

## POT 4311: PROBLEMS OF DEMOCRACY (FALL 2025)

Instructor: Yuanxin Wang  
Meeting Times: M, W, F 2 (8:30-9:20AM)  
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Classroom: Pugh Hall 120  
OH: R 12-2PM, By Appointment

### Course Description

The global popularity of democracy today has been increasingly haunted by its ambiguous meaning and contested substance. While it has been often associated with various ideas such as freedom, equality, constitution, representation, and even revolution, democracy, the venerable Greek term, originally signifies the rule (*kratos*) by the people (*demos*). But who are the people? How do and should they rule? What are the justifications and, if any, limitations of their ruling? An investigation on how *past* political thinkers and activists reflected on these questions not only helps us de-familiarize and problematize *current* opinions about democracy but also points toward alternative *futures* of democratic ideals.

This advanced undergraduate course situates the ongoing debates about democracy and its problems in a larger historical and philosophical framework. We will study a sampling of classic and contemporary literature on democracy. We will begin with the history of democracy, ranging from ancient Athenian democracy to revolutionary democracies in the modern world, and draw insights from their advocates and critics. We will then return to the contemporary world and examine debates about the normative values and justifications of democracy. Finally, we will interrogate current challenges to democracy (i.e. populism, racial domination, social media) and consider various attempts to solve or mitigate these problems.

No lesson is intended to espouse, promote, advance, inculcate, or compel a particular feeling, perception, viewpoint or belief.

### Course Objectives

1. Foundational Knowledge: Students are expected to understand key historical ideas and moments in the development of democracy and identify key debates in contemporary democratic theory as presented in the course.
2. Application and Integration: Students are expected to develop an ability to apply and synthesize the concepts and arguments they have learned in the course to analyze democratic theories and practices.
3. Learning to Think Differently: Students are expected to develop a reflexive perspective on the reading material. They are also encouraged to develop a capacity to think critically and differently by exploring democratic theories beyond the confine of the canonical traditions and prevailing practices.

### Course Requirements and Grading

Your grade for this course will be based on 6 components:

1. Attendance and participation (15%; 5%, 10%)

Attendance (5%) in this course is expected. Role will be taken at the beginning of each class meeting. Excused absences must be consistent with university policies and require appropriate documentation. Additional information can be found [here](#). Students who miss more than 30% of the class (12 class meetings) will not be able to complete/pass the course.

Active in-class participation (10%) is essential to your success in this course. When you come to class, you should come prepared to discuss the material that has been assigned for that class. This means that you are expected to do the reading to be covered during a given class in advance and bring your personal insights to an open and fruitful discussion.

2. Weekly discussion posts (15%; 1% each)

In addition to participating during class, you are required to prepare TWO discussion questions for each Friday class meeting which is based on a seminar format. The questions should be well situated in the text and highlight some passages/concepts/arguments of the week's reading that you find important and noteworthy. *At least ONE question should refer to the text that the instructor has not lectured on (in most cases, that means the required reading for the class on Friday).*

Each question should consist of three components in 4-5 sentences (100-150 words): (i) passages from the reading (with page number, if available) that have drawn your attention; (ii) a brief explanation of how and why certain arguments/concepts/assumptions in the selected passage are unclear, inconsistent, and/or unconvincing; (iii) the question(s) for discussion.

The questions must be posted on our Canvas page by **Thursday midnight** (with the exception of Weeks 4, 8, and 9).

You DO NOT have to post discussion questions on the weeks you are assigned to present in class or write the paper. You will receive full credit for that week's discussion post as long as you submit the reflection paper on time and give the presentation. Given the timely nature of this assignment, no late post or retrospective make-up will be accepted.

3. In-class presentation (15%)

You are expected to give a thematic presentation on the Friday's required reading of a selected week. (\*Please note that you cannot do the in-class presentation and the reflection paper on the same week.) The presentation should have FOUR components:

- (i) A clear and concise summary of the reading, esp. the author's main argument.

