

POLI 276 Major Issues in Political Theory: Everyday Debates in Democratic Politics

Spring 2024

Yi-Hsuan Huang [*pronounced as e-shuan hwang*]

yhsuan@live.unc.edu

Class Meetings: TH 3:30 - 4:45 pm, FH 104

Office Hours: T 5:30 - 7:30 pm & H 12:00 - 1:00 pm or by appointment

Make an [appointment](#); Office hours [Zoom Link](#)

For Arendt, to belong to a democratic political community is to have a "common world," not to share a worldview, and this common world exists only where there is a plurality of worldviews. Our sense of what is common, "the sameness of the object," can appear only when it is seen from multiple perspectives.

--Linda Zerilli, A Democratic Theory of Judgment

Course Introduction and Objectives

This class draws thinkers from the ancient, modern, and contemporary times to reflect on wide-ranging issues in democratic politics: the tension between positive and negative freedom, the underlying dangers of a manipulable populace, the important-but-not-unproblematic demarcation of the public and private spheres, the justifiability for exclusion in democracy, and the delicate balance between individualism and collective governance.

This class intends to:

1. Introduce important debates in the history of democratic theory with a critical lens
2. Use theoretical tools to appraise issues in democratic politics

Assignments & Evaluations

- Attendance 5%
- Class Engagement 10% (Midterm Self-Reflection 1%)
- Five Pop Quizzes 15% (Can drop the lowest two grades)
- Five Analytical Reflection Journals 25% (150-300 words each, due 1 pm before class)
- Two Issue Analysis Essays (3 pages, or 700-1000 words each) 40%
- Final Take Home Exam 5%

Grading Scale

A = 92 - 100 | A- = 90 - 91

B+ = 87 - 89 | B = 83 - 86 | B- = 80 - 82

C+ = 77 - 79 | C = 73 - 76 | C- = 70 - 72

D+ = 67 - 69 | D = 63 - 66 | D- = 62 and below

Attendance (5%) Attendance to every session is expected. All excused absence needs to have proper documentation. Each unexcused absence will result in a deduction of 1% of your overall grade. More than 5 unexcused absences will make the attendance grade 0. Please check the Autonomy Token section for more information on attendance flexibility.

Class Engagement (10%) Discussion is a critical component of this class and will take up 40%-50% of the class time. My role as an instructor is to explain and clarify the concepts, to facilitate and move forward the discussion, but it is the conversations among peers that actually allow you to learn how to apply theory in real-world cases. Therefore, I take in class engagement very seriously. Everyone is expected to contribute to this learning process and, remember, every viewpoint is valuable (there's no "dumb" opinion or question).

- Grades are based on both the level of engagement (the frequency and activeness of your participation) and active listening (whether you show respect and actively listen to others). (Please refer to the Class Engagement Rubric for details).
- Verbal contribution is the most straightforward and irreplaceable form of "engagement," but I would also look at other elements such as the focus level, your performance on little in-class assignments, etc. Please see this as a chance to practice public speaking, as a skill we all need to learn and use in our life.
- To ensure other forms of engagement, there will be small in-class assignments that allow you to showcase your knowledge and active thinking.
- These behaviors will negatively affect your grade: messaging or using other web pages in class, repeatedly being late to class, being inactive in small group discussion...and so on).
- To ensure we are on the same page for expectations, you will be asked to do a midterm self-reflection to rate your engagement performance, and I will return it with feedback to let you know what is going well and if there are areas to improve.
- If you are worried about your engagement grade or need to seek other channels to participate, please contact me before [Mar. 20](#), this is to ensure that there are enough sessions to improve.

Pop Quizzes (10%) There will be a total of five pop quizzes throughout the course, each consisting of 4-10 multiple-choice questions. These quizzes are very easy if you complete the reading assignments. To guide your reading and the preparation of quizzes, a number of **Reading Questions** will be provided in advance.

Please note that there will be no make-up opportunities for missed quizzes. If you have an excused absence, the quiz score will simply be dropped. If you use a token to excuse yourself, the grade will also be dropped, but it will count toward the two dropped grades.

