

POLS 4060-38854- Problems in Democratic Theory
Spring 2026
Classroom- Baldwin 102
Tuesday/Thursday: 2:55-4:15
Dr Colin French, Lecturer
cf98448@uga.edu
Baldwin Hall 378
Office Hours- Friday 10AM-11AM, 12PM-3PM or by appointment

Prerequisite- POLS 1101

Major problems that arise in theoretical discussions of democracy, such as the nature of democratic government, its purposes, its justification, its limitations, and the conditions necessary for its maintenance.

‘Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time....’- Winston Churchill

Democratic forms of government, despite being ubiquitous across the western world, are still largely exclusive to modern society. Many of the world’s democratic countries are economically prosperous, and protect liberties and minority rights at high levels, and many authoritarian regimes hold faux elections to grant themselves a sense of legitimacy from the idea of popular mandate.

In this class, we will evaluate democracy both from a theoretical and empirical framework. As a theory based course, reading will be heavy, but students will not need an advanced grasp of mathematics or statistics. Some of the topics to be covered include, but are not limited to...

Key Questions- Democratic Performance and Proliferation

- 1) Does democratic government ensure greater minority rights?
- 2) Does democracy help or hurt economic prosperity?
- 3) Are democracies more peaceful on the international arena?
- 4) Is democratic government ‘the future’ - i.e. will every country eventually reach this standard? Should they try?
- 5) Is democracy ‘the end of history,’ or will other newer forms of government emerge?
- 6) Why did it take so long in human history for democracy to become a popular form of government?
- 7) Can democracy survive political polarization?
- 8) Does the rise of the internet help or hurt democratic regimes?

Key Questions- Prescriptive

- 1) Is there anything that can be done about political ignorance?
- 2) Should voting be mandatory?
- 3) Can democracy be improved?

Strategic Learning Objectives (SLOs)

- A) Students will learn about the historical and ethical foundations of democratic forms of government.
- B) Students will critically compare the political, economic, and human rights focused outcomes of democratic and nondemocratic systems.
- C) Students will learn classic and contemporary criticisms of democratic forms of government.
- D) Students will understand the difference between a variety of representative electoral systems. (Parliamentary & Presidential, First-Past-The-Post & Proportional Representation)
- E) Students will develop and write critical papers on democratic theory.
- F) Students will learn the empirical correlates of democratic development, as well as theories why democracies have emerged in some areas of the world with greater frequency than others.
- G) Students will learn some quantitative measurements of democracy, including political and economic freedom indexes.

Books

- “Against Democracy”- Jason Brennan, 2016 **ISBN: 9780691162607**
“Democracy & Political Ignorance”- Ilya Somin **ISBN: 9780804799317**
“Democracy for Realists”- Achen & Bartels, 2016 **ISBN: 9780691178240**
“How Democracies Die”- Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018 **ISBN: 9781524762940**

Other readings will be posted via ELC or distributed in class via paper handout

Grading

- Weekly Quizzes 40% - (Thursdays at class end)
Final Test (Take-Home, April 27th-30th)- 20%
Class Participation- 10%
Oral Report- Speech Analysis- 10% (In Class)
Argumentative Paper peer feedback- 5%
Argumentative Paper (Due March 7th (First Draft), April 29th) - 15%

All Grades are Final.

CLASS SCHEDULE

Week 1- Introduction

1/13- Syllabus, Dahl: "On Democracy" What is Democracy? ELC (Pages 35-44)

1/15- Dahl: "On Democracy" Why Democracy? (Page 44-61)

Week 2- The Problem of Ignorance (Somin Unit)

1/20- Somin: Introduction & Chapter 1 "The Extent of Political Ignorance"

1/22- Somin: Chapter 2 "Do Voters Know Enough?"

Week 3-

1/27- Somin: Chapter 3 "The Rationality of Political Ignorance"

1/29- Somin: Chapter 4 "The Shortcomings of Shortcuts"

Week 4

2/3- Somin: Chapter 5 "Foot voting vs Ballot Box Voting"

2/5- Somin: Chapter 7 "Can Voter Knowledge be Increased?" + Conclusion

Week 5- *Threats to Contemporary Democracy* (Levitsky & Ziblatt Unit)

2/10- Levitsky & Ziblatt: Chapter 1 "Fateful Alliances"

2/12- Levitsky & Ziblatt: Chapter 2 "Gatekeeping in America"

Week 6-

2/17- Levitsky & Ziblatt: Chapter 4 "Subverting Democracy"

2/19 - Levitsky & Ziblatt: Chapter 5 "The Guardrails of Democracy"

Week 7

2/24- Levitsky & Ziblatt: Chapter 6 "The Unwritten Rules of American Politics"

