POLS 270: Basic Issues in Political Philosophy: The Idea of Democracy

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Course Description

This course satisfies the political theory requirement for students who have not taken POLS 170. The theme of the course may vary from semester to semester.

The class this spring will involve you in a careful examination of a seemingly simple idea: rule by the demos, or “the people.” We will wrestle with a number of fundamental questions related to this idea. Who counts as “the people”? Why should this group be entrusted with political power? What does “ruling” involve and/or require of citizens? (E.g., Is democracy more than just voting?) Over what areas of life is it proper for “the people” to rule? (E.g., Should the economic forces that largely shape our lives come under democratic control?) With these questions in mind, we will explore key positions on the topic as they have appeared in the history of Western political thought.

This is a course in political philosophy, which means that our discussion will be conceptual rather than applied. We will be talking about ideas, rather than examining concrete cases as you might expect to do in a course on democracy in comparative politics or in American politics. Applied thinking is important, and may even be your preferred approach. But empirical analysis presupposes underlying theoretical assumptions. Political philosophy is the area of political science in which such assumptions are examined directly.

Note that you will be required to read complicated, challenging, original texts. It is perfectly possible that you will not understand what you read at first - serious philosophy is like that - and it will be up to you to keep at it until you do. I will not spoon-feed you information, either through a textbook or through lectures. One of the important benefits of political theory courses is that they are designed to teach you to track complex lines of argument.

At the end of the semester, students will plan and convene a mini-conference on democracy, to be held during class hours over two or three class periods. The sessions at the conference, which you will prepare in small groups, may be more applied if you so choose. Planning groups will meet outside of class, in advance of the conference.

General Expectations and Policies

The bottom line requirement for this course is that you do the reading very, very carefully (more than once, in most cases), and come to class prepared to talk about the material with others in order to understand and evaluate it. If, for whatever reason, you are not in a position to take on a high level of intellectual responsibility, you should think hard about whether or not you will be able to meet this expectation; this may not be the course for you to take this semester.

Attendance is mandatory unless you are sick or face an emergency situation (please do not come to class sick). Irregular participation will result in a significant reduction of the final grade or in failure. Cell phones, laptops and other electronic devices must be turned off during class. In keeping with the values of Jesuit education at SLU, I take it for granted that comportment in the classroom will be good-natured, considerate and intellectually serious; failure to meet this expectation will result in a
student being required to leave the room, and will constitute an unexcused absence. I also expect that you will come to class on time.

**Academic Integrity**

The University is a community of learning, whose effectiveness requires an environment of mutual trust and integrity. Academic integrity is violated by any dishonesty such as soliciting, receiving, or providing any unauthorized assistance in the completion of work submitted toward academic credit. While not all forms of academic dishonesty can be listed here, examples include copying from another student, copying from a book or class notes during a closed book exam, submitting materials authored by or revised by another person as the student’s own work, copying a passage or text directly from a published source without appropriately citing or recognizing that source, taking a test or doing an assignment or other academic work for another student, securing or supplying in advance a copy of an examination or quiz without the knowledge or consent of the instructor, sharing or receiving the questions from an on-line quiz with another student, taking an on-line quiz with the help of another student, and colluding with another student or students to engage in academic dishonesty.

All clear violations of academic integrity will be met with appropriate sanctions. In this course, academic dishonesty on an assignment will result, at a minimum, in a grade of zero for the assignment and a report of academic dishonesty being sent to the Academic Honesty Committee of the College of Arts and Sciences. In the case of Class B violations, the Academic Honesty Committee may impose a larger sanction including, but not limited to, assigning a failing grade in the course, disciplinary probation, suspension, and dismissal from the University.

Students should refer to the following SLU website for more information about Class A and B violations and the procedures following a report of academic dishonesty:

http://www.slu.edu/x12657.xml

**Student Learning, Disability Statement**

In recognition that people learn in a variety of ways and that learning is influenced by multiple factors (e.g., prior experience, study skills, learning disability), resources to support student success are available on campus. Students who think they might benefit from these resources can find out more about:

- Course-level support (e.g., faculty member, departmental resources, etc.) by asking your course instructor.

- University-level support (e.g., tutoring/writing services, Disability Services) by visiting the Student Success Center (BSC 331) or by going to www.slu.edu/success.

Students who believe that, due to a disability, they could benefit from academic accommodations are encouraged to contact Disability Services at 314-977-8885 or visit the Student Success Center.

Confidentiality will be observed in all inquiries.

