Political Philosophy [DRAFT]

Course Level: Upper

[Semester], [Institution]

Description & Overview

Political life, for better or worse, is inescapable. Insofar as we're social creatures, we need to devise rules and procedures for getting along with one another—for figuring out the means by which we collectively decide what projects to pursue, how desired goods are allocated, and who ultimately holds power over others. The outcomes of these decisions are highly consequential. They shape both our public interactions and how our individual lives turn out. There's thus tremendous value in thinking through the various, philosophical contours of political life. This course is accordingly designed to familiarize students with these issues while honing their ability to engage with them in a philosophically rigorous way.

The course is comprised of three main parts. For the first unit, we'll examine the nature of the political itself. What, exactly, does it mean for us to be political creatures? What does political life consist of? While we typically associate the political with legal governance, we'll quickly see that it encompasses far more than this. The second part then transitions to questions of democratic governance and decision making. Democracy is often lauded as the best model for collective decision-making. Yet how should we characterize democratic decision-making? Is it deliberative in nature, or is it perhaps inherently antagonistic? Moreover, what justifies our endorsement of democracy over alternative models? And these questions become more pressing once we apply them to mass, representative democracies—the dominant form of democratic governance. Finally, the third part addresses practical issues that emerge in democratic life. We'll specifically look at the place of toleration and sacrifice within democratic communities, which will orient us toward the difficulties in sustaining the kind of equality we want democracies to exhibit.

Course Information

Instructor:
C.J. Oswald
[Email]

Lecture:
[Location]
[Time]

Office Hours:
[Location]
[Time]

Readings:
Course Packet

Student Learning Objectives: By the end of this course, students will be able to

- Distinguish (broadly) between moral and political normativity in describing the domain of political philosophy, and how it differs from moral philosophy
- Explain what it means for political concepts to be "essentially contestable"
- Describe competing characterizations of the political realm while also highlighting their commonalities
- Differentiate the leading models of democracy while assessing their corresponding strengths and weaknesses

- Examine the distinct strategies for justifying democracy as the preferable form of political decision-making; in doing so, explain the notions of political legitimacy and equality
- Explain the philosophical problems with democratic representation
- Identify the standard role of neutrality in democratic politics while exploring potential pitfalls of it
- Pursue and develop an independent project over the course of several months
- Produce a written piece of original, long-form argumentation, which raises and addresses a philosophical question related to course themes

General Course Policies

Syllabus Policy: I think of syllabi as pseudo-contracts between myself and students. Consequently, the policies, requirements, and guidelines listed throughout should be read as promises made to students about what they can expect from the course. However, as instructor, I reserve the right to modify the syllabus as needed to best achieve the course learning objectives. Students will be promptly informed—and likely consulted—regarding any such changes.

Email and Communications: The best way to communicate with me is through email. When emailing me, please include **"[Course Name/Number]"** in the subject heading. I plan on responding to all emails within **2 business days** (so excluding weekends and holidays). If you haven't received a response after that period, please feel free to follow up.

Office Hours: Office hours are times set aside and dedicated for meeting with students. You're welcome (and encouraged!) to drop by and discuss whatever you need or want to. Often, students come prepared with questions regarding the course material, assignments, or grades. Yet I'm also happy to discuss philosophy, university life, and related topics. By attending office hours, you can receive more personalized instruction, feedback, and even advice on both the course and being a student. So please don't hesitate to use them!

Screens (and In-Class Materials): Evidence is mounting that the use of digital technologies or "screens" (e.g., laptops, phones, tablets) in educational settings hinders learning. These technologies distract both you and your classmates, preventing you from both attending to the material during class and, accordingly, from absorbing and reflecting on it. So, this will be a **screens-free** classroom: the use of screens within the classroom is prohibited. However, since printing is often costly, I will provide handouts for class discussion, which will include passages from the day's assigned reading. If students require a laptop or tablet for **accessibility** reasons, please inform me as soon as possible.

Grading, Requirements, and Assignment Policies

AI & Original Work: Much of philosophy's value stems from practicing it. By doing philosophy, we contribute to a collective intellectual project while also enhancing and refining our capacities for rational thought, communication, and so on. That is, there's value in doing the work independent of material outcomes (e.g., grades, jobs, etc.). As such, I require all students to submit their own, original work. The use of either generative AI programs (e.g., chatbots and other LLMs) or AI

tools that significantly shape the writing (e.g., Grammarly) is therefore prohibited. If, for whatever reason, I suspect submitted work may not be your own, I may invite you for an interview regarding both the material and process. This interview will be treated as an oral examination counting for **50%** of your grade on the relevant assignment.

Revisions and Resubmissions: We learn and improve most when we have opportunities to correct--what we come to learn are--our mistakes. Moreover, philosophical writing is rarely finished after just one draft. To facilitate this, students are granted **three** opportunities to revise and resubmit their work in light of my feedback. This policy applies to the following assignments: In-Class Exams, Term Paper Proposal and Defense, Term Paper Draft.

Late/Missing Assignments and Extensions: Students are expected to submit all assignments by their designated deadline. Any assignments submitted after the deadline are subject to **a late penalty** consisting of the removal of **one** opportunity to revise and resubmit assignments. **Late submissions for revisions and resubmissions aren't allowed**. However, I'm fairly lenient in granting extensions for assignments. So long as I'm asked within a reasonable time frame (e.g., not a few hours before the deadline), I'll typically grant an extension, the length of which will depend on student circumstances.

Grading Scheme:

A+	99-100
A	94-98.9
A-	90-93.9
B+	87-89.9
B	83-86.9

B-	80-82.9
C+	77-79.9
C	73-76.9
C-	70-72.9
D+	67-69.9

D	63-66.9
D-	60-62.9
F	0-59

Assignments: Below are the assignments that students will complete for this course, along with their corresponding weight.

