

Subject name: Democratic Theory

Lecturer: Zsolt Kapelner

Goal of instruction:

The goal of the course is to introduce students to key philosophical debates in contemporary democratic theory. By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- analyse the concept of democracy, understand the distinction between aggregative and deliberative models of democracy or representative and direct democracy
- understand and map possible solutions for key philosophical problems regarding democracy, e.g., the value of democracy, the authority of democracy, the problem of persistent minorities, etc.
- apply philosophical analysis to contemporary problems regarding democracy, e.g., representation, constitutionalism, or democratic backsliding

Students will develop the following skills:

- Conceptual analysis and critical thinking, particularly regarding contemporary politics
- Research and argumentation in empirically informed political theory
- Abstract analysis of current affairs.

Subject content:

The course has two main components. The first module which encompasses classes 1 to 6 discuss general theoretical problems in the philosophy of democracy, i.e., the definition of democracy, its instrumental (dis)value, its political epistemology, its non-instrumental worth, and the source and limits of democratic authority. The second module (classes 7-11) uses the theoretical foundations established in the first module to address particular problems within democratic theory, namely representation, constitutionalism, militant democracy, the boundaries of the demos, and global democracy. The last class addresses what may be called the contemporary crisis of democracy and the possibilities of further democratization as well as the role of philosophical reflection in real-world politics.

The course does not presuppose any prior knowledge of political philosophy, however, some familiarity with current affairs is useful.

Examination and evaluation system:

Your final grade is determined by the following components depending on whether you take the course of 4 or 8 credits:

4-credit students:

- Participation: 30%
- Writing assignment: 70%

8-credit students:

- Participation: 30%
- Presentation: 20%
- Writing assignment: 50%

Participation

Each class is centred on the discussion of one or two key texts. You are expected to prepare for each class and contribute to in-class discussion.

Preparation

To prepare for each class, you are expected to

- read the mandatory reading carefully and reflect on its content.
- submit **2 short discussion questions (50–100 words)** about the text 24 hours before class.

In-class discussion

During in-class discussions you are expected to

- demonstrate familiarity with the text under discussion.
- critically engage with the argument of the text and other students.
- try to make connections with other course material and current affairs.

To maintain an inclusive classroom environment based on mutual respect, keep in mind that we will discuss topics on which you and others are likely to have strong and often conflicting opinions; you are welcome to express these opinions and have them charitably discussed as long as you also treat others' views with respect and openness.

Presentation

For those who take the course for **8 credits** (e.g., Erasmus students), giving a presentation is **mandatory**, for those who take the course for **4 credits**, it is **optional**. The presentation is 10–15 minutes long. If you give a presentation at a class, you are expected to:

- Reconstruct the central thesis of the mandatory reading and its key argument in your own words. **There is no need to summarize the text, everyone has read it already.**
- Raise objections to the text's main argument, point out potential weaknesses or limitations.
- Choose 2 or 3 questions from the student submissions to start the conversation with.

Writing assignment

All students must submit an argumentative paper in political philosophy or political theory **by December 31**. You can choose any topic discussed in class or find one on your own. In writing your essay, keep in mind the specific requirements of the discipline: discuss your topic from the point of view of political philosophy or political theory, and not empirical political science, political sociology, public policy. If you decide to use empirical data, use it to make a theoretical or philosophical point, rather than present an empirical analysis. Avoid writing commentary on current affairs or political journalism. If your paper starts to look like an opinion piece on a news website, take a step back, and see how you can make your paper fit academic standards.

To write a good final paper, you should:

- Clearly identify a central thesis statement for or against which you argue.
- Present a clear argument and avoid logical [fallacies](#).
- Use at least 5 sources.
- Cite your sources, and clearly indicate which ideas are yours and which you get from others, and **do not plagiarise**.

If you do not have a lot of experience writing papers in political philosophy and political theory, check out the following resources:

- [On writing philosophy papers.](#)
- [On writing political theory papers #1.](#)
- [On writing political theory papers #2.](#)

To make sure you're on the right track, you must submit an essay proposal of 150–300 words by **Week 8**.

You will get feedback and advice for the final paper.

Possible topics of the final paper include, but are not limited to:

- Should we have rule by experts instead of democracy?
- Is there an obligation to vote?
- Should non-citizen immigrants have the right to vote?
- Should anti-democratic parties be banned?
- Can populism ever be democratic?

Feel free to think of your own topic, however.

Wordcount: 2,500–3,000 words

Footnotes and bibliography are excluded from the word count.

8-credit students

Students, who take the course of 8 credits, e.g., Erasmus students, also have a second writing assignment. It is **case study**: you should choose a concrete example from real-world politics and analyse it in terms of the theoretical tools you acquired in class.

