

SCLL 250

DEMOCRACY: ANCIENT AND MODERN

from Fall 2025; Fall 2026 schedule used
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill



Course Information

Credit Hours: 3 Credit Hours
Target Audience: anyone
Meeting Pattern: T/Th
Instructional Format: lecture
Classroom or Location: ?????

Instructor Information

Name: Jed Atkins
Email Address: jed.atkins@unc.edu
Office Location: 106 Whitehead Hall
Office Hours: Tuesdays 3:30-5:00, or by appointment

Course Description:

This course examines democracy in its ancient and modern forms, with special attention to Athenian and American democracy. Does modern democracy fulfill the promise of ancient democracy, or betray its fundamental tenets? What can we learn from the first democracy about thinking and living in democratic America? Topics may include freedom, equality, and rights; democratic institutions; citizenship; rhetoric; democratic knowledge and decision-making; foreign policy; corruption; religion; and hope.

Course Aims:

The goal of the course is to promote critical reflection on central aspects of democracy that continue to be matters of concern and debate, including liberty and equality; constitutions and institutions; citizenship and civil disobedience; political rhetoric; democratic decision-making; foreign policy; populism; demagoguery, tyranny, and corruption; religion and hope. We will draw on philosophy, history, drama, short stories, cinema, political speeches, essays, classical and contemporary scholarship in political science, and more. We will also hear from distinguished guests who will help us reflect more deeply on what it means to live within a pluralistic contemporary democracy.

Course Books:

The following books are required. Please get the same editions and translations. It truly is important to get the same editions and translations; it helps keep all of us on the same page (literally) as we discuss the readings and when it comes time to write papers. All other texts will be posted on the Canvas site.

1. Christopher Carey, *Democracy in Classical Athens*, second edition. Bloomsbury 2017. ISBN 9781474286367
2. Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. by George Lawrence, ed. by J. P. Mayer (HarperCollins, 2000). ISBN 9780060956660
3. Thucydides, *On Justice, Power, and Human Nature*, trans. by Paul Woodruff (Hackett, 1993). ISBN 0872201686

All other readings or videos will be on Canvas (see below).

Course Requirements:

Course grade will be determined as follows:

Two Papers:	40%
Class participation:	10%
Reading responses:	10%
Final Exam	25%
Dialogue Group participation	15%

You will be required to write two papers (5-6 pages, double-spaced) on assigned topics. These are not research papers. The only texts you will need to write them will be what we read for this course. I will discuss the expectations and requirements for these papers at greater length in class. The Final Exam will include IDs, short answers, multiple choice, and essay questions.

There is a participation component to your grade—which is composed of my evaluation of your in-class contributions. A good participation grade requires more than mere attendance, it requires active in-class participation in discussion.

For each class, I have assigned reading questions. You are to write out your answers and bring *written answers to these questions and a question of your own based on the reading to the class in which they are discussed. The answers don't need to be long—a single side of a sheet will suffice, and should take you roughly 15-20 minutes to complete. They are graded satisfactory/unsatisfactory.*

Students will be assigned into teams called Dialogue Groups. Your dialogue group will enable you to take the class conversation deeper. You will work together to prepare debates, a mock Athenian trial, and even a stage and perform a dialogue! Imagine what it would be like if you could bring Socrates, Lincoln, and MLK into conversation around civil disobedience—you could bring this, or similar conversations, to life!

With all your work, be sure to follow UNC standards of conduct regarding academic honesty and plagiarism. Violations of these standards will be referred to the appropriate dean.

Freedom of Expression and Civil Discourse:

Democracy: Ancient and Modern aims to promote open and civil cross-disciplinary conversation about democracy's biggest questions. Crucial to this process is the ability to freely and respectfully explore and try out a wide range of arguments, whether these viewpoints represent your own deeply held convictions, ideas you are unsure about, or efforts to play devil's advocate. Students in *the Good Life* will naturally have many different points of view and prior beliefs: all viewpoints aimed at advancing our conversation are welcome and encouraged.