- (ii) The author's most *and* least compelling arguments from your perspective. Please note that you should also explain why you find these arguments well-constructed or problematic.
- (iii) One empirical case (e.g. recent or historical events, novels, dramas, movies, music) that contributes to a better understanding of the reading and/or complicates its theoretical import. You are expected to provide necessary background information about the case and explain its relevance to your critical reflection on the reading.
- (iv) Three well-articulated discussion questions. Interpretive questions (i.e. "why", "how", "in what ways") are preferred to purely descriptive questions (i.e. "what") regarding their potential contribution to discussion.

You will have 10-12 minutes to present before holding a brief Q&A session. At 12 minutes, you will be asked to stop the presentation regardless of your progress. DO NOT read your notes, scripts, or presentation slides verbatim. Talking directly to your audience is essential to an interactive and engaging presentation.

Your presentation will be evaluated by the following criteria: (i) the clarity and accuracy of your interpretation of the text; (ii) the use and usefulness of the empirical case (esp. information about the case and its relevance to the reading); (iii) the quality of discussion questions; (iv) the quality of the presentation slides (e.g. organization of information, legibility of slides, use of graphics); (v) the performance of your oral presentation (including your performance during the Q&A).

The presentation should be facilitated by PowerPoint slides (or equivalent), which must be submitted by the **Thursday midnight** before your presentation.

#### 4. Reflection paper (15%)

You are required to write a reflection paper in lieu of the discussion questions on a selected week. (\*Please note that you cannot do the in-class presentation and the reflection paper on the same week.)

The paper should be based on the week's reading and highlight some arguments/concepts that you find intriguing, noteworthy, and/or problematic. It should be 1200-1500 words, double spaced, in 12-point Times New Roman font. Papers that go slightly over the required length are acceptable. A paper that is less than 1200 words is likely to be problematic.

Each reflection paper should consist of THREE components:

- (i) A brief synopsis of the selected reading(s) (300-400 words).
- (ii) A "puzzle" (i.e. an issue worth further exploration and open to different responses) from the reading, and a brief explanation of why and how certain concepts/arguments are puzzling, inconsistent or unconvincing from your perspective (100-150 words).

- (iii) Your reflection on and tentative response to the puzzle (800-1000 words). Please note that this is the most important element of your reflection paper, which requires interpretive labor and critical analysis in addressing questions such as: What are the theoretical implications and/or practical significance of the puzzle? Does the author allude to any explanation/solution in the text? If not, what do you think should be done with it?

Since you are analyzing the author's internal logic, it is important to support your interpretation with textual evidence. Remember, well-chosen textual evidence is what distinguishes good argument from mere opinion or bald assertion. Numerous, brief citations are preferred to chunky quotes. Parenthetical citation with relevant page numbers is sufficient (p. #). Outside source should be minimal. No bibliography is required.

For full credit you must submit your response paper (as a PDF or as a Microsoft Word document) on Canvas by the **Thursday midnight** of the week you select. The highest grade for a late response paper in the absence of a legitimate excuse is C+. An example of a legitimate excuse would be an illness for which you have a signed doctor's note. Please be aware: a "C+" is not the lowest grade a late assignment can receive; it is the highest (i.e., it is the ceiling, not the floor).

A sign-up sheet for in-class presentation and reflection paper will be circulated in Week 1.

- 5. Midterm exam (15%)
- 6. Final exam (25%)

Both exams will be essay-based and close-book. A list of prompts will be provided in advance. The instructor will randomly pick TWO questions out of the pool at the day of the exam for your choice. You must answer ONE in fifty minutes, for the midterm, and in two hours, for the final.

### **Grading Policy**

The course is out of 100 total points, and the Grading Scale is as follows: 93-100 (A); 90-92 (A-); 87-89 (B+); 83-86 (B); 80-82 (B-); 77-79 (C+); 73-76 (C); 70-72 (C-); 67-69 (D+); 63-66 (D); 60-62 (D-); 0-59 (E; failing)

More information on UF grading policy may be found at [Grades and Grading Policies](#). Requirements for class attendance and make-up exams, assignments, and other work in this course are consistent with [university policies](#).

