

POL484F
Democratic Theory
Fall 2025

Professor: Melissa S. Williams
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Office hours: Tuesdays 2-4 PM or by appointment, Sidney Smith Hall, Room 3040
Seminar: Mondays 1-3 PM
Location: Larkin 341, 15 Devonshire Place

Course description

This seminar examines the idea of democracy from a range of historical, normative and theoretical perspectives. Although it is not a comprehensive survey of democratic theory, the course seeks to expose students both to some of the classic debates in the history of democratic thought and to some influential contemporary works in democratic theory. Throughout the course, we will explore the authors' answers to three questions that all theories of democracy implicitly or explicitly address:

- (1) What is "democracy"? (the definitional or semantic question)
- (2) What is democracy's value? (the normative question)
- (3) What are the practices that are constitutive of democracy? (the institutional question)

As we will see, the institutional question is the point at which the *normative* foundations of democracy meet the *empirical* or *descriptive* claims about the contexts in which democracy is possible or desirable, and one of the goals of the course is to help you refine your skills at analytically distinguishing normative and empirical claims as they operate in a particular theory.

Our seminar unfolds at a moment when representative democracy as we know it in Western societies is undergoing significant disruption, even crisis. Although it is beyond the scope of the course to delve deeply into this crisis, my hope is that our studies will equip you with some theoretical tools that will help you to make sense of democracy's current condition and its possible futures.

Course readings:

All required course readings are available through Quercus or online through UofT Libraries.

Although they are not assigned texts, you may find the following overviews of democratic theory helpful:

- Simone Chambers, *Contemporary Democratic Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2024).
- Bernard Crick, *Democracy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- Frank Cunningham, *Theories of Democracy: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002).
- Robert A. Dahl, *On Democracy* (2nd ed.) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).
- David Held, *Models of Democracy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

For some weeks, I have added a number of recommended readings that will deepen your engagement with the week's themes. In addition, I have in some cases provided a list of suggested further readings. These are not meant to be exhaustive of the relevant literature for each theme – the literature in democratic theory is voluminous – but just to point you to some additional sources that might help to deepen your thinking about a particular set of debates. These suggested readings might be a good place to begin filling out your bibliography for your research paper. The syllabus includes both some “classics” in 20th and 21st century democratic theory (marked with an asterisk) and important contemporary contributions to this vast literature.

Course requirements:

- **Reading and participation (20%).** This is a reading-intensive course and you will need to adopt strategies for reading all of the assigned material before class. Each member of the seminar is expected to attend every class having carefully studied the readings and having read response essays on the Quercus portal. Active, informed, and thoughtful participation in the course, based on a thorough reading of the assigned works, is important to your success. Please do not hesitate to reach out to me if you among those for whom oral participation in class is challenging and we can discuss alternate modes of participation. Should you be unable to attend class because of illness or for any other reason, please let me know in advance, via the Quercus email facility.
- **Response essays and presentations (20%).** Twice during the semester, once during Weeks 2-6 and once during Weeks 7-12, each student will prepare a 2-page (500 word) critical response to the week's readings and should be prepared to present a brief summary in class. Please sign up for your response essays on Quercus by 12:30 PM on Monday, September 8. Your essays must be posted on the course portal no later than 6:00 PM the evening before class. Each essay will be worth 10 percent of your final mark, for a total of 20 percent. Late response essays will not be accepted. If you find you are not able to submit a response essay for a week in which you have signed up, please let me know as soon as possible, and definitely before it is due.
- **Term paper proposal (10%).** Due by 11:59 PM on Friday, October 17, via the Quercus portal. Write a brief (800-1200 words) proposal for your term paper, stating your thesis question and including a bibliography of the main sources you will be relying upon (the bibliography is not included in the word limit). Your bibliography should be comprised of at least two or three major works from the syllabus but should also include sources from the wider literature to which you have been guided through your research and through discussion with the professor.
- **Term paper (50%).** Due by 11:59 PM on Monday, December 1, via the Quercus portal. These should be 3750-5000 words in length. Do not exceed the maximum word limit. Papers should be written in 12-point type, double spaced. Make sure to use a standard style guide (e.g., MLA, Chicago) for references.

