

**PHIL 770: Advanced Studies in Political Philosophy**  
**[Topic: Political Epistemology & Democratic Theory]**  
UNC Chapel Hill, Fall 2021

**Instructor:** Alex Worsnip ([aworsnip@unc.edu](mailto:aworsnip@unc.edu))

**Class meetings:** Wednesdays, 1-3:30, Caldwell Hall (CW) 213

**Virtual office hour:** Wednesdays, 11-12

**In-person office hour:** Thursdays, 3:30-4:30

- weather permitting: outside, at a table by the Blue Ram Café (at the back of the Campus Y)
- otherwise: in my office (Caldwell Hall, 202B). I'll email if I'm moving my office hour indoors.

Meetings outside of office hours are also always available by appointment.

**Course description.** This is a course at the intersection of epistemology and political philosophy (more specifically, the political philosophy of democracy). It will be divided into two parts. In the first part of the course, we'll investigate the epistemic responsibilities of citizens in a democracy. Questions will include: should we always defer to experts about complex policy questions, or are we justified in thinking and reasoning for ourselves? What are our obligations in deciding what media to consume and how? How should we respond to political disagreements? In the second part, we'll examine some prominent work in democratic theory in light of the epistemic investigations of the first half of the course. We'll look at epistemic arguments for democracy, deliberative conceptions of democracy, debates about political legitimacy under conditions of disagreement (and related notions such as public reason and political liberalism), and arguments for alternatives to (ordinary, electoral) democracy.

**Note on distribution requirement satisfaction.** As an interdisciplinary course, this course can be counted either toward the "metaphysics and epistemology" or toward the "value theory" distribution requirement for philosophy grad students. However, to count it toward the former requirement, you must write a final paper that engages substantially with the specifically epistemological issues and literature from the course; and similarly, to count it toward the latter requirement, you must write a final paper that engages with the issues and literature in political philosophy from the course. If you wish to use this course to satisfy a distribution requirement, you must declare which distribution requirement you want to satisfy before you submit your final paper; the department does not allow you to stipulate which distribution requirement the course satisfies retrospectively.

**Requirements/assessment.**

- **Participation** (10% of grade). Including: attendance of all classes (*modulo* COVID policies stated below) having done adequate preparation, and participation in discussions.
- **In-class presentation** (10% of grade). Beginning in the second week of class, students will take turns giving presentations. Here is the format that presentations should take:
  - Presentations should be around 15 minutes long (absolute maximum of 20 minutes). We will not interrupt.

- Presentations should not summarize/recap a whole paper (or anything close to it). Instead, your presentation should be aimed at spurring critical discussion of one or more of the assigned readings for that week, on the assumption that everyone has already read them.
  - Begin by recapping only (but, ideally, all) the aspects of the paper that are strictly necessary for setting up the points you want to raise.
  - Then, raise one to three points for discussion. These could be any of the following (not an exhaustive list):
    - An interpretative question about the author's view
    - A question about how two parts of the author's view relate to one another
    - A question or suggestion about how two different readings relate to one another
    - A (potential) criticism of the author's view
    - An identification of an assumption underlying the author's view, and a question about whether this assumption is plausible
    - A remark or question about the terms of debate in which the different readings for that week are engaged (e.g., an identification of a common presupposition they all make, and a question about whether it is plausible)
- **Please use a handout for your presentation.** Please email me the file by 12 noon on the day of class, and also bring copies of the handout with you.
- Because the class is heavily enrolled, some weeks will contain two presentations. I'll send a link to a sign-up sheet following our first class meeting.
- **Reading responses** (*10% of grade per response*). You will take turns writing short reading responses (500-750 words each) on that day's reading. Each student will write three reading responses over the course of the semester. The reading responses should highlight and explain an aspect of that day's reading that you found interesting, and critically respond to it. Soon after the start of the semester, I will distribute a schedule for the responses. Reading responses are due at 8pm on the day before class via email.
- **Term paper** (*50% of grade*). You will write a term paper for the class. This paper will be on a topic of your choice. Since this is an extended piece of writing, we'll follow a multi-step process:
  - Initial meeting to discuss ideas. *To be completed by **Fri, 11/5** at the latest.* I will meet with each of you one-on-one to discuss your ideas for a possible topic for your paper. Please come to the meeting having thought carefully about what you might like to write about. (Though this is the only required meeting, you're welcome to meet with me again at any point later on.)
    - NB: if you want to write on a topic that we're covering at the end of the semester but haven't reached yet by the date of our meeting, that is possible. If there's a forthcoming topic that catches your eye, have a look at the readings for it before our meeting.
  - One paragraph paper proposal. *Due **Sun, 11/7, 11:59pm**.* You will write up a proposal for the topic of your paper, explaining the issue(s) you plan to discuss and (if you know) what you (tentatively) plan to argue. The proposal should be clear, should propose a well-defined, manageable and tractable topic, and should be clearly related to the themes of the class. If you

intend to use this class to satisfy a distribution requirement, it should specify which. I will write back to you either approving the proposal as it is or asking you to make modifications.