Class Attendance & Participation (20%): As an upper-level course, I intend for much of the inquiry in this class to be self-directed. Discussions may veer one way or another depending on the class's interests. While some of class time will be dedicated to explaining elements of the arguments, the discussion overall will be shaped by student interactions. Accordingly, there's a built-in expectation that students will have read the assigned readings beforehand and will have done so carefully. Similarly, there's an increased expectation of students being active participants in every class (with exceptions being made as appropriate). Given this, regular attendance and participation determine a large chunk of students' grades. If students need to miss class for whatever reason, please simply let me know ahead of time.

In-Class Exams (45%): Students will complete **three** in-class exams. The exams themselves will consist of a short, argumentative essay that's to be written during the class period. Students will be provided with **two** or **three** prompts to choose from, all of which relate to the course themes up until that point (and within the corresponding unit). Typically, the prompt will be in the form of a general question (e.g., "Should democratic relations be characterized as cooperative or adversarial?") and students will (i) take a stand on the question and (ii) produce an argument in favor of their position. As such, the in-class exams represent structured opportunities for students to practice and build upon their argumentation skills while grappling with the core philosophical themes of the class.

Term Paper (35%): Throughout the semester, students will develop and produce a long-form argumentative paper (2,500-3,000 words) on a topic pertaining to the course content. The paper will be scaffolded, thus involving multiple check-ins with

me. Some of these will be done during class, but others will occur outside of class time. About one-third into the semester, students will submit a paper proposal, including their (i) topic/question, (ii) general argument, and (iii) sample bibliography. The paper proposal will be defended in a short oral examination (**5%** of final grade). Around the halfway point, students will submit either a full draft or detailed outline of their paper, which will then be subject to a peer review activity during class (**15%** of final grade). Then, at the end of the semester, students will submit the completed version of the paper (**15%** of final grade). Further details will be provided on an independent assignment sheet.

Course Topics, Readings, and Schedule

Topic	Week	Day	Readings	Assignments
Course Introduction	1	1	No Reading	
The Subject of Political Philosophy	1	2	Charles Larmore, *What is Political Philosophy?* - Chp. 1: "The Relation between Political and Moral Philosophy," 18-39	
Unit 1: The Nature of the Political				
Political Concepts & Discourse	2	3	William Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse* - Chapter 1: "Essentially Contested Concepts in Politics"	
Politics & Human Life	2	4	Aristotle, *Politics* - Book I.1-3 (1252a-1253a), - Book III.1-3 (1274b30-1276b15)	
The Nature & Function of Political Communities	3	5	Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* - Chapters 17 and 22	
The Nature & Function of Political Communities	3	6	John Locke, *Second Treatise on Government* - Chapters 7-9	
In-Class Exam 1	4	7	N/A	*Exam 1*
The Public-State Distinction	4	8	John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* - Chapter 1: "Search for the Public"	
The Public-Private Distinction (Revisited)	5	9	Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* - Chapters 7-10	*Term Paper Proposal & Oral Defense*
Unit 2: Democratic Governance				

Democratic Frameworks: Liberal Democracy	5	10	John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* - Lecture IV: "The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus"	
Democratic Frameworks: Deliberative Democracy	6	11	Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* - Chapter 7: "Deliberative Politics: A Procedural Concept of Democracy"	
Democratic Frameworks: Agonistic Democracy	6	12	Chantelle Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* - Essay 4: "For an Agonistic Model of Democracy"	
Democratic Frameworks: Politics of Difference	7	13	Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* - Chapter 4: "The Ideal of Impartiality and the Civic Public"	*Exam 1 Revisions*
Justifying Democracy: Skeptics	7	14	Christopher Achen & Larry Bartels, *Democracy for Realists* - Chapter 8: "The Very Basis of Reasons: Groups, Social Identities, and Political Psychology"	
In-Class Exam 2	8	15	N/A	*Exam 2*
Justifying Democracy: Representation of Interests	8	16	John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* Chapters 2 and 3	
Justifying Democracy: Legitimacy and Political Power	9	17	Allen Buchanan, "Political Legitimacy and Democracy"	
Justifying Democracy: Equality	9	18	Niko Kolodny, "Rule Over None I: What Justifies Democracy?"	
Justifying Democracy: Equality	10	19	Niko Kolodny, "Rule Over None II: Social Equality and the Justification of Democracy"	*Term Paper Draft/Outline*
Democratic Representation: The Nature of Political Representation	10	20	Jane Mansbridge, "Rethinking Representation"	*Peer Review Activity*
Democratic Representation: Who Represents?	11	21	Carol Gould, "Diversity and Democracy: Representing Differences"	*Exam 2 Revisions*
Democratic Representation: Critical Perspectives	11	22	Linda Martín Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others"	

In-Class Exam 3	12	23	N/A	*Exam 3*
Democratic Representation: Critical Perspectives	12	24	Alexander Guerrero, "Against Elections: The Lottocratic Alternative"	
Unit 3: Neutrality, Toleration, and Sacrifice				
Neutrality and Toleration: Respecting Differences	13	25	John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*	
Neutrality and Toleration: Respecting Differences	13	26	John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* - Chapters 1 and 4	
Neutrality and Toleration: Feasibility	14	27	Michael Sandel, "The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self"	
Neutrality and Toleration: Feasibility	14	28	Bernard Williams, "Toleration: An Impossible Virtue?"	
Sacrifice	15	29	Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers* - Chapters 1 and 2	*Exam 3 Revisions*
Sacrifice	15	30	Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers* - Chapters 3 and 4	*Term Paper**