

PHIL 9020.03 - THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF DEMOCRACY (FALL 2023)

In some domains, we believe that experts know best. If we fall sick, we do not seek out the medical opinion of just anyone, nor do we poll the members of our community. Instead, we place far greater weight on the opinions of doctors and trust them with our care. Is politics like that? Would delegating political rule to experts result in better political decisions, or do we fare better using democratic procedures? Epistemic democrats defend the latter position. They argue that we should endorse democratic institutions, practices, or principles, not (merely) because of anything intrinsically right, just, or fair about them, but because they lead to better political decisions. The goal of this seminar is to critically investigate different versions of this view to arrive at a better understanding of democracy's epistemic advantages and limitations. Although we will read some historical sources, our primary focus will be on recent developments in the literature. Throughout, we will consider not only philosophical arguments, but also formal results such as the Condorcet Jury Theorem and the Diversity Trumps Ability theorem, as well as empirical evidence both about democracy's macro-level performance and about micro-level phenomena relating to voter information, bias, and the like.

Instructor: Jacob Barrett

Location and Meeting Time: Wednesdays from 5-7:30pm in Furman 106

Email and Office: jacobaribaret@gmail.com (for now), Furman 103

Required Texts

All readings that are not easily available online will be provided to you as .pdfs. However, if you strongly prefer hard copies of any of the books we are reading, and if you find it in any way burdensome to acquire them, please let me know and I will do my best to get you a copy.

Assessment

Term Paper – Your grade will largely depend on your term paper, which will be due by the end of the exam period (Dec 16). The paper should be about 20-25 pages and should be emailed to me.

Optionally, you may submit a rough draft of your essay to me any time before the Thanksgiving break. If you submit a rough draft, I will not grade it but will provide comments that should help you revise the paper before submitting the final version. Regardless of whether you choose to submit a rough draft, I strongly encourage everyone to discuss potential essay topics with me.

An alternative option is to write two shorter essays instead of one longer one. Please let me know if you'd like to make use of this option so that we can work out suitable deadlines and guidelines.

Participation/Shorties – Each week, you are expected to do the required reading, attend class, and contribute to the discussion. Please let me know in advance if you will need to miss any meetings.

You are also expected to write short reflection pieces (“shorties”) of about 1-2 pages, which you should email me 24 hours before we meet. These should address at least one of the readings, discussing an objection, connection, point of confusion, or so on. I encourage you to write a shorty before each meeting, but at a minimum please submit 12. Sometimes, I may provide more specific instructions about your shorty for the following week (e.g., I may ask you to structure one as a referee report).

I will not grade your shorties or provide a participation grade. However, if you fail to participate or to submit shorties to a satisfactory level, I reserve the right to reduce your final grade by one grade point. I do not expect to exercise this right, except perhaps in rare cases where performance is severely and unambiguously substandard, and where I have already been in touch with you to register my concern.

Schedule of Readings

The below reading list is highly tentative. It will almost certainly change along the way as our discussions develop and in response to feedback from members of the seminar. I will do my best to keep everyone updated, but if you are ever unsure about what you are meant to be reading, please don't hesitate to ask.

Each week, I have added at least one "extra reading" in addition to the required ones. You are not expected to do these readings before coming to class. Instead, I have provided them to help you look more into topics you find especially interesting or challenging, and to give you a head start when doing research for your essays. Please feel free to ask me, at any point, for further suggested readings.

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Part I Introductions

Week 1 (Aug. 23)

Required Reading:

Introduction to Epistemic Democracy (and to the seminar)

David Estlund, "Beyond Fairness and Deliberation: The Epistemic Dimension of Democratic Authority"

John-Jacques Rousseau, *On Social Contract*, book 2, ch. 3, book 4, ch. 2

Thomas Christiano and Sameer Bajaj, "Democracy" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, section 2

Extra Reading:

Joshua Cohen, "An Epistemic Conception of Democracy" – a classic articulation of epistemic democracy

Week 2 (Aug. 30)

Required Reading:

Institutional Epistemology and Some Models of Epistemic Democracy

F. A. Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society"

Elizabeth Anderson, "The Epistemology of Democracy"

Extra Reading:

Hélène Landemore, *Democratic Reason*, ch. 3 – a nice historical survey of different approaches to epistemic democracy

Robert B. Talisse, "The Epistemology of Democracy: An Overview" – another helpful survey piece focused more on the contemporary literature

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Part II Models of Epistemic Democracy

Week 3 (Sep 6)

Required Reading:

The Wisdom of Crowds and the Condorcet Jury Theorem, Part I: The Basic Idea

Aristotle, *Politics*, book 3, chapter 11

Francis Galton, "Vox Populi (the wisdom of crowds)"

Christian List and Robert E. Goodin, "Epistemic Democracy: Generalizing the Condorcet Jury Theorem"

Extra Reading:

Scott E. Page, *The Difference*, chapters 7-8 – on the "wisdom of crowds" model (as opposed to the Condorcet Jury Theorem model)

Bernard Grofman, and Scott L. Feld, "Rousseau's General Will: A Condorcetian Perspective"

Jeremy Waldron, "The Wisdom of the Multitude: Some Reflections on Book 3, Chapter 11 of Aristotle's *Politics*" – for some historical context