Here are some guidelines, inspired by the syllabi from previous courses taught by your professor, to help us with this common undertaking: (a) Practice charity: listen well to others and try to understand their arguments and concerns. Interpret others' words so that they convey their argument in its best and strongest form; when you critique an idea, try to focus on the argument itself, not the person who said it; (b) practice intellectual humility: recognize we are all learning and growing (even your professors!), and that we can learn from one another; (c) aim at truth, not victory.

Reading assignments:

UNIT 1: DEMOCRATIC VALUES: Liberty and Equality

Aug. 18th Introduction: What Can We Learn About Democracy from Athens?

Readings: *Kurt Vonnegut, Harrison Bergeron**; Text referred to during discussion:
*Aristotle, Politics 3.12**

Reading Questions:

1. Would you like to live in the America of 2081 described in Harrison Bergeron? What aspects of this society are appealing? Appalling?

Aug. 20 The Road to Democracy

Readings: *The Road to Democracy: Christopher Carey, Democracy in Classical Athens*, pp. 15-40; *Pericles' Funeral Oration* (Herrman, pp. 11–21)

Watch: Melissa Schwartzberg, "[What did Democracy Really Mean in Athens?](#)" (5 minute video)

Reading questions:

1. Who was Solon and what were his most important reforms?
2. Based on Carey's account of Kleistenes, is it fair to say that he "invented" Athenian democracy? (Consider the question: "What is democracy?" The Schwartzberg video may help with this.)
3. According to Pericles, what are the key features of the Athenian democratic regime?
4. Would you like to live in the society that Pericles describes?

Aug. 25th Liberty and Equality in American Democracy:

Readings: *Declaration of Independence*; Allen, *Our Declaration*, pp. 151-166; Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 503–517, 525–528 (Part 2)

Reading questions:

1. What argument does the Declaration of Independence make? What is its thesis?
2. Why does Tocqueville believe that equality is more fundamental to American democracy than liberty? Do you agree (503–506)?
3. Why does democracy lead to individualism (506–508), and why does Tocqueville believe that this individualism is dangerous to liberty? (reflection on p. 436 and 509–510).
4. How do free institutions and associations (p. 509–517) and self-interest rightly understood (pp. 525–28) combat this individualism?

Aug. 27 Democracy and Slavery: Ancient and Modern

Readings: Fisher, *Slavery in Classical Greece*, ch. 4 "Slaves in Classical Athens"; Tocqueville *Democracy in America*, pp. 316–320, 340–363; (Optional reading cited in Lecture: Ralph Ellison, "What America Would be Like Without Blacks")

Reading questions:

1. How were slaves deployed in Athenian democracy?
2. What differences does Tocqueville offer between Ancient and American slave systems?
3. How does Tocqueville believe that slavery harms masters as well as slaves?
4. Tocqueville observes that the problems of slavery extend beyond slavery to racism ("race prejudice"), which infects both laws and customs in the North. What are some examples of this prejudice and how does he see it conflicting with the democratic desire for equality?
5. An observation: Tocqueville is pessimistic about the possibility of peaceful race relations in America. In part, this reflects the mood of his day. But some critics have also argued that it stems from his failure to recognize the integral and essential contributions of African Americans to the emerging democratic political culture he was surveying. For a different perspective on this question, see Ralph Ellison's essay in Time Magazine in 1970.

Sept. 1 Slavery and Freedom in American Democracy

Readings: Lincoln, "Emancipation Proclamation"; Douglass; "What to a Slave in the Fourth of July"

Reading questions:

- (1) What is the purpose of the Emancipation Proclamation? What does it do? What does it not do?
- (2) How does Douglass answer the question he poses in the title of his address?
- (3) Why, despite all that he condemns, does Douglass defend the Constitution? Do you agree with his defense?

Sept. 3 Democratic Freedom and the Trial of Socrates

Readings: Plato, *Apology of Socrates*;

Watch: "[Ostracism in Ancient Greece](#)" (3 minute video)

Reading questions:

1. What are the charges that Socrates' faces in the Apology?
2. How well does Socrates answer these charges?
3. What counter-penalty does Socrates propose after he is convicted? Why do you think he suggests this particular punishment?
4. Was the Athenian jury right to convict Socrates? Was he guilty of the charges brought against him?
5. Does the result of the trial suggest flaws in the Athenian model of Democracy?