Lateness policy: Please organize your schedule so that you can submit your work on time. Cultivating good time management skills is an essential part of your university education. If you are having trouble meeting a deadline, it is essential that you reach out to me before the assignment is due. Late essays will be penalized at the rate of 2 percent per day of lateness, including weekends.

Academic integrity:

Academic integrity is fundamental to learning and scholarship at the University of Toronto. Participating honestly, respectfully, responsibly, and fairly in this academic community ensures that the U of T degree that you earn will be valued as a true indication of your individual academic achievement and will continue to receive the respect and recognition it deserves.

Please make sure you are familiar with the University of Toronto's *Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters* (<http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/policies/behaveac.htm>). It is the rule book for academic behaviour at UofT, and you are expected to know the rules. I take plagiarism very, very seriously.

Normally, students will be required to submit their course assignments to the University's plagiarism detection tool website for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their material to be included as source documents in the University's plagiarism detection tool reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University's use of the University's plagiarism detection tool service are described on the company web site.

Generative AI

Representing as one's own an idea, or expression of an idea, that was AI-generated may be considered an academic offense in this course. I recognize that in some circumstances there may be valid reasons to use generative AI as part of your learning process. If you believe you have a valid reason to use it, you must request and receive my approval in writing prior to submitting work that has relied on generative AI, and include a statement describing your use of AI in a note on the assignment you submit. This rule applies to all written work in the course, including Reading Journals.

Schedule of Class Meetings and Course Readings

Week 1: September 8

What is Democracy? What is Democratic Theory? A Classic View

Required:

- Dahl, *On Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1998; rev. ed. 2020), chs. 1, 4-7.

Recommended:

- Read or skim all chapters of Dahl, *On Democracy*.
- Mark E. Warren, "A Problem-Based Approach to Democratic Theory," *American Political Science Review* 111(1): 39-53 (2017).
- Thomas Christiano and Sameer Bajaj, "Democracy," in Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (eds.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2024) (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/democracy/>)

Further reading:

- Chambers, Simone. 2024. *Contemporary Democratic Theory*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Cunningham, Frank. 2002. *Theories of Democracy: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Routledge.
- Dahl, Robert. 2008. *Democracy and Its Critics*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Held, David. 2006. *Models of Democracy*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Przeworski, Adam. 2010. *Democracy and the Limits of Self-Government*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Week 2: September 15

Democratic Skepticism: Western Liberal Democracy as a System of Domination

Required:

- Review Dahl reading from the first week.
- Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract*, ch. 1 (pp. 9-40)
- Ignacio Portela, “A New Future for New Caledonia?” *EJIL Talk!* August 25, 2025.
<https://www.ejiltalk.org/a-new-future-for-new-caledonia/>

Recommended:

- Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), ch. 1 (pp. 25-49).
- Nancy Fraser, “What Should Socialism Mean in the 21st Century?” 56: 1-13 (2022).

Further reading:

- Bruyneel, Kevin. 2021. *Settler memory: The Disavowal of Indigeneity and the Politics of Race in the United States*. Durham: UNC Press Books.
- Dahl, Adam. 2018. *Empire of the People: Settler Colonialism and the Foundations of Modern Democratic Thought*. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas.
- Fraser, Nancy. 2022. *Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet---and What We Can Do about It*. London, UK: Verso.
- Pateman, Carole. 1988. *The Sexual Contract*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Pateman, Carole, and Charles W. Mills. 2007. *Contract and domination. Contract & domination*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Week 3: September 22

The Evolution of Western Democracy

Required:

- Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government* (1997), chs. 1, 2, 4 (chs.5 & 6 recommended)

Further reading:

- Dunn, John. 2005. *Democracy: A History*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.