For example, you can look at how a referendum raises the problem of persistent minorities, how a controversial democratic decision makes us reflect on the limits of democratic authority, how a particular case of gerrymandering or unregulated campaign finance undermines democratic equality, how party dynamics in a particular country relate to problems of partisanship, etc.

Your case study should include the following:

- A description of the case you study.
- An analysis of how a particular theoretical problem, concept, or argument, discussed in class, is relevant to the case in question.

- A discussion on how this theoretical analysis contributes to thinking about possible solutions to the problems raised by the case.

Wordcount: 1,000–1,500 words.

To help you develop a good case study, you are required to submit a Case Study Proposal of 150–300 words by **Week 6**. You will receive feedback and develop the final piece by the end of the semester and submit it together with the final paper.

Literature:

Readings week by week:

Week 1. What is democracy?

Mandatory reading: Amartya Sen, “Democracy as a Universal Value,” *Journal of Democracy* 10(3): 3–17. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/democracy-as-a-universal-value/>

Recommended readings:

- Jon Elster, “The Market and the Forum: Three Varieties of Political Theory,” in *Philosophy and Democracy*, ed. Thomas Christiano (Oxford: 2003, 2003), 138–60.
- Alvin I. Goldman, “What Is Democracy (and What Is Its Raison D’Etre)?,” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 1, no. 2 (2015): 233–56.
- David Held and Schott Gareth, *Models of Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).
- Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), chap. 1.
- Chantal Mouffe, “For an Agonistic Model of Democracy,” in *Political Theory in Transition*, ed. Noel O’Sullivan (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 113–30

Week 2. The problem of voter ignorance

Mandatory reading: Jason Brennan, “The Right to a Competent Electorate,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 61, no. 245 (2011): 700–724.

Recommended readings:

- Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).
- Ilya Somin, “Voter Ignorance and the Democratic Ideal,” *Critical Review* 12, no. 4 (1998): 413–58.
- Thomas Christiano, “Voter Ignorance Is Not Necessarily a Problem,” *Critical Review* 27, no. 3–4 (2015): 253–69.
- Piero Moraro, “Against Epistocracy,” *Social Theory and Practice* 44, no. 2 (2018): 199–216.

Week 3. The wisdom of the crowds

Mandatory reading: Elizabeth Anderson, “The Epistemology of Democracy.” *Episteme* 3 (1-2):8-22 (2006)

Recommended readings:

- David Estlund, “Beyond Fairness and Deliberation: The Epistemic Dimension of Democratic Authority,” in *Philosophy and Democracy: An Anthology*, ed. Thomas Christiano (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 69–94.
- Fabienne Peter, “Pure Epistemic Proceduralism,” *Episteme* 5, no. 1 (2008): 33–55.
- Hélène Landemore, *Democratic Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).
- Robert E. Goodin and Kai Spiekermann, *An Epistemic Theory of Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Week 4. Why should I vote?

Mandatory reading: Alvin I. Goldman, “Why Citizens Should Vote,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16, no. 2 (1999): 201–17.

Recommended readings:

- Daniel Jacob, “Every Vote Counts: Equality, Autonomy, and the Moral Value of Democratic Decision-Making,” *Res Publica* 21, no. 1 (2014): 61–75.
- Christian F. Rostbøll, “The Non-Instrumental Value of Democracy: The Freedom Argument,”

Constellations 22, no. 2 (2015): 267–78.

- Jeremy Waldron, “Participation: The Right of Rights,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 98 (1998): 307–37.
- Jason Brennan, “Democracy and Freedom,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Freedom*, ed. David Schmidtz and Carmen E. Pavel, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 335–49.

Week 5. A society of equals

Mandatory reading: Niko Kolodny, “Rule Over None I: What Justifies Democracy?,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 42, no. 3 (2014): 195–229.

Recommended readings:

- Niko Kolodny, “Rule Over None II: Social Equality and the Value of Democracy,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 42, no. 4 (2014): 287–336.
- Elizabeth Anderson, “Democracy: Instrumental vs. Non-Instrumental Value,” in *Contemporary Debates in Political Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Christiano and John Christman (London: Blackwell, 2009), 213–27.
- Steven Wall, “Democracy and Equality,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 57, no. 228 (2007): 416–38.
- Daniel Viehoff, “Power and Equality,” *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy* 5 (2019): 3–38.
- Philip Pettit, *On the People’s Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Week 6. The authority of democracy and its limits

Mandatory reading: Thomas Christiano, “The Authority of Democracy,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 12, no. 3 (2004): 266–90.