- **Full draft.** *Due Sun, 11/21, 11:59pm.* You will write a *full, complete* draft of the paper. I will send you detailed comments on your draft by Sun, 11/28 (this is the main set of comments you will receive from me on your paper).
- **Final submission.** *Due Sun 12/5, 11:59pm.* Finally, you will have an opportunity to revise the paper in light of my comments, before submitting the final version. I will send you your grade with some briefer comments by the end of that week.

Note: provided that you complete the first three steps of the paper-writing process in full and by the due dates specified above, your grade for your paper will be determined solely by the fourth step, i.e., the final submission. Thus, the other stages of the process represent a risk-free way to try out your ideas and to get feedback on them before making the final submission.

**Participation-only students.** Those taking the class participation-only will still be required to do a presentation, but no reading responses or final paper.<sup>1</sup> To pass the class, you also need to attend regularly just like any other student, and to show evidence that you have been doing and thinking about the reading (e.g. via participation in class discussions or via voluntary reading responses). If you're taking the class participation-only, you must notify me by the end of the second week of classes.

**Honor code.** As should go without saying in a class at this level, UNC's honor code, available at [honor.unc.edu](http://honor.unc.edu), applies to all class assignments. As a reminder, you are not permitted to submit a final paper that substantially overlaps in content with a paper submitted for another class. Consult with me if you're in any doubt about how this requirement applies.

### **COVID-related policies.**

- As a general rule, in-person attendance of class is required. However, as per the university's instructions, you should **not** attend class if you are showing any symptoms of COVID-19 (find the full instructions [here](#)).<sup>2</sup> Instead, contact me via email and we will work out a plan. If you are showing symptoms but are well enough to join class remotely via Zoom, that can be arranged. My top priority is your safety and that of your fellow classmates, and I will show flexibility in accordance with this. I only ask that you stay in touch so that I'm aware of your situation and can make accommodations.
- As per UNC's policy this semester, you are required to wear a mask in class. This also applies to in-person office hours when they are held indoors.
- I encourage you in the strongest possible terms to get vaccinated if you haven't already done so. (For your own peace of mind: I am fully vaccinated myself.) Not only is this the best way to ensure that in-person learning can continue throughout the semester – it's also a matter of great personal importance to me, as the parent of a very young child, to minimize the extent to which my teaching in-person puts her at risk. So your being vaccinated is much appreciated.

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<sup>1</sup> "Participation-only" is a new-ish option that is **not** the same as auditing, in that it involves getting credit for the class (but can't be counted toward your distribution requirements). Auditors will not be required to do a presentation.

<sup>2</sup> This is in addition to those who have been ordered to isolate/quarantine due to a positive test or a recent exposure. Obviously, you should not attend class under those circumstances either!

## **Commitments, accessibility & equity.**

- I am very happy to meet with you at any time to discuss assignments, to chat informally about the topics of the class, or to offer support. Please come to my office hours, or if those times don't work, email me to set up an appointment.
- I am committed to making class fully accessible, and to providing accommodations for those who need them. If I can do anything to help make the class more accessible to you, please let me know, or have UNC Accessibility Resources & Service (ARS) contact me on your behalf.
- I am also committed to making the class a safe learning environment for everyone irrespective of gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality, religion, or other individual or group identity. As should go without saying, personal attacks or discriminatory treatment of others on any of these bases will not be tolerated under any circumstances.
- I am a Safe Zone Ally, trained and certified by the university LGBTQ center. I am available to meet during office hours or by appointment to offer support.
- I encourage you to make use of the following campus resources as appropriate:
  - For accommodations for students with disabilities or other accessibility needs: Accessibility Resources & Service (ARS), [ars.unc.edu](http://ars.unc.edu)
  - For those experiencing mental health challenges: Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), [caps.unc.edu](http://caps.unc.edu)
  - For LGBTQ students in need of support or community: [lgbtq.unc.edu](http://lgbtq.unc.edu)
  - For those experiencing discrimination, harassment, interpersonal (relationship) violence, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, or stalking: visit [safe.unc.edu](http://safe.unc.edu), or contact the Director of Title IX Compliance ([adrienne.allison@unc.edu](mailto:adrienne.allison@unc.edu)), the Report & Response Coordinators in the Equal Opportunity and Compliance (EOC) Office ([reportandresponse@unc.edu](mailto:reportandresponse@unc.edu)), or the Gender Violence Service Coordinators ([gvsc@unc.edu](mailto:gvsc@unc.edu); confidential).