Analytical Reflection Journals (25%) These journals are due on Tuesdays and Thursdays at 1:00 pm, before the class meeting. You need to complete five journals throughout the semester, and you are free to choose which readings to write about. But you may not write about readings for the same theme twice (so you will have to choose readings from five different themes). A journal will ask for a response of 150-300 words to a prompt question, which will be made available on Canvas every

Friday. These journals are mostly graded on completion, but you will only receive half credit if it is evident that you did not complete the reading.

Issue Analysis Essays (40%) You'll be asked to write two issue analysis essays to apply theories we learn in class to a prompt case. The essay will ask you to analyze how a particular theorist would respond to a real-world situation, give your critical analysis of that potential response, and provide your own argument to the prompt question. More details and a rubric will be given in class. There will be a 5% penalty for every late submission of 24 hours. After 7 days, the assignment will not be accepted. You can select your own prompt case for the second essay.

Final Take Home Exam (5%) gives you an opportunity to choose from a few options that best help you to wrap up the semester. You can either do a multiple-choice exam, create a concept map, or write a short reflection essay. Those who want to do a non-exam route would have to run your proposal by me before Apr. 16 for approval.

(Optional) **Oral Presentation** gives you an opportunity to present your chosen prompt case for your second issue analysis essay or your final exam project and introduces an interesting topic to the class. The assignment is optional and not graded, but will earn you one more autonomy token. Those who want to present should sign up before Apr. 4.

Autonomy Tokens!

Autonomy tokens are created to give everyone flexibility and autonomy in their unique learning process. Everyone has **four** tokens from the start and can decide when and how to use them.

Ways to use tokens:

- Use one token to excuse an absence without documentation (Quiz will be dropped but will count toward the two drop-limit)
- Use one token to extend an assignment deadline by 24 hours (You can also combine a number of tokens to extend it for a longer time)
- Use two tokens to rewrite an assignment (The revision plan has to be run by me, and also has to be a different prompt)

How to cash a token:

- Simply email me and let me know how you'd like to use it. No questions asked.
- You cannot use your token to extend the deadline of a journal entry. If you miss the deadline, you'll have to choose another date.
- You should use tokens for anything that does not have a strong mandatory nature (traveling plans, club events, part-time jobs, internship - unless required by the department...etc).

You can earn one additional token by volunteering for a five-minute presentation of your second issue analysis prompt, or alternative final projects.

Any other accommodation beyond the use of tokens needs to have documented reasons and should be clearly communicated to me. Even if you send an ARS notice, you are still responsible for

discussing the exact accommodation with me. Any chronic situations with limited/without documentation should also be communicated clearly and gain approval.

Classroom and Communication Policy

I strive to make the class as inclusive and comfortable. To do so, I kindly ask for a sense of mutual respect. Here are some basic rules:

- I allow laptops and smartphones to be used in class as long as they do not disturb our discussion, and I reserve the right to ban electronic devices if they are used in ways not relevant to class activities. Staring at the electronic devices, clearly using them for non-class purposes will significantly lower your engagement grade.
- If we ever have to meet online, please be in a quiet place, and turn your camera on. Please also refrain from multitasking. This means you should not be walking, driving, or talking to friends simply because we are online.
- I am aware of the challenges and difficulties in college life, but please also recognize my limit as a human. Always communicate early and regularly with me whenever you encounter difficulties and need special assistance.
- Please don't expect last-minute answers or accommodation, and always have your questions ready for office hours.
- It is okay to ask for additional assistance (as things happen!) but be mindful that any accommodation I offer needs to be fair for everyone.

Office Hours

Office hours are held on Zoom on Tuesdays 5:30 - 7:30 pm & Thursdays 12:00 – 1:00 pm or by appointment.

- To avoid Zoom malfunction, please always sign up for office hours before coming.
- Office Hours Zoom Link: <https://unc.zoom.us/j/3120433448>

Discuss *Democratically*: Practice Mutual Respect in Conversations

Discussion is a critical element of this class. It is more than common that you will encounter different viewpoints. It is perfectly fine to be critical of ideas, but please do so in a civil and respectful manner. Meanwhile, if a point brought up by a classmate or the instructor challenges your original view, I encourage you to:

- always assume good rather than malicious intent and
- ask yourself what it means for our society or world that an idea that seems to be anathema to you is true to another person

(Smirk, not respond to a question-asker, looking away...all these are not okay.)

