

POLI 220: DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

Spring 2026: T/Th 12:35-2:15

Steele Hall 219

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Office Hours: T/Th 11:00 – 12:00 or by appointment

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In recent years, contemporary democratic theorists have debated the vitality of democratic culture in the United States and most other advanced industrial democracies. Some of these scholars lament the apparent lack of informed, engaged, and active citizens and the perceived weakness of democratic culture. However, rather than a new phenomenon, doubts about the ability of individuals to participate in their own governance date back to ancient Greece and have troubled political theorists throughout the ages. In this course, we will consider these questions by reading and discussing the works of both ancient and modern democratic theorists. Additionally, we will rely on a unique method of learning about history and governance known “reacting to the past”. As part of this method, we will all participate in two role-playing simulations that recreate the political environment in 4th and 5th century B.C.E. Athens and revolutionary France. In both settings, philosophers and leaders considered and debated how to construct their political system. Acting in the roles of leaders and citizens in these eras, you will consider such issues as who should make important decisions on behalf of society (random citizens, oligarchs, or all property-owning individuals), how should leaders be selected, and who should be recognized as citizens. The outcomes of these simulations are not pre-determined, meaning that your decisions and actions may differ from events as they actually occurred in ancient Greece and revolutionary France. Upon completing the simulation, we will reflect on lessons learned and implications for democratic citizenship today.

Required Texts:

Plato. Translator: Desmond Lee. 2007. *The Republic*. Penguin Classics. ISBN-13: 978-0140455113

Ober, Josiah, Naomi J. Norman, and Mark Carnes. 2022. *The Threshold of Democracy: Athens in 403 B.C.* The University of North Carolina Press. (4th edition). ISBN-13: 978-1469670751

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. Translator: Mark Cranston. 1968. *The Social Contract*. Penguin Classics. ISBN-13: 978-0140442014

Popiel, Jennifer and Mark Carnes. 2022. *Rousseau, Burke, and Revolution in France, 1791*. The University of North Carolina Press. (2nd edition). ISBN 978-1469670744

Dahl, Robert. 1972. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. Yale University Press. ISBN-13: 978-0300015652

Assessment:

- 7.5% - class attendance and participation
- 40% - four essays (4-5 pages in length, double-spaced), each worth 10%
- 15% - final paper (10-12 pages in length, double-spaced)
- 15% - three quizzes, each worth 5%
- 15% - mid-term examination
- 7.5% - performance in simulations

Grading Scale:

The numerical equivalents of the letter grades are:

A = 93%-98%	C+ = 78%-80%	D- = 60%-63%
A- = 90%-93%	C = 73%-78%	F = 60% or below
B+ = 88%-90%	C- = 70%-73%	
B = 83%-88%	D+ = 68%-70%	
B- = 80%-83%	D = 63%-68%	

Learning Goals:

This course meets the Ethics requirement of the Central Curriculum.

- Recognize the various dimensions of ethical questions and their implications for human life. (ULG 1a, 3b, 4a, 4b, 4c, 4d)
- Demonstrate an ability to use at least one moral principle or theory to construct or assess an ethical argument. (ULG 2a, 2b)
- Develop a reasoned argument for an ethical position and defend it from possible objections. (ULG 2a)
- Understand the concept of moral standing and its significance for ethical questions. (ULG 2a, 4a)

Short Essays

You must write 4 short essays as a requirement for this course. Two of these essays are linked with the first simulation and two with the second simulation. All are intended to assist you in delivering arguments as part of the simulations.

You must author and submit the first essay at some point before the conclusion of the second meeting of the Athenian Assembly and the second essay at some point before the conclusion of the fourth meeting of the Athenian Assembly. Please do not put this off to the last minute. The point is not to fulfill a requirement of the course, but rather to persuade your fellow Athenians of your position. To that end, an essay on the Reconciliation Agreement (which will be addressed at the first meeting) submitted at the start of the fourth meeting will have very little relevance.

These essays should be 4-5 pages minimum (9-10 pages maximum) double-spaced with normal margins (meaning one inch of white space between the text and the edge of the page).