- Week 4 (Sep 13)** **The Wisdom of Crowds and the Condorcet Jury Theorem, Part II: Details and Challenges**
- Required Reading: Hana Samaržija, “A Belated Failure: Condorcet in Contemporary Epistemic Conditions”
Robert E. Goodin and Kai Spiekermann, *An Epistemic Theory of Democracy*, chs. 17-18
- Extra Reading: Robert E. Goodin and Kai Spiekermann, *An Epistemic Theory of Democracy* – the rest of the book is very good on the Condorcet Jury Theorem model of democracy
- Week 5 (Sep 20)** **Diversity and Democracy, Part I: The Basic Idea**
- Required Reading: Scott E. Page, *The Difference*, ch. 6
Hélène Landemore, *Democratic Reason*, ch. 1
- Extra Reading: Lu Hong and Scott E. Page, “Groups of Diverse Problem Solvers can Outperform Groups of High-Ability Problem Solvers” – the source of the “Diversity Trumps Ability” theorem
Scott E. Page, *The Difference* – the rest of the book is very good on the theory and evidence behind the epistemic benefits of diversity
- Week 6 (Sep 27)** **Diversity and Democracy, Part II: Details and Challenges**
- Required Reading: Hélène Landemore, *Democratic Reason*, chs. 4, 6
Jason Brennan, “Sexy but Wrong: Diversity Theorem Defenses of Democracy”
Aaron Ancell, “Democracy Isn’t That Smart (But We Can Make It Smarter): On Landemore’s *Democratic Reason*”
- Extra Reading: Hélène Landemore, *Democratic Reason*, chs. 5, 7
Hélène Landemore, “Yes, We Can (Make It Up on Volume): Answers to Critics” – responses to related objections
Hélène Landemore and Scott E. Page, “Deliberation and Disagreement: Problem Solving, Prediction, and Positive Dissensus” – further variations on a theme
- Week 7 (Oct 4)** **Deweyan Pragmatism, Part I: The Basic Idea**
- Required Reading: Jack Knight and James Johnson, *The Priority of Democracy*, chs. 4-6
- Extra Reading: John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* – a classic pragmatist text and historical precursor of the Knight and Johnson book
- Week 8 (Oct 11)** **Deweyan Pragmatism, Part II: Details and Challenges**
- Required Reading: Jack Knight and James Johnson, *The Priority of Democracy*, chs. 7-8
Robert B. Talisse, “A Farewell to Deweyan Democracy”
- Extra Reading: Cheryl Misak, “Making Disagreement Matter: Pragmatism and Deliberative Democracy” – a fellow traveler with Talisse
Joshua Forstenzer, “Deweyan Democracy, Robert Talisse, and the Fact of Reasonable Pluralism: A Rawlsian Response” – a reply to Talisse

Week 9 (October 18) Deliberative Models

Required Reading: James S. Fishkin and Robert C. Luskin, “Experimenting with a Democratic Ideal: Deliberative Polling and Public Opinion”
Jane Mansbridge et al., “A Systemic Approach to Deliberative Democracy”

Extra Reading: Cristina Lafont, *Democracy Without Shortcuts* – a state-of-the art treatment of deliberative democracy
Lynn M. Sanders, “Against Deliberation” – a classic critique of the deliberative democracy program

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Part III Empirical Challenges to Epistemic Democracy

Week 10 (Oct 25) Challenges to Popular Sovereignty and Retrospective Voting

Required Reading: Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*, chs. 2-5

Extra Reading: Plato, *Republic*, book 8
Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, chs. 21-22
Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion* – some historical predecessors

Week 11 (Nov 1) Democratic Realism and The Group Theory of Democracy

Required Reading: Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*, chs. 8-9, 11

Extra Reading: Samuel Bagg, *The Dispersion of Power*, ch. 2 – a helpful summary of some related grounds for pessimism
Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy* – a book-length argument against democracy drawing on similar evidence as Achen and Bartels

Week 12 (Nov 8) Democratic Rejoinders

Required Reading: Maxime Lepoutre, “Democratic Group Cognition”
Andrew Healy and Neil Malhotra, “Retrospective Voting Reconsidered”
Henry Farrell, Hugo Mercier, and Melissa Schwartzberg, “Analytical Democratic Theory: A Microfoundational Approach”

Extra Reading: Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, especially chs. 3-4 – a pathbreaking approach referenced in the Lepoutre article

Week 13 (Nov 15) Contemporary Challenges: Fragmentation, Polarization, Segregation

Required Reading: Robert B. Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy*, chs. 3-4
Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*, ch. 5

Extra Reading: Maxime Lepoutre, *Democratic Speech in Divided Times*, ch. 7 – on segregation
Jamie Draper, “Gentrification and Everyday Democracy” – on gentrification
Cass R. Sunstein, *#Republic* – on social media and the internet
Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenlun, *A Lot of People Are Saying* – on “the new conspiracism”
Robert E. Goodin and Kai Spiekermann, *An Epistemic Theory of Democracy*, epilogue – on recent electoral results and misinformation
Zeynep Pamuk, *Politics and Expertise* – on the role of experts in democracy