Many class topics are raised on the assumption that upholding a few democratic values (civil liberty, equality...etc) is essential to a robust democratic system. But there is extensive disagreement on the means. Keep in mind that disagreeing doesn't mean that your peer is an authoritarian by nature.

Also, be mindful of how, while silence is natural when contemplating, a prolonged and uninterested silence can be daunting and disrespectful. If you cannot understand a point made by your peer, please kindly ask for clarification rather than being disengaged.

Schedule

1/11 Introduction

1/16 Democracy Index 2021 Report p. 12-16; p. 70-79

I: Justifying Democracy

1/18 Stanford Encyclopedia 2.1 Instrumentalism; Helen Landmore (2012) “First Mechanism of Democratic Reason: Inclusive Deliberation,” p. 89-104 (Section 1-3)

1/23 Jason Brennan (2016) Chapter 1 “Hobbits and Hooligans” p. 1-19; Chapter 2 “Ignorant, Irrational, Misinformed Nationalists” p. 24-36; Stanford Encyclopedia 2.2 Non-instrumentalism

II: Democracy as Self-government

1/25 John Locke, “Second Treatise of Government” Chapter 9, Chapter 5 (§27-30); Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, “Book 1 Chapter 1, 3-7”

1/30 Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty” p. 3-p. 10 (Section I-II)

2/1 Philip Pettit (2012) *On the People’s Term*, p. 36-64, p. 69-74

III: Speech and Politics: Truths, Lies and Harm

2/6 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, “I, II” p. 5-17, 51-54

2/8 Ishani Marita (2012) “Subordinating Speech,” p. 94-120

2/13 No Class - Well-being Day

2/15 Jamie Susskind (2022) “[We Can Regulate Social Media Without Censorship. Here’s How;](#)” Philip M. Napoli (2019) “The First Amendment, Fake News, and Filter Bubbles”

2/20 Hannah Arendt, “Truths and Politics” I-IV

IV: Democratic Citizenship

2/22 Plato, *Republic*, “Book 7,” p. 208-214

2/27 Richard Oxenberg (2015) “Philosopher-Kings in the Kingdom of Ends: Why Democracy Needs a Philosophically Informed Citizenry”

2/29 Aristotle, *Politics*, “Book III Ch1-5”

3/5 Midterm Review & Issue Analysis Writing; Mid-term Self-Reflection Due (in class)

3/7 No Class - **First Issue Analysis Essay Due 11:59 pm**

V: Toleration and the (Feminist) Critique of the Public/Private Dichotomy

3/19 John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*; Carole Pateman (1989) “Feminist Critiques of the Public/Private Dichotomy,” p. 118-124, 131-136

3/21 Anne Phillips (2011) “It’s My Body and I’ll Do What I Like with It: Bodies as Objects and Property”

3/26 Independent, “[France bans unhealthy thin models with law requiring doctor’s certificate](#)”

3/28 No Class - Well-being Day

VI: Equality of Power

4/2 Jane Mansbridge (1983) “Equality” p. 233-251; Guardian, “[Democracy is on life support: the organizers fighting voter suppression in the US South](#),”

4/4 Class cancelled; **Sign-up for Oral Presentation 11:59 pm by email**

4/9 Anne Phillips (1994) “Dealing with Difference: A Politics of Ideas or A Politics of Presence?”

VII: Exclusion

4/11 Suzanne Dovi (2009) “In Praise of Exclusion”

4/16 Brian Kogelmann (2020) “[Excluding the Antidemocratic Is Antidemocratic](#)”; Alex Kirshner (2014) “Self-Limiting Theory of Militant Democracy” p. 26-28, 33-55; **Alternative Final Proposal Due 11:59 pm**

VIII: Individuals and the Collective

4/18 Stanford Encyclopedia “Common Good” Section 3 (only) “[Why Does Political Philosophy Need This Concept? Defects in a “Private Society”](#)”; (Optional) **Oral Presentation**

4/23 Hannah Arendt (1998) *The Human Condition* p. 38-58; Time “[We Have Put Individualism Ahead of the Common Good for Too Long](#)”

4/25 Common Issues in Democracy Revisit; Q&A session; **Last Quiz**

4/26 **Second Issue Analysis Due 11:59 pm**

5/9 **Final Exam; 4:00 pm - 7:00 pm**; Alternative Final Exam Due 7:00 pm