Sept. 8 *"Lincoln, the Founding, and an America Worth Saving"*

Speakers: Lucas Morel; [Professor of Politics, Washington and Lee](#) (for example)

Readings: Lincoln, "Gettysburg Address"; "Second Inaugural"

Reading questions: **Write down the talk's thesis, a point you found interesting, and a question you would like to ask.** Then during the Q & A consider asking it!

UNIT 2: DEMOCRATIC CONSTITUTIONS AND INSTITUTIONS

Sept. 10 *The Democratic Athenian Constitution in Practice*

Readings: Christopher Carey, *Democracy in Classical Athens*, pp. 57-77 and pp. 79-98; (optional); [Law and Courts in Ancient Athens](#); Cartledge, "[Trial of Socrates](#)"; Rahe, "[Illiberal Democracy](#)"

Reading Questions:

Class Mock Trial: Socrates and Athens on Trial (Dialogue Group Activity)

Sept. 15 *Greek Democracy and the United States Constitution*

Readings: Federalist Papers [9*](#) (Hamilton); [10*](#) (Madison) [47*](#) (Madison), [51*](#) (Madison)
United States Constitution

Reading questions:

1. According to the Federalists, what is the key problem that the Constitution is designed to address?
2. What devices does the Constitution use to address this problem?
3. Describe the Federalists' view of ancient democracies.

Sept. 17 *What is Representation (Or: What are we electing our representatives to do for us?)*

Readings: Burke, "[Speech to the Electors at Bristol](#)"; Federalist 57; Brutus, Essay III

Reading questions:

1. According to Burke, should a representative vote according to the will and preferences of his constituents? Why or why not?

2. What does “Brutus” mean when he writes that representatives should “resemble those who appoint them” as a “sign” to the “thing signified”? Is this a good goal? A realistic one?
3. According to Madison, what mechanisms or devices encourage representatives to be faithful to their constituents? Do you think American politics supports Madison’s confidence in these devices?

Sept. 22 *Equal Rights Amendment*

Speakers: Linda R. Monk; Constitutional scholar (as an example)

Readings: [Monk, The Bill of Rights: A User's Guide](#).

Reading questions:

Write down the talk’s thesis, a point you found interesting, and a question you would like to ask. Then during the Q & A consider asking it!

UNIT 3: CORRUPTION, DESPOTISM, AND TYRANNY

Sept. 24 *Plato on Democracy and Tyranny*

Readings: Plato, Republic [book 8](#); Republic [book 9](#)

Reading questions:

1. List the five types of cities and corresponding types of citizens in Books 8–9. What is the defining characteristic or principle of each city?
2. Based on Socrates' description of the democratic regime, identify the positive and negative elements of democracy?
3. Why does Socrates think democracy leads to tyranny?
4. In a 2016 piece that got a lot of media attention, Andrew Sullivan argued that Plato's account of a late-stage democracy ripe for tyranny accurately describes the present American situation. Do you agree that Plato's account of democracy reflects our current democratic moment? Why or why not?

Sept. 29 *Demagogues and Democratic Corruption*

Readings: Aristophanes, [Wasps Part I](#); [Part II](#) ; The lecture will also draw on the character of Cleon as presented by Thucydides in Woodruff, Thucydides on Justice, Power, and Human Nature, pp. 67–71

Reading questions:

1. What does Aristophanes convey by characterizing the jurors as wasps?
2. What deficiencies of democracy are hinted at in this play? Is Aristophanes highlighting problems with democracy itself or with the corruption of democracy?
3. What does ContraCleon’s failure to restrain his father say about the Athenian democracy’s capacity to deal with demagogues?

Oct. 1 *American Populism and the Tyranny of the Majority*

Readings: Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, pp. 246–261 [All the King's Men](#) ([Link here and in Resources](#))

Reading questions:

1. Consider the character of Willie Stark. What motivates him? How do his motivations change as the film progresses?
2. Compare Willie Stark to Cleon (as presented in the *Wasps* and *Thucydides*). Can you detect differences between American and Athenian "demagoguery" based on these sources?
3. Describe the response of the elite to Willie Stark. Why was their opposition ineffective? Would the outcome have been better (ask yourself: "better from whose perspective?") if they had succeeded in their opposition?
4. What characterizes the form of majority tyranny that Tocqueville predicts may befall democracies? Why does he think it is different than ancient forms of tyranny?