2/26- Levitsky & Ziblatt: Chapter 9 "Saving Democracy"

Week 8: Elections & Democratic Accountability (Achen & Bartels Unit)

3/3 - Achen & Bartels: Chapter 1 "Democratic Ideals and Realities"

3/5 - Achen & Bartels: Chapter 2 "The Elusive Mandate"

Argumentative Paper First Draft Due 3/7

Spring Break- 3/9-3/14 (No Class)

Week 9:

3/17 - Achen & Bartels: Chapter 3 “Tumbling Down”

3/19 - Achen & Bartels: Chapter 4 “A Rational God of Vengeance and Reward”

Week 10

3/24 - Achen & Bartels: Chapter 5 “Blind Retrospection”

3/26 - Achen & Bartels: Chapter 6 “Musical Chairs”

Week 11

3/31 - Achen & Bartels: Chapter 8 “The Very Basis of Reasons”

4/02 - Achen & Bartels: Chapter 11 “Groups and Power”

Week 12- Against Democracy (Brennan Unit)

4/07 - Brennan: Chapter 1 “Hobbits and Hooligans”

4/09 - Brennan: Chapter 2 :Ignorant, Irrational, Misinformed Nationalists”

Week 13-

4/14 - Brennan: Chapter 3 “Political Participation Corrupts”

4/16 - Brennan: Chapter 5 “Politics is not a Poem”

Week 14

4/21 – Brennan: Chapter 6 “The Right to Competent Government”

4/23 – Brennan: Chapter 8 “The Rule of the Knowers” & Chapter 9 “Civic Enemies”

Final Exam- Take-Home (April 27th-30th)

Argumentative Paper Final Draft Due April 29th

COURSE POLICIES

Make-ups for major assignments will only be offered in the case of serious need. Students should not assume an extension or make-up opportunity will be granted in all circumstances. Health and personal issues can be valid reasons. Late assignments will be penalized by ten percent for each day they are late.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Any assignments conducted with or without the aid of AI will receive an automatic score of 0, without exceptions. Emails and other communications sent using generative AI will be ignored.

SCHOLASTIC DISHONESTY AND ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

UGA Student Honor Code: "I will be academically honest in all of my academic work and will not tolerate academic dishonesty of others." A Culture of Honesty, the University's policy and procedures for handling cases of suspected dishonesty, can be found at www.uga.edu/ovpi

Plagiarism:

Writing and presenting original work in college can be challenging, but this is not an excuse to plagiarize. Any directly taken information, quotations, or work that is not referenced or cited can be counted as plagiarism. Please take note and remember to provide references to any outside materials used in your work or writing.

ATTENDANCE POLICY

The student is responsible for all assigned course work and cannot be absolved of this responsibility. When enrolled in a particular course, the student is obligated to do all of the work assigned. Punctual and regular attendance is vital to the discharge of this obligation. Absences, excused or not, do not alter this responsibility. Regulations more restrictive than College guidelines, but not in conflict with it, may be established by the instructor for any course.

Instructors are responsible for distributing their individual course attendance guidelines in their syllabi during the first class each term. Absences will be excused for:

- documented illnesses,
- official representation of the College,
- death of a close relative,
- religious holiday, and
- other circumstances beyond the control of the student.

Excuses for official representation of the College must be obtained from the official supervising that activity or event.

Students whose unexcused absences surpass three of the scheduled classes will receive a lowered participation grade, by 10% for each missed session.

UGA WELLBEING RESOURCES

UGA Well-being Resources promote student success by cultivating a culture that supports a more active, healthy, and engaged student community.

Anyone needing assistance is encouraged to contact Student Care & Outreach (SCO) in the Division of Student Affairs at 706-542-8479 or visit sco.uga.edu. Student Care & Outreach helps students navigate difficult circumstances by connecting them with the most appropriate resources or services. They also administer the Embark@UGA program which supports students experiencing, or who have experienced, homelessness, foster care, or housing insecurity.

UGA provides both clinical and non-clinical options to support student well-being and mental health, any time, any place. Whether on campus, or studying from home or abroad, UGA Well-being Resources are here to help.

- Well-being Resources: well-being.uga.edu
- Student Care and Outreach: sco.uga.edu
- University Health Center: healthcenter.uga.edu
- Counseling and Psychiatric Services: caps.uga.edu or CAPS 24/7 crisis support at 706-542-2273
- Health Promotion/ Fontaine Center: healthpromotion.uga.edu
- Disability Resource Center and Testing Services: drc.uga.edu

Additional information, including free digital well-being resources, can be accessed through the UGA app or

by visiting <https://well-being.uga.edu>

Disclaimer: The course syllabus is a general plan for the course; deviations announced to the class by the instructor may be necessary.