### **Required Texts**

All readings can be found on the course's Canvas page. Course material and details in this syllabus are subject to change. Any such changes will be announced in advance on Canvas.

## **Class Demeanor**

Students are expected to arrive to class on time and behave in a manner that is respectful to the instructor and to fellow students. Opinions held by other students should be respected in discussion. Your courtesy towards others is key to a lively and enjoyable intellectual environment. Phones should be turned off prior to class.

## **Course Evaluation**

Students are expected to provide professional and respectful feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing course evaluations online. Students can complete evaluations in three ways:

1. The email they receive from GatorEvals,
2. Their Canvas course menu under GatorEvals, or
3. The central portal at <https://my-ufl.bluer.com>

Guidance on how to provide constructive feedback is available [here](#). Students will be notified when the evaluation period opens. Summaries of course evaluation results are available to students [here](#). Note: Starting in Spring 2025, the central portal will change to <https://my-ufl.bluer.com>. The previous GatorEvals link (<https://ufl.bluer.com/ufl/>) will redirect to the updated portal for one year.

## **Academic Integrity**

UF students are bound by The Honor Pledge which states, “We, the members of the University of Florida community, pledge to hold ourselves and our peers to the highest standards of honor and integrity by abiding by the Honor Code.” On all work submitted for credit by students at the University of Florida, the following pledge is either required or implied: “On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing this assignment.” [The Honor Code](#) specifies a number of behaviors that are in violation of this code and the possible sanctions. Furthermore, you are obligated to report any condition that facilitates academic misconduct to appropriate personnel. If you have any questions or concerns, please consult with the instructor in this class.

## **Policy Regarding In-Class Recording**

Students are allowed to record video or audio of class lectures. However, the purposes for which these recordings may be used are strictly controlled. The only allowable purposes are (1) for personal educational use, (2) in connection with a complaint to the university, or (3) as evidence in, or in preparation for, a criminal or civil proceeding. All other purposes are prohibited. Specifically, students may not publish recorded lectures without the written consent of the instructor. A “class lecture” is an educational presentation intended to inform or teach enrolled students about a particular subject, including any instructor-led discussions that form part of the presentation, and delivered by any instructor hired or appointed by the University, or by a guest instructor, as part of a University of Florida course. A class lecture does not include lab sessions, student presentations, clinical presentations such as patient history, academic exercises involving

solely student participation, assessments (quizzes, tests, exams), field trips, private conversations between students in the class or between a student and the faculty or lecturer during a class session. Publication without permission of the instructor is prohibited. To “publish” means to share, transmit, circulate, distribute, or provide access to a recording, regardless of format or medium, to another person (or persons), including but not limited to another student within the same class section. Additionally, a recording, or transcript of a recording, is considered published if it is posted on or uploaded to, in whole or in part, any media platform, including but not limited to social media, book, magazine, newspaper, leaflet, or third-party note/tutoring services. A student who publishes a recording without written consent may be subject to a civil cause of action instituted by a person injured by the publication and/or discipline under UF Regulation 4.040 Student Honor Code and Student Conduct Code.

### **Procedure for Conflict Resolution**

Any classroom issues, disagreements or grade disputes should be discussed first between the instructor and the student. If the problem cannot be resolved, please contact [Dr. Ben Smith](#). Be prepared to provide documentation of the problem, as well as all graded materials for the semester. Issues that cannot be resolved departmentally will be referred to [the University Ombuds Office](#) or [the Dean of Students Office](#).

### **Resources**

#### Accommodation for Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities who experience learning barriers and would like to request academic accommodations should connect with the [Disability Resource Center](#). It is important for students to share their accommodation letter with their instructor and discuss their access needs, as early as possible in the semester.