Week 4: September 29

What’s Good About Democracy? Instrumental and Non-Instrumental Value

Required:

- Elizabeth Anderson, “Democracy: Instrumental vs. Non-Instrumental Value,” in Thomas Christiano and John Christman, eds., *Contemporary Debates in Political Philosophy*, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), pp. 213-228.

- Richard Arneson, “Democracy is Not Inherently Just,” in Keith Dowding, Robert E. Goodin and Carole Pateman, eds. *Justice and Democracy*, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 40-58.

Recommended:

- Richard Arneson, "Defending the Purely Instrumental Account of Democratic Legitimacy," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 11 (1): 122-132 (2003). <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9760.00170>.
- Christopher G. Griffin, “Democracy as a Non-Instrumentally Just Procedure." *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 11 (1): 111-121 (2003). <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9760.00169>.

Week 5: October 6

Deliberative Democracy & Its Discontents in a Digital Age

Required:

- Jürgen Habermas, “Three Normative Models of Democracy,” *Constellations* 1(1): 1-10 (1994).
- Jürgen Habermas, “Popular Sovereignty as Procedure,” in James Bohman and William Rehg, eds., *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997).
- Jürgen Habermas, "Reflections and Hypotheses on a Further Structural Transformation of the Political Public Sphere." *Theory, culture & society* 39 (4): 145-171 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764221112341>.

Recommended:

- Simone Chambers, “The Philosophic Origins of Deliberative Ideals,” in André Bächtiger, John S. Dryzek, Jane Mansbridge, and Mark E. Warren, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- Jane Mansbridge et al., “A Systemic Approach to Deliberative Democracy,” in John Parkinson and Jane Mansbridge, eds., *Deliberative Systems: Deliberative Democracy at the Large Scale* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Further reading:

- Bächtiger, André, John S. Dryzek, Jane Mansbridge, and Mark E. Warren, eds., 2018. *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Benhabib, Seyla. 1996. “Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy,” in *Democracy & Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Cohen, Joshua. 1997. “Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy,” in James Bohman and William Rehg, eds., *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997.
- Dryzek, John. 2011. “Global Democratization: Soup, Society, or System?” *Ethics & International Affairs* 25(2): 211-234.
- Forst, Rainer. 2001. “The Rule of Reasons: Three Models of Deliberative Democracy,” *Ratio Juris* 14(1): 345-378.
- Gutmann, Amy and Dennis Thompson. 1996. *Democracy & Disagreement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).
- *Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

Cristina Lafont, *Democracy without Shortcuts: A Participatory Conception of Deliberative Democracy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

*** NO CLASS ON OCTOBER 13 – THANKSGIVING***

Week 6: October 20 **Inclusive Democracy**

Required:

- Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), chs. 1-4.

Recommended:

- Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, chs. 5-7.

Further reading:

- Gould, Carol. 1988. *Rethinking Democracy: Freedom and Social Cooperation in Politics, Economy and Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hayward, Clarissa Rile. 2000. *De-Facing Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mansbridge, Jane. 1999. "Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent 'Yes'," *Journal of Politics* 61(3): 628-657.
- Williams, Melissa S. 1998. *Voice, Trust and Memory: Marginalized Groups and the Failings of Liberal Representation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Young, Iris Marion. 1990. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

READING WEEK – NO CLASS ON OCTOBER 27

Week 7: November 3 **Epistocracy and Meritocracy *contra* Democracy**

Required:

- Jason Brennan and Hélène Landemore, *Debating Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), Introduction and chs. 1-2 and 5-6.
- Baogang He and Mark E. Warren, "Can Meritocracy Replace Democracy? A Conceptual Framework," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 46(9):1093–112 (2020).

Further reading:

- Bell, Daniel A. *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*. Princeton University Press, 2016.
- Brennan, Jason. 2017. *Against Democracy: New Preface*. Princeton University Press.
- Landa, Dimitri, and Ryan Pevnick. "Political Meritocracy and Democracy." *Annual Review of Political Science* 28(1): 253-271 (2025).
- Landemore, Hélène. 2012. *Democratic Reason : Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many*. Core Textbook ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Landemore, Hélène. 2020. *Open democracy : reinventing popular rule for the twenty-first century*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Week 8: November 10

Lot vs. Elections

Required:

- Mark E. Warren & Hilary Pearse, "Introduction," in *Designing Deliberative Democracy: The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Alexander Guerrero, "Against Elections: The Lottocratic Alternative." *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 42(2), 135–178 (2014).
- Cristina Lafont and Nadia Urbinati, *The Lottocratic Mentality: Defending Democracy against Lottocracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024, Introduction & Chapter 8.