Course instructors support student accommodation requests when an approved letter from Disability Services has been received and when students discuss these accommodations with the instructor after receipt of the approved letter.
The easiest way to contact me is through e-mail, which I check regularly. In most cases I will be able to get back to you within a few hours; if you haven’t heard back within 12 hrs, send me another e-mail. I will retrieve phone messages when I am in my office, but I will not be on campus every day; e-mail is much more reliable. I’m also delighted to talk to you in person, during office hours.

**Assignments and Grade Breakdown**

Quality of participation - 20%
“Benchmark” essay (5 pps.) – ungraded, but you cannot pass the class without it
Midterm Exam – 20%
Essay (6-7 pps.) – 20%
Conference performance – 10%
Final exam – 30%

Around mid-semester, you will be required to have a short meeting with me in my office, to check in on your progress in the course. This meeting is mandatory.

Your grade will be based on your performance on the assignments listed above. There is no extra credit available for the completion of additional work. Make-up exams will be offered only under the most extraordinary of circumstances. I give letter grades, corresponding to qualitative assessment criteria. I do not grade on a distributional curve; your grade is based solely on the quality of your own performance. I am a very transparent grader, and I am happy to talk with you about how to do your best in the course and to develop intellectually. Please note the College of Arts and Sciences’ common grading scheme: A=93-100; A-=90-92; B+=87-89; B=83-86; B-=80-82; C+=77-79; C=73-76; C-=70-72; D=60-70; F=below 60.

Note In this class, final grades designate the following: **A-range** = Excellent at political philosophy; **B+**= Very good at political philosophy; **B** = Good, solid work in political philosophy; **B-** = Acceptable degree of competence in political philosophy; **C-range** = Weak in the area of political philosophy; **D-range** = Poor in the area of political philosophy. **Please be sure that you understand these criteria.** If you have any questions, feel free to ask me.

I don’t accept late papers, unless you have contacted me ahead of time concerning an absolute emergency. Papers are due at the beginning of class on the date that they are due, unless otherwise stipulated.

**Required texts**

The following books have been ordered at the SLU Bookstore:

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics, Politics*
- Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*
- Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*
- Mill, *Utilitarianism, On Liberty, and Representative Government*

Additional readings will be available electronically.
Projected Reading and Discussion Schedule

Introduction
Jan 17 – Explanation of the course
Jan 19 – Background lecture

Classical Anti-Democratic Republicanism
Jan. 24 Aristotle – Virtue, human nature & political life
Ethics, Bk 1-2, 6; Politics, Bk 1 chs 1-2;

Jan. 26 Ethics, Bks 8-9
Politics, Bk 3, chs 6-7, 9; Book 7, ch 4

Jan. 31 & Feb. 2 Aristotle – The activity of citizenship
Politics, Bk 3, chs 1, 4, 5; Bk 7, chs. 4, 9, 10

Feb. 7 & 9 Aristotle – On democracy
Politics, Bk 3, chs 5, 8; Bk 4, chs 4-9; Bk 6, chs 1-5

Property, Natural Law and the State - Non-Democratic Constitutionalism
Feb. 14 The Debate at Putney Church

Feb. 16 Locke – The “State of Nature” metaphor
2nd Treatise, chs 1-4; ch 6, paragraph 54;

Feb. 21 & 23 Locke – The inviolability of property
2nd Treatise, ch. 5
MacPherson, selections

Feb. 28 Locke – Citizenship and the terms of political association
2nd Treatise, paragraphs 87; 89; 91-99; 119-122; 138-140; 221-222

March 1 Rousseau – On the Basis of a Distinction Between Force and Right
The Social Contract, Bk 1, chs 1-6

March 6 Mid-term prep
March 8 Mid-term

Universality, Participation, Legitimacy – Modern Democratic Republicanism

March 20 & 22 Rousseau – On the Basis of a Distinction Between Force and Right
The Social Contract, Bk 1, chs 1-6
March 27 & 29  Rousseau – Universality and the formation of a “We”  
2nd Treatise, Bk 1 chs 7-9; Bk 2

April 3 & 10  Rousseau – Popular Sovereignty and the Institutions of Government  
2nd Treatise, Bk 3, Bk 4, chs 1-2

April 12  Reaction -- Managing Majorities  
Federalist Papers, selections

**Progress and the Franchise – Perfectionist Representative Government**

April 17 & 19  Mill – The Value of Political Participation  
On Representative Government, chs. 1-3  
On Liberty, chs. 2-3

April 24 & 26  Mill – Citizenship and The Viability of Representative Government  
On Representative Government, chs 4-8  
Utilitarianism, chs. 2-3

May 1 & 3  Conference