

Democratic Theory and Practice

GOVT 101 – Fall 2019

Time:	Thursdays, 7:20-10pm	Instructor:	Christopher D. Berk
Room:	Innovation Hall 215G	Email:	cberk@gmu.edu
		Office Hours:	Thursdays, 3-5pm Research Hall 339

Description

This course is an introduction to the study of politics that focuses on a definitive characteristic of modern political life: democracy. It's been noted that the two and a half millennia during which democracy has been discussed, debated, attacked, supported, ignored, established, destroyed, and re-established has not, in fact, produced agreement on some of the most fundamental questions *about* democracy.

This course will introduce students to a wide range of ideas about the meaning of democracy and a wide range of views about the state of democracy in the world today. We'll discuss both classic and contemporary texts, along with various case studies, across three broad units: constitutionalism, theories of democracy, and critics of democracy. Those discussions will be enriched by reading an assortment of political and social theorists.

Course Objectives

Students in this course will learn, elaborate, and apply elements of social scientific reasoning to complex moral and political problems related to democracy. The assignments will hone your ability to reason from evidence and push you to communicate complex ideas efficiently and effectively.

As a Mason Core course in the social and behavioral sciences, we will

- Explain how individuals, groups or institutions are influenced by contextual factors;
- Demonstrate awareness of changes in social and cultural constructs;
- Use appropriate methods and resources to apply social and behavioral science concepts, terminology, principles and theories in the analysis of significant human issues, past or present.

Course Structure

This is primarily a lecture course. That said, discussion, deliberation, and debate will be central to our class sessions. We'll begin most sessions with a close reading of a particular case study or court case, then move to the more abstract readings.

Keep in mind that the issues in this course are contentious and touch on matters about which we all have deep convictions. Although it will be tempting to stake out quick stands on many of the issues, you should remain open to opposing perspectives and base your position on careful, well-reasoned argumentation.

Assignments

Participation: Students are expected to read the assigned material before class and to contribute to discussion regularly and thoughtfully. As we will be referencing the material during our seminar discussions, I expect that you will *print the articles and bring them with you to class*. We will make time for discussion in this class. You are encouraged and expected to participate regularly in small group discussions in class. Although low participation in class will not adversely affect your grade, consistently excellent contributions to discussion can earn extra credit sufficient to improve a marginal grade (e.g. a high A- can become an A).

Second, class discussion will be a combination of open conversation and cold-calling. If you do not feel able to participate on a given day for whatever reason, you can email me by noon the day of class to let me know. Please do not do this more than two or three times over the term.

Reading responses (10%): Once a week you will post on Blackboard a 4-7 sentence response to your reading assignment. This assignment is intended to help you digest the readings before you come to class. You should either make a critical comment about the reading, find an interesting point of comparison with another reading, or pose an important question about the reading. You must post by *3pm on the day of class*. You must complete 10 postings over the course of the term.

Exams (90%): You will write three exams in this course. The first will be worth 20%, the second 30%, and final exam 40% of your grade in the course. These exams will be cumulative. They will be written to test your knowledge of the readings, of our classroom discussions, and of wider course themes. You must do the reading and come to class to do well. Exams may include multiple choice, short answer, and essay questions. Dates for exams are:

- Exam 1: September 26, 2019
- Exam 2: October 31, 2019
- Final Exam: TBA

Computer Use During Class

You're welcome to use a computer (tablet, etc.) in class, but if you bring a computer you will be expected to post copies of your notes on the course wiki (in Blackboard) following the class session to share with others. If you are not willing to do this, do not bring a computer with you.

Disability Accommodation

If you are in need of accommodation for an impairment or disability, contact me as soon as possible. You should also contact the Office of Disability Services to document your needs and determine a reasonable accommodation. They can be reached at ods@gmu.edu.

I assume that all of us learn in different ways, and that the organization of any course will accommodate each student differently. For example, you may prefer to process information by speaking and listening, so that some of the written handouts I provide may be difficult to absorb. Please talk to me as soon as you can about your individual learning needs and how this course can best accommodate them. If you do not have a documented disability, remember that other support services, including the GMU Writing Center, the Tutor Referral Program, and Student Health Services, are available to all students.

Academic Integrity

The integrity of the University community is affected by the individual choices made by each of us. Mason has an Honor Code with clear guidelines regarding academic integrity. Three fundamental and rather simple principles to follow at all times are that: (1) all work submitted be your own; (2) when using the work or ideas of others, including fellow students, give full credit through accurate citations; and (3) if you are uncertain about the ground rules on a particular assignment, ask for clarification. No grade is important enough to justify academic misconduct. Plagiarism means using the words, opinions, or factual information from another person without giving the person credit. Writers give credit through accepted documentation styles, such as parenthetical citation, footnotes, or endnotes. Paraphrased material must also be cited. If you have any doubts about what constitutes plagiarism, please see me.

Reading Schedule

This course is self-contained. All material will be available through the course GMU Blackboard page.

Practical notes on reading:

This course, at times, will have a heavy reading load. You should expect to spend at least five hours reading per class session. Some of it will be detailed reading of texts where accuracy and command are necessary. Court decisions, in particular, can be slow going. At other times, you'll need to read quickly through a large amount of material, passing rapidly over details and pulling out the central themes and concepts.

8.29.2019

- Introduction, “constitutional democracy and its critics”

UNIT: Constitutionalism & Institutional Design

9.5.2019

- Elster, “Introduction” in *Constitutionalism and Democracy*
- Graber, “Constitutional purposes” in *A New Introduction to American Constitutionalism*

9.12.2019

- *United States v. Carolene Products Co.* (1938)
- Graber, “Constitutional Authority” in *A New Introduction to American Constitutionalism*

9.19.2019

- *Minor v. Happersett* (1875)
- Cohen, *Semi-Citizenship in Democratic Politics*
- Graber, *Dred Scott and the Problem of Constitutional Evil*

9.26.2019

– Exam 1 –

UNIT: Types of Democracy

10.3.2019

- Plato, *The Republic*
- Allen, *Talking with Strangers*
- Fishkin, *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation*

10.10.2019

- Rousseau, *The Social Contract*
- Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*

10.17.2019

- Rawls, *Political Liberalism*
- Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*

10.24.2019

- Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*
- Przeworski, *Democracy and the Limits of Self-Government*

10.31.2019

– Exam 2 –

UNIT: Critics

11.7.2019

- *Lassiter v. Northhampton County Board of Electors* (1959)
- *Kramer v. Union Free School District No. 15* (1969)
- Brennan, *Against Democracy*
- Estlund, *Democratic Authority*

11.14.2019

- Sunstein, *Laws of Fear*
- Olson, “Whiteness and the participation-inclusion dilemma”
- Forman, *Locking Up Our Own*

11.21.2019

- Osnos, “Doomsday Prep for the Super-Rich”
- Gilens and Page, “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens”

11.28.2019

THANKSGIVING RECESS

12.5.2019

- Ginsburg and Huq, *How to Lose a Constitutional Democracy*
- Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*

– Final Exam TBA –