What form should the essay take? The simulation allows you enormous freedom in the form of your written argument. You could author a poem or story, an opinion editorial, or a more straightforward academic essay with a clearly defined and supported thesis. You might also experiment and develop your argument in a written form not listed here.

The essay should advance a particular position or point that you are trying to make within the simulation. To that end, you need to provide clear and compelling reasons for your fellow Athenians to adopt your position (especially the indeterminate roles). Please note that your written work can serve as the basis for speeches delivered in the Assembly.

The simulation book provides much advice on making and advancing written arguments. Please read these before developing your paper.

Essays 3 and 4

You must author and submit the third essay at some point before the conclusion of the second meeting of the National Assembly and the fourth essay at some point before the conclusion of the fourth meeting of the National Assembly. For many of you, the third and fourth essays will be different from the first simulation. If you are a part of a faction, then you must produce a newspaper that promotes the views and objectives of that faction. You will want to appoint one member of your faction as the editor, who will help coordinate the written work of the other faction members. Each faction member must then produce two written essays that will be included in each of the two faction newspapers. The indeterminate roles will be given a separate essay assignment.

These essays should also be 4-5 pages minimum (9-10 pages maximum) double-spaced with normal margins (meaning one inch of white space between the text and the edge of the page).

The simulation book provides much advice on making and advancing written arguments. Please read these before developing your paper.

Final Paper

Your final paper for the course requires you to examine one of the questions pertaining to democratic theory that has been discussed in the course. You should select a relatively narrow question to frame the paper. Some example questions might include: who should have a role in governance, what should be the methods for identifying citizens of a democracy, or what is the ideal form of democracy? Your paper might defend or attack the position(s) of one of the political thinkers read in class (or out of class if you are so interested). The paper might develop one of your own ideas, as based on the readings in class (meaning an idea not necessarily espoused within the reading). The paper might use a historical or modern example of democracy to critically test one of the theories advanced in the class. The purpose is simply to develop a theoretical argument pertaining to the success or failure of democratic governance.

This essay should be 10-12 pages double-spaced with normal margins (meaning one inch of white space between the text and the edge of the page).

If you would like more direction, the following are two prompts that you might use as the foundation for the paper. Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *The Social Contract* argues that the people, rather than monarchs or oligarchs, should lead a political community.

Prompt 1: Compare a specific point raised by Rousseau to the relevant argument advanced by Plato within *The Republic*. Compare and contrast the lines of reasoning used by both scholars in support of their opposing positions. Analyze the strengths and weaknesses of each line of reasoning. Conclude with an analysis of which argument you find more compelling and explain why. In the conclusion, you may draw on historical and contemporary examples to explain why you agree with Rousseau or Plato.

Prompt 2: Analyze Rousseau in light of historical and/or contemporary events. Begin with an analysis of whether his proposals on collective governance appear to work? Then move deeper into his thinking, identifying a specific line of reasoning (or two) that he uses in support of his positions. Does this particular reasoning seem valid in light of actual events? This essay should serve as a critical analysis either in opposition or in support of Rousseau's ideas, drawing on real world examples.

General Business:

Please note that class attendance is mandatory. You may miss two classes without providing an excuse. The class participation grade will be reduced by 7 points for every additional class missed, unless due to one of the following two exceptions. If you miss class due to a medical reason and provide documentation from a medical practitioner, your absence will be excused without any penalty. Any absences that result from religious observances shall also be excused without any penalty. Anything covered in class lectures or assigned readings may be part of the examinations. If you miss a class, it is your responsibility to find out anything covered in class from another student. Please contact me immediately if you will need to miss class at any time during this semester. ***Students should make every effort possible to attend simulation sessions, as the success of this exercise requires everyone to perform their role.***

Any student with a disability that may prevent you from fully demonstrating your abilities should contact me as soon as possible so that we can make accommodations necessary to ensure full participation and facilitate your educational opportunities. Students with disabilities are advised to also contact Disability Services at 570-372-4340.