Recommended readings:

- Daniel Viehoff, “Democratic Equality and Political Authority,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 42, no. 4 (2014): 337–75.
- Allen Buchanan, “Political Legitimacy and Democracy,” *Ethics* 112, no. 4 (2002): 689–719.
- Thomas Christiano, *The Constitution of Equality: Democratic Authority and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- David Estlund, *Democratic Authority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

Week 7. Constitutionalism

Mandatory reading: Jeremy Waldron, “The Core of the Case against Judicial Review.” *The Yale Law Journal* Vol. 115, No. 6 (Apr., 2006), pp. 1346-1406

Recommended readings:

- Ronald Dworkin, *Freedom’s Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996)
- Corey Brettschneider, *Democratic Rights: The Substance of Self-Government* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007)
- Jeremy Waldron, *Law and Disagreement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999)
- Ronald Dworkin, “Equality, Democracy, and Constitution: We the People in Court,” *Alberta Law Review* 28, no. 2 (1990): 324

Week 8. Representative democracy

Mandatory reading: Naida Urbinati. "Representative democracy and its critics." In Sonia Alonso, John Keane and Wolfgang Merkel (eds.) *The future of representative democracy* (2011): 23-49. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Recommended readings:

- Andrew Rehfeld, “On Representing,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2018): 216–39.
- Jeremy Waldron, “Representative Lawmaking,” in *Political Theory: Essays on Institutions*, ed. Harvard University Press (Cambridge, MA & London, 2016), 125–44.
- Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970).
- Adam Przeworski, “Minimalist Conception of Democracy: A Defense,” in *Democracy’s Value*, ed. Ian Shapiro and Casiano Hacker-Cordón (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 23–55.

Week 9. The role of political parties

Mandatory reading: Fabio Wolkenstein, "Agents of Popular Sovereignty," *Political Theory* 47, no. 3 (2019): 338–62.

Recommended readings:

- Jonathan White and Lea Ypi, *The Meaning of Partisanship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)
- Russell Muirhead, *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).
- Nancy L. Rosenblum, *On the Side of the Angels: An Appreciation of Parties and Partisanship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008)
- Fabio Wolkenstein, "The Political Theory of Parties," *Politik* 22, no. 2 (2019): 10–29.

Week 10. The democratic boundary problem

Mandatory reading: Arash Abizadeh, "Democratic Theory and Border Coercion," *Political Theory* 36, no. 1 (2008): 37–65.

Recommended readings:

- Frederick G. Whelan, "Democratic Theory and the Boundary Problem," *Nomos* 25, no. 1983 (1983): 13–47
- Eva Erman, "The Boundary Problem and the Ideal of Democracy," *Constellations* 21, no. 4 (2014): 535–46
- Ben Saunders, "Defining the Demos," *Politics, Philosophy and Economics* 11, no. 3 (2012): 280–301
- David Miller, "Why Immigration Controls Are Not Coercive: A Reply to Arash Abizadeh," *Political Theory* 38, no. 1 (2010): 111–20.

Week 11. Global democracy

Mandatory reading: Daniel M Weinstock, "The Real World of (Global) Democracy," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 37, no. 1 (2006): 6–20.

Recommended readings:

- Carol C. Gould, "Structuring Global Democracy: Political Communities, Universal Human Rights, and Transnational Representation," *Metaphilosophy* 40, no. 1 (2009): 24–41
- Terry Macdonald, "Democratizing Global 'Bodies Politic': Collective Agency, Political Legitimacy, and the Democratic Boundary Problem," *Global Justice: Theory Practice Rhetoric* 10, no. 2 (2017): 22–42
- Thomas Christiano, "Is Democratic Legitimacy Possible for International Institutions?," in *Global Democracy: Normative and Empirical Perspectives*, ed. Daniele Archibugi, Mathias Koenig-Archibugi, and Raffaele Marchetti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 69–95
- Philip Pettit, "Legitimate International Institutions: A Neorepublican Perspective," in *The Philosophy of International Law*, ed. John Tasioulas and Samantha Besson (Oxford, 2010), 139–62.

Week 12. The crisis and future of democracy

Mandatory reading: Rainer Forst, "Two Bad Halves Don't Make a Whole: On the Crisis of Democracy," *Constellations*, no. 26 (2019): 378–83.

Recommended readings:

- Nadia Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).
- John P. McCormick, "The New Ochlophobia? Populism, Majority Rule and Prospects for Democratic Republicanism," in *Republicanism and the Future of Democracy*, ed. Yiftah Elazar and Geneviève Rousselière (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 130–51.
- Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016).
- Martin Gilens, *Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).