Further reading:

- Hutton Ferris, D. (2023). Lottocracy or Psephocracy? Democracy, Elections, and Random Selection. *European Journal of Political Theory*.
- Guerrero, Alexander. (2024). *Lottocracy: Democracy Without Elections*. Oxford University Press.
- Landmore, H. (2020). *Open Democracy: Reinventing Popular Rule for the Twenty-First Century*. Princeton University Press.
- Lever, A. (2023a). Democracy: Should We Replace Elections with Random Selection? *Danish Yearbook of Philosophy*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1163/24689300-bja10042>
- Lever, A. (2023b). Random Selection, Democracy and Citizen Expertise. *Res Publica*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11158-023-09589-0>

****October 30: Reading Week – No Class****

Week 9: November 17

Populism, Left and Right

Required:

- Jan Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), ch. 1.
- Ernesto Laclau, *On populist reason* (London: Verso, 2005), chs. 1 & 4.
- Chantal Mouffe, "The populist moment," *Simbiótica. Revista Eletrônica* 6 (1): 06-11 (2019).

Recommended:

- Jane Mansbridge and Stephen Macedo, "Populism and democratic theory." *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 15 (1): 59-77 (2019).
- Nadia Urbinati, "Political Theory of Populism," *Annual Review of Political Science* 22(6): 1-17 (2019).

Further reading:

- Arato, Andrew. 2013. "Political Theology and Populism," *Social Research* 80(1): 143-72.
- Arato, Andrew, and Jean L Cohen. 2022. *Populism and civil society: The Challenge to Constitutional Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cohen, Jean L. 2019. "What's Wrong with the Normative Theory (and the Actual Practice) of Left Populism." *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical & Democratic Theory* 26 (3).
- Canovan, Margaret. 2005. *The People*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Mudde, Cas and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. 2018. "Studying Populism in Comparative Perspective: Reflections on the Contemporary and Future Research Agenda," *Comparative Political Studies* 51(13): 1667-1693.

- Rosenblum, Nancy L. and Russell Muirhead, 2019. *A Lot of People are Saying*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Taggart, Paul, Cristóbal Róvira Kaltwasser and Paulina Ochoa Espejo, eds.. 2017 *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Urbinati, Nadia. 2018. Populism and Despotism: An Interview with John Keane (June 26) (<http://sydneydemocracynetwork.org/interview-professor-nadia-urbinati-on-populism-and-despotism/>)
- Urbinati, Nadia. 2019. *Me, the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Week 10: November 24

Representation and the Constructivist Turn

Required:

- Mansbridge, J. (2003). Rethinking Representation. *American Political Science Review* 97(4): 515-528.
- Lisa Disch, *Making Constituencies: Representation as Mobilization in Mass Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), Introduction and chs. 1 & 2.
- Michael Saward, *The Representative Claim* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), chs. 1 and 2.

Recommended:

- Jane Mansbridge, "Recursive Representation in the Representative System," in Dario Castiglione and Johannes Pollak, eds., *Creating Political Presence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

Further reading:

- Disch, Lisa. 2019. *The Constructivist Turn in Political Representation*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Dovi, Suzanne. 20 "Political Representation," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- *Pitkin, Hanna. 1967. *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rehfeld, Andrew. 2006. "Toward a General Theory of Representation," *Journal of Politics* 68(1): 1-21 (2006).
- Urbinati, Nadia. 2006. *Representative Democracy: Principles and Genealogy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Urbinati, Nadia and Mark E. Warren. 2008. "The Concept of Representation in Contemporary Democratic Theory," *Annual Review of Political Science* 11: 387-412.

