suggestions for further reading:
Week 9: Race, Colonialism and Democracy
November 22, 2021
- Joel Olson, _The Abolition of White Democracy_ (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

Suggestions for further reading:

Week 10: Parties
November 29, 2021

Suggestions for further reading:
- Frances McCall Rosenbluth and Ian Shapiro, _Responsible Parties: Saving Democracy from Itself_ (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

Week 11: Populism, Truth, and Democracy
December 6, 2021

Suggestions for further reading:


Week 12: Bringing the Lot Back In?
December 9, 2021 (“Make-up Monday”)


Suggestions for further reading:


**December 9, 11:59 PM – Final paper due**