#### Health and Wellness Resources

- *U Matter, We Care*: If you or someone you know is in distress, please contact [umatter@ufl.edu](mailto:umatter@ufl.edu), 352-392-1575, or visit [U Matter, We Care website](#) to refer or report a concern and a team member will reach out to the student in distress.
- *Counseling and Wellness Center*: [Visit the Counseling and Wellness Center website](#) or call 352-392-1575 for information on crisis services as well as non-crisis services.
- *Student Health Care Center*: Call 352-392-1161 for 24/7 information to help you find the care you need, or [visit the Student Health Care Center website](#).
- *University Police Department*: [Visit UF Police Department website](#) or call 352-392-1111 (or 9-1-1 for emergencies).
- *UF Health Shands Emergency Room / Trauma Center*: For immediate medical care call 352-733-0111 or go to the emergency room at 1515 SW Archer Road, Gainesville, FL 32608; [Visit the UF Health Emergency Room and Trauma Center website](#).
- *GatorWell Health Promotion Services*: For prevention services focused on optimal wellbeing, including Wellness Coaching for Academic Success, visit the [GatorWell website](#) or call 352-273-4450.

#### Academic Resources

- *E-learning technical support:* Contact the [UF Computing Help Desk](#) at 352-392-4357 or via e-mail at [helpdesk@ufl.edu](mailto:helpdesk@ufl.edu).
- [\*Career Connections Center\*](#): Reitz Union Suite 1300, 352-392-1601. Career assistance and counseling services.
- [\*Library Support\*](#): Various ways to receive assistance with respect to using the libraries or finding resources.
- [\*Teaching Center\*](#): Broward Hall, 352-392-2010 or to make an appointment 352- 392-6420. General study skills and tutoring.
- [\*Writing Studio\*](#): 2215 Turlington Hall, 352-846-1138. Help brainstorming, formatting, and writing papers.
- *Student Complaints On-Campus:* [Visit the Student Honor Code and Student Conduct Code webpage for more information.](#)
- *On-Line Students Complaints:* [View the Distance Learning Student Complaint Process.](#)

## Readings and Assignments Schedule

\*\*\* Readings and assignments are to be completed by their corresponding date. Please note that the syllabus can be changed as needed during the semester. \*\*\*

\*\*\*These mandatory readings might be complemented with additional readings through the semester, provided by instructor. \*\*\*

### Week 1 (Aug 18-22) Introduction

Aug 22 Syllabus walkthrough

*\*Sign up for reflection paper and in-class presentation.*

## **PART I: DEMOCRACY IN HISTORY: ANCIENT AND MODERN**

### Week 2 (Aug 25-29) Athenian Democracy: Eulogy and Sarcasm

Aug 25 Josiah Ober, “The Original Meaning of “Democracy””; Thucydides, “Pericles’ Funeral Oration,” from *History of the Peloponnesian War* [12 pages]

*Recommended:* Aristotle, *Constitution of Athens*, paragraph 3, 5-12, 20-22, 27-28

Aug 27 Aristophanes, *The Wasps*, Act One, Scene 1 [49 pages]

Aug 29 Matthew Landauer, “The “Idiōtēs” and the Tyrant: Two Faces of Unaccountability in Democratic Athens” [28 pages]

Presenters:

### Week 3 (Sept 1-5) The Trial of Socrates: The City and Man

Sept 1 No Class (Holiday)

Sept 3 Plato, *The Apology of Socrates* [35 pages]

*Recommended:* Plato, *The Republic*, Book VIII, pp.233-249

Sept 5 Richard Kraut, “Socrates and Democracy,” section 1-4, from *Socrates and the State* [22 pages]

Presenters:

### Week 4 (Sept 8-12) Revolution and Democracy: An Introduction



Sept 8 John Locke, *The Second Treatise*, Chapter 2, 8-9, 19 [29 pages]

*Recommended:* Sheldon Wolin, “Norm and Form: The Constitutionalizing Democracy” [23 pages]