Week 11: December 1

Critical Realism and Democratic Theory

Required:

- Samuel Bagg, *The Dispersion of Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), Introduction, chs. 1-4, ch. 7 (esp. sec. 7.3), ch. 10; skim other chapters.

Further reading:

- Achen, Christopher H., and Larry M. Bartels. 2017. *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Arlen, Gordon, and Enzo Rossi. 2021. "Must Realists Be Pessimists About Democracy? Responding to Epistemic and Oligarchic Challenges." *Moral philosophy and politics* 8 (1): 27-49. <https://doi.org/10.1515/mopp-2019-0060>.
- Elliott, Kevin J. (2023). *Democracy for Busy People*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Green, Jeffrey Edward. 2009. *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Green, Jeffrey Edward. 2016. *The Shadow of Unfairness: A Plebeian Theory of Liberal Democracy*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
- McCormick, John P. 2011. *Machiavellian Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rossi, Enzo, and Matt Sleat. 2014. "Realism in Normative Political Theory." *Philosophy Compass* 9 (10): 689-701. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12148>.

Week 12: December 2 (Make-up Monday)

Decolonial Democracy/Abolition Democracy

- Abolition Democracy:

Required:

- Angela Davis, *Abolition Democracy* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), esp. "Politics and Prisons" (pp. 16-44); "Abolition Democracy" (pp. 73-99).

Recommended:

- W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1935), esp. ch. 7.
- Joel Olson, 2004. *The Abolition of White Democracy*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, esp. ch. 1, pp. 9-19, and ch. 5.

Further reading on abolition democracy:

Loick, Daniel. 2021. "Police abolition and radical democracy." *THE POLICE*: 117.

Lester, Quinn. 2021. "Whose democracy in which state?: Abolition democracy from Angela Davis to WEB Du Bois." *Social Science Quarterly* 102 (7): 3081-3086.

Mamet, Elliot. 2023. "'This Unfortunate Development': Incarceration and Democracy in WEB Du Bois." *Political Theory* 51 (2): 382-412.

Roberts, Neil. 2021. "Angela Y. Davis: Abolitionism, Democracy, Freedom." edited by Melvin L. Rogers and Jack Turner, 660-684. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Decolonial Democracy:

Required:

- Yann Allard-Tremblay, "The Two-Row Wampum: Decolonizing and Indigenizing Democratic Autonomy," *Polity* 54(2): 225-249 (2022).

Recommended:

- Jakeet Singh, "Decolonizing radical democracy." *Contemporary Political Theory* 18: 331-356 (2019).
- Hans Asenbaum, Nicole Curato, Bonny Ibhawoh, Genevieve Fuji Johnson, Justin McCaul, Ricardo Fabrino Mendonça, and Friedel Marquardt. 2024. "Can Deliberative Democracy be Decolonized? A Debate." Canberra: Centre for Deliberative Democracy.
- Young, Iris Marion. 2005. "Self-determination as Non-domination: Ideals Applied to Palestine/Israel." *Ethnicities* 5 (2): 139-159.

Further reading on decolonizing democratic theory:

Asenbaum, Hans. 2022. "Doing democratic theory democratically." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 21.

Conway, Janet, and Jakeet Singh. 2011. "Radical Democracy in Global Perspective: notes from the pluriverse." *Third World Quarterly* 32 (4): 689-706.

Temin, David Myer. 2021. "Our Democracy: Laura Cornelius Kellogg's Decolonial-Democracy." *Perspectives on Politics* 19 (4): 1082-1097.

Temin, David Myer. 2024. *Remapping Sovereignty: Decolonization and Self-Determination in North American Indigenous Political Thought*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

- Young, Iris Marion. 2000. "Hybrid democracy: Iroquois federalism and the postcolonial project." *Political theory and the rights of indigenous peoples*: 237-258.
- Young, Iris Marion. 2007. *Global Challenges: War, Self-determination and Responsibility for Justice*. Cambridge: Polity.