Make sure that you include proper citations in any written or oral work. Plagiarism will result in a failure for that assignment, referral to the administration and other potential consequences. Please consult Sharon Stoerger's online resource for more information on plagiarism: <http://www.web-miner.com/plagiarism> Please also consult the Susquehanna University Code of Student Conduct at <http://www.susqu.edu/studentlife/16594.asp> If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please contact me or the Writing Center located in Fisher Hall, Room 202, phone number 570-372-4342.

AI technologies may be used in this course, but their application is confined to specific predefined scenarios. As we progress through the curriculum, I will provide explicit guidance on when and how AI technologies may be appropriately utilized to complement your learning

experience. Students should note that using AI technologies outside these sanctioned instances is not allowed, and violations will be addressed according to the academic integrity policy. This AI policy is specific to this course, and students should not assume that it applies universally to other classes. Please see Susquehanna University's AI policy for more information.

I reserve the right to move around different topics and assignments on the syllabus in consultation with the class. Please do not hesitate to ask questions, introduce discussion points, articulate your opinions and comment on the reading materials.

Schedule of Classes:

Week 1: Introduction to Course

January 12

Day 1: Introduction to Class and Simulations

Day 2: Problems in Democratic Culture and the Invention of the Democratic Citizen

Readings: *Wolin* and *Putnam* Chapter 2 readings (Blackboard)

Week 2: Ancient Greece

January 19

Day 1: The Growth of Athens and the Peloponnesian War

Day 2: *No Class*

Readings: *Ober, et al* Chapter 2

Week 3: The Republic I

January 26

Day 1: Justice and Morality and Building Society

Day 2: The Guardians and Philosopher Rulers

Readings: *Plato* Parts I-V

Week 4: The Republic II

February 2

Day 1: Imperfect Societies

Day 2: **Quiz 1** and Simulation Introduction and Rules Briefing

Readings: *Plato* Parts VII-IX

Week 5: Ancient Greece Simulation I

February 9

Day 1: Session 1: Reconciliation Agreement and Defining the Electorate

Day 2: Session 2: Social Welfare and Governance

Readings: *Ober, et al* Chapters 1 and 3 and Role Profile

Assignment: Essay 1 due by Wednesday

Week 6: Ancient Greece Simulation II

February 16

Day 1: Session 3: Trial of Socrates

Day 2: Session 4: Remilitarization and Remaining Issues

Assignment: Essay 2 due by Monday

Week 7: Discussion and Review

February 23

Day 1: Simulation Debriefing and Mid-Term Review

Day 2: Mid-Term Examination

Spring Break

February 28 – March 8

Week 8: The Social Contract

March 9

Day 1: Origins of Society

Day 2: Governing Society

Readings: *Rousseau* Introduction and Books I-IV

Week 9: Revolutionary France I

March 16

Day 1: Origins and Consequences of the French Revolution

Day 2: **No Class**

Readings: *Popiel and Carnes* Chapter 2

Week 10: Revolutionary France II

March 23

Day 1: Critiques of Monarchies and the Jacobins and the Virtue of Political Stability

Day 2: **Quiz 1** and Simulation Introduction and Rules Briefing

Readings: *Burke* reading

Week 11: Revolutionary France Simulation I

March 30

Day 1: Session I: The Role of the Church and Issue Determined by Assembly President

Day 2: Session II: Royal Sanction and Nobility

Readings: *Popiel and Carnes* Chapter 1 and 3 and Role Profile

Assignment: Essay 3 due by Wednesday

Week 12: Revolutionary France Simulation I

April 6

Day 1: Session III: Declarations on the Rights of Man and Slave Rebellion

Day 2: Session IV: Concluding Session

Assignment: Essay 4 due by Monday

Week 13: Conceptualizing Modern Democracies

April 13

Day 1: Simulation Debriefing and Defining Polyarchies

Day 2: Historical Trajectories

Readings: *Dahl* Chapters 1-3

Week 14: Classifying Modern Democracies

April 20

Day 1: Organizing Democracies

Day 2: **Quiz 3**

Readings: *Lijphart* Chapters 1-4

Final Exam: Final paper due by scheduled final examination time