Sept 10 Emily Nacol, “The Risks of Political Authority: Trust, Knowledge and Political Agency in Locke's Second Treatise” [16pages]

Presenters:

*\*Response papers and weekly discussion questions will be due by midnight, Sept 9.*

Sept 12 Class Canceled

### **Week 5 (Sept 15-19) Revolution and Democracy in America**

Sept 15 *Declaration of Independence*; Thomas Jefferson's letter to James Madison; James Madison's Letter to Thomas Jefferson; *The Federalist*, #10, #14 [19 pages]

Sept 17 Abigail Adams's letters to John Adams and Mercy Otis Warren; Jefferson, *Notes on the state of Virginia*; David Walker, *Appeal* [18 pages]

*Recommended:* William Apess, *Eulogy on King Philip*

Sept 19 Danielle Allen, *Our Declaration*, Chapter 14-18, 25-28 [32 pages]

Presenters:

### **Week 6 (Sept 22-26) Revolution and Democracy in France**

Sept 22 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Book I, Chapter 1, 6-8; Book II, Chapter 1-4, 6-7; Book III, Chapter 3-7; Book IV, Chapter 1 [35 pages]

Sept 24 *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*; Olympe de Gouges, “Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Female Citizen”; Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, “What is the Third Estate?” [35 pages]

*Recommended:* Toussaint L'Ouverture, “Proclamation”, “Letter to the French Directory”, “Haitian Constitution of 1801”

Sept 26 Joseph Schumpeter, “Two Concepts of Democracy”, pp.153-177 [25 pages]

Presenters:

### **Week 7 (Sept 29-Oct 3) After Revolution: Social Movements and Struggle for Inclusion**

Sept 29 Judith Shklar, "Voting", pp.387-413 [27 pages]

Oct 1 Carole Pateman, "Feminism and Democracy"; Stokely Carmichael, "Toward Black Liberation" [29 pages]

Oct 3 Sheldon Wolin, "What revolutionary action means today?" [12 pages]

Presenters:

### **Week 8 (Oct 6-10) Midterm**

Oct 6 Review session

Oct 8 Midterm exam

Oct 10 In-Class Film Viewing: "What is Democracy?"

*\*No in-class presentation this week. Weekly discussion post will be due by Saturday midnight (Oct 11).*

## **PART II: DEMOCRACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY: VALUES AND CHALLENGES**

### **Week 9 (Oct 13-17) Intrinsic and Instrumental Values**

Oct 13 Richard Arneson, "Democracy is not Intrinsically Just"; Thomas Christiano, "Democracy as the Public Realization of Equality," from *The Constitution of Equality* [47 pages]

Oct 15 Elizabeth Anderson, "Democracy: Instrumental vs. Non-Instrumental Value" [16 pages]

Presenters:

*\*Response papers and weekly discussion questions will be due by midnight, Oct 14.*

Oct 17 No Class (Homecoming)

### **Week 10 (Oct 20-24) Majority Rule**

Oct 20 Jeremy Waldron, "The Core of the Case against Judicial Review" [61 pages]

Oct 22 Alexis de Tocqueville, "Of the Omnipotence of the Majority in the United States and Its Effects," from *Democracy in America* [25 pages]

*Recommended:* Jon Elster, "Tyranny and Brutality of the Majority"

Oct 24 Ben Saunders, "Democracy, Political Equality, and Majority Rule" [30 pages]

Presenters:

**Week 11 (Oct 27-31) Populism(s)**

Oct 27 Jan-Werner Müller, “Introduction” and “What Populists Say”, from *What is Populism?* [40 pages]

Oct 29 Margaret Canovan. “Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy”; Philippe Schmitter, “The Virtues and Vices of Populism” [22 pages]

*Recommended:* Nadia Urbinati, “Political Theory of Populism”

Oct 31 John McCormick. “Democracy’s Crisis and the Populist Cry of Pain” [22 pages]

Presenters:

