



Great Political Thinkers: Democratic Theory

Spring 2023
Stern College, Yeshiva College
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Course Summary

Political philosophy examines the central problems faced by human beings both as individuals and as members of associations that, in the Western tradition, have come to be called political. It asks two fundamental questions: “how should I live my life?” and “how can and should we live together?” The great thinkers of the Western tradition have explored these questions with tremendous depth.

This semester, we will be focusing on how different great thinkers, ancient and modern, understood democracy. As we will see, these thinkers saw democracy not merely in terms of mass voting and elections—though these are decisive aspects of democracy. They understood democracy as a *regime*—a principle that determines the *way of life* of citizens or subjects in democracies and which distinguishes them from people living under other regimes, such as aristocracies. The great thinkers portray the nature of democracy, its strengths and weaknesses, and the kinds of human qualities it relies upon. This means that reflecting on democracy demands reflecting on the questions listed above: how should I live my life and how can we live together?

We will study, in depth, three thinkers: Aristotle, Machiavelli, and Alexis de Tocqueville, after having introduced our theme with a short text by Plato. Though they wrote in radically different epochs and contexts, these seminal thinkers all reflect on “the people” as a political category and what it means for the people to rule. While not neglecting other aspects of their work, our goal will be to think along with these writers about the meaning of the most popular form of government.

For Poli Sci majors: toward Intro course requirement or Political Theory distribution.

Expectations

Students will be expected to carefully read between 100 and 150 pages a week. Prior to every class, students will be expected to have read and reflected upon the readings of that week, and to participate in class discussions about them. Students will write two interpretative essays which carefully analyze the books studied. A take home final essay will ask for comparisons between thinkers covered and major themes addressed in the course.

Attendance

Active attendance and participation are essential for the functioning of the course and learning experience. Attendance will be taken at every class. All absences are to be cleared in advance with the instructor. Any more than two unexcused absences will result in a docked grade.

Grading

20%: Class Attendance and Participation

20%: Paper 1

20%: Paper 2

40%: Take Home Final Essay

Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities who are enrolled in this course and who will be requesting documented disability-related accommodations should make an appointment with the Office of Disability Services, (646) 592-4280, akelsen@yu.edu during the first week of class. Once you have been approved for accommodations, please submit your accommodation letter to ensure the successful implementation of those accommodations.

Reading Material

All students are required to obtain their own copies of the following works, **in the following noted editions/translations**. Please contact the instructor if you have any difficulty, financial or otherwise, in obtaining these texts.

Aristotle, *Politics* (University of Chicago, Carnes Lord translation)

Machiavelli, *The Prince* (University of Chicago, Harvey Mansfield translation)

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (University of Chicago, Harvey Mansfield translation)

Other readings may be distributed

Schedule

Week I (January 18): Introduction: Great Thinkers & Democracy

Week II (Jan 23/Jan 25): Democracy and the Cycle of Regimes
Reading: Plato's *Republic*, Book VIII (to be distributed)

Week III (Jan 30/February 1): Aristotle's *Politics* Book I

Week IV (Feb 6/Feb 8): *Politics* Books II-III



Week V (Feb 13/15): *Politics* Books III-IV

Week VI (Feb 20/22): *Politics* Books IV-VI

Week VII (Feb 27/March 1): Machiavelli, *The Prince* (**Paper 1 Due**)

Week VIII (Mar 8): Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Week IX (Mar 13/15): Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Week X (Mar 20/22): Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Week XI (Mar 27/29): Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

Week XII (April 3): Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (**Paper 2 Due**)

Week XIII (Apr 17/19): Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

Week XIV (Apr 24): Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

Week XV (May 1/3): Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

Week XVI (May 8/10): Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Review & Conclusion (**Final Paper Distributed**)