## **Schedule of readings (TENTATIVE – subject to change)**

### ***Part I: The epistemic responsibilities of democratic citizens***

#### **8/18 Expertise and deference I: should we think for ourselves? Can we?**

- Michael Huemer, “Is Critical Thinking Epistemically Responsible?”
- Thomas Grundmann, “Facing Epistemic Authorities: Where Democratic Ideals and Critical Thinking Mislead Cognition”
- Elijah Millgram, *The Great Endarkenment*, §§2.1-2.7

#### **8/25 Expertise and deference II: is deference to experts politically problematic?**

- Allan Hazlett, “The Social Value of Non-Deferential Belief”
- Han van Wietmarschen, “Political Testimony”
- C. Thi Nguyen, “Cognitive Islands and Runaway Echo Chambers: Problems for Epistemic Dependence on Experts”

**9/1 Conspiracy theories: can it be rational to believe them?**

- M R.X. Dentith, “Conspiracy Theories on the Basis of the Evidence”
- M. Giulia Napolitano, “Conspiracy Theories and Evidential Self-Insulation”

**9/8 Echo chambers: is it ever OK to be in one?**

- Jennifer Lackey, “Echo Chambers, Fake News, and Social Epistemology”
- Yuval Avnir, “What’s Wrong with the Echo Chamber: A Motivated Reasoning Account”
- Jeremy Fantl, “Fake News vs. Echo Chambers”

**9/15 Media consumption: multi-sided, one-sided, or zero-sided?**

- Alex Worsnip, “The Obligation to Diversify One’s Sources: Against Partisanship in the Consumption of News Media”
- Boyd Millar, “Epistemic Obligations of the Laity”
- Sven Bernecker, “An Epistemic Defense of News Abstinence”

**9/22 Political disagreement I: should we conciliate about politics?**

- David Christensen, “Disagreement and Public Controversy”
- Bjørn Hallsson & Klemens Kappel, “Disagreement and the Division of Epistemic Labor”

**9/29 Political disagreement II: can polarization be rational?**

- Thomas Kelly, “Disagreement, Dogmatism, and Belief Polarization”
- Emily McWilliams, “Evidentialism and Belief Polarization”
- Hrishikesh Joshi, “What are the Chances You’re Right about Everything? An Epistemic Challenge for Modern Partisanship”

**10/6<sup>3</sup> Bias I: do cultural biases and influences render our political beliefs unjustified?**

- Daniel Greco, “Climate Change and Cultural Cognition”
- Susanna Siegel, “On the Problem of Culturally Normal Belief”
- Yuval Avnir & Dion Scott-Kakures, “How Irrelevant Influences Bias Belief”

**10/13 Bias II: when can we justifiably accuse others of bias (and vice, and irrationality)?**

- Nathan Ballantyne, “Debunking Biased Thinkers (Including Ourselves)”
- Robin McKenna, “Asymmetrical Irrationality: Are Only Other People Stupid?”
- Quassim Cassam, “Epistemic Vices, Ideologies, and False Consciousness”

***Part II: Democratic theory revisited***

**10/20 Political legitimacy under disagreement: political liberalism and public reason**

- John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, pp. 133-140, 212-227, 240-254
- Thomas Nagel, “Moral Conflict and Political Legitimacy”
- Joseph Raz, “Facing Diversity: The Case of Epistemic Abstinence”

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<sup>3</sup> Class on 10/6 will be from 12:30-3.

**10/27 What are the epistemological presuppositions of political liberalism? Do they hold up?**

- Fabienne Peter, “Epistemic Foundations of Political Liberalism”
- David Enoch, “Political Philosophy and Epistemology: The Case of Public Reason”
- Han van Wietmarschen, “Reasonable Citizens and Epistemic Peers: A Skeptical Problem for Political Liberalism”

**11/3 Deliberative conceptions of democracy**

- Joshua Cohen, “Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy”
- Lynn Sanders, “Against Deliberation”
- Optional: Amy Gutmann & Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?*, ch. 1

**11/10 Epistemic arguments for democracy I**

- David Estlund, *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework*, chs. 6 & 9
- Robert Talisse, *Democracy and Moral Conflict*, ch. 4

**11/17 Epistemic arguments for democracy II**

- Hélène Landemore, *Democratic Reason*, chs. 4-7

[11/24 No class – Thanksgiving break]

**12/1 Epistemic arguments against democracy**

- Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy*, chs. 3, 7 & 8
- Optional Background: Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy*, ch. 2
- Optional: Alexander Guerrero, “Against Elections: The Lottocratic Alternative”