**Week 12 (Nov 3-7) Democracy and the Color Line**

Nov 3 Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract*, Introduction and Chapter 1 [40 pages]

Nov 5 Jane Mansbridge, “Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent ‘Yes’”; Meena Krishnamurthy. “(White) Tyranny and the Democratic Value of Distrust” [46 pages]

Nov 7 Juliet Hooker, “Black Lives Matter and the Paradoxes of U.S. Black Politics” [22 pages]

Presenters:

**Week 13 (Nov 10-14) Democracy and Neoliberalism**

Nov 10 Thomas Biebricher, *The Political Theory of Neoliberalism*, pp. 25-8; 79-108 [34 pages]

Nov 12 Wendy Brown, “American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization” [25 pages]

Nov 14 Jodi Dean, “Neofeudalism’s Basic Features”

Presenters:

**Week 14 (Nov 17-21) Re-Imagining Democracy in the Age of Technology**

Nov 17 Simone Chambers, “Truth, Deliberative Democracy, and the Virtues of Accuracy: Is Fake News Destroying the Public Sphere?”; Cass Sunstein, “Is Social Media Good or Bad for Democracy?” [25 pages]

Nov 19 Sarah Kreps and Doug Kriner, “How AI Threatens Democracy;” Aviv Ovadya, “Reimagining Democracy for AI” [19 pages]

Nov 21 Benjamin Barber, “Three Scenarios for the Future of Technology and Strong Democracy” [17 pages]

Presenters:

**Week 15 (Nov 24-28) Democracy and Trust**

Nov 24 Amandine Catala “Democracy, Trust, and Epistemic Justice” (17 pages)

*\*There will be no class on Nov 17. TWO discussion questions based on Catala’s piece should be posted on Canvas by midnight, Nov 29. No response paper/seminar presentation this week.*

Nov 26 No Class (Thanksgiving)

Nov 28 No Class (Thanksgiving)

**Week 16 (Dec 1-5) Wrap-Up**

Dec 1 Wrap-Up Lecture

Dec 3 Review Session

Dec 5 No Class (Reading Days)

**FINAL EXAM: Dec 11 (7:30-9:30 AM in Pugh Hall 120)**

## GUIDELINES FOR WEEKLY DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

In this course, you are required to draft two discussion questions about the readings per week. These questions are to be brief, compact exercises in critical commentary. As explained in the syllabus, they should be “well situated in the text and highlight some passages/concepts/arguments of the week’s reading that you find important and noteworthy.” This is not small feat. In fact, I guarantee that should you succeed in crafting a lucid discussion question, you will find it as challenging as writing a lengthy paper.

What is a discussion question? It presents a **PUZZLE** that facilitates class discussion. At a broader level, a puzzle or tension suggests that there is an issue worth exploring and open to different responses. **Interpretive questions** (i.e. “why”, “how”, “in what ways”) are thus preferred to purely “descriptive” questions (i.e. “what”) regarding their potential contribution to discussion.

Puzzles most often start with the question WHY??? Why does x appear to hold true, if y also holds true? Alternatively, if two or more authors contest over similar subjects, why cannot both be true, and how can the contradiction be resolved? These are some common ways to structure a good discussion question.

We often have strong feelings about certain passages or arguments in the readings. It is not easy to turn these feelings (i.e. confusion, suspicion, sympathy, anger) into concrete questions. One way to mitigate this problem is to explicitly present **the related passages** to your readers and guide them to be attentive to the textual/historical context, theoretical import, and practical significance. Your questions do not have to be *about* the text, as the content of the questions is open. But you should start *with* the text, which gives your readers something to reflect on.

Therefore, a good discussion question should consist of **three components in 4-5 sentences**: (i) the passages (with page number, if available) that have drawn your attention; (ii) a brief explanation of how certain arguments/concepts/assumptions in these passages could lead to a puzzle or tension (2-3 sentences); (iii) the question(s) for open discussion.

Good luck and have FUN!