UNIT 4: CITIZENSHIP AND CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Oct. 6 *Must Citizens Obey the Law*

Readings: Plato, [Crito](#)

Reading questions:

1. What arguments do the "laws of Athens" provide for Socrates' obligation to remain in the city to face the death penalty?
2. Does our decision to live in a country and make use of its resources constitute a tacit consent to be governed by its laws?
3. How do we reconcile the picture of "Socrates the loyal citizen" of Plato's *Crito* with "Socrates the philosophical dissident" of Plato's *Apology*?

Oct. 8: Dialogue Group Activity

Oct. 13 *Melissa Lane, Class of 1943 Professor of Politics & Director, University Center for Human Values* [Zena Hitz, "Republic 89"](#) (as an example)

Reading questions:

Write down the talk's thesis, a point you found interesting, and a question you would like to ask. Then during the Q & A consider asking it!

Oct. 15 *Civil Disobedience*

Readings: Abraham Lincoln, "[Address to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois](#)"*
Martin Luther King, Jr., [Letter from Birmingham Jail](#)*

Reading questions:

1. According to Lincoln, what is the key to the perpetuation of our democratic political institutions?
2. How does Martin Luther King, Jr. define civil disobedience?
3. Does MLK's advocacy of civil disobedience contradict Lincoln's advocacy of reverence for the law? What about the Crito's argument for respecting the laws' authority?

For Hamer's DNC speech cited in lecture, see the optional reading in Canvas.

UNIT 5: DEMOCRACY AND FOREIGN POLICY

Oct. 20 *Why Democracies Go To War*

Readings: Thucydides, Books 12 (selections: Woodruff, Thucydides on Justice, Power, and Human Nature, pp. 1, 12–13, 15–37, 46–50, 52–58)

Reading questions:

1. What is Thucydides' purpose in writing this work?
2. What is Thucydides' view of human nature? Consider especially the account of the plague (pp. 46–50).
3. Why do wars begin, according to Thucydides?
4. Why does Pericles encourage the Athenians to defend their empire? How, if at all, might his reasons relate to Thucydides' view of human nature?

Oct. 22 *Democracy and Empire*

Readings: Thucydides, Books 37 (selections: Woodruff, Thucydides on Justice, Power, and Human Nature, pp. 66–76, 102–9, 111–23, 127–28, 145–60)

Reading questions:

1. Does the entire Mytilenian incident support Cleon's contention that "a democracy is not capable of ruling an empire" (p. 67)?
2. Why did the Sicilian expedition fail? Can you find a passage in last class' readings where Athens' downfall is foreshadowed?
3. "When one side is stronger, it gets as much as it can, and the weak must accept that." (p. 103) What does this quotation from the Melian dialogue mean? To what extent does it represent Thucydides' outlook on foreign policy?

Oct. 27 *Thucydides and American Foreign Policy*

Readings: Allison, "The Thucydides Trap" (Read this first) Jaffe, "America vs. China" Waldron, "The Chamberlain Trap."

Reading questions:

- 1.) What makes these good essays?
- 2.) What are the authors' main arguments?
- 3) How are the authors using Thucydides to support that argument?

UNIT 6: DEMOCRATIC KNOWLEDGE AND DECISION-MAKING

Oct. 29 Do the Experts Know Best?

Readings: Plato, *Republic*, 487e–489e and 514a–520e; Brennan, “Can Epistocracy, or Knowledge-Based Voting, Fix Democracy” ; Tom Nichols, “How we Killed Expertise (and why we need it back”)

Reading questions:

1. Consider the “ship of state” metaphor in Plato’s *Republic*. Whom do the ship-owner, sailors, and true pilot represent? How does this metaphor critique the suitability of democratic knowledge to rule the state?
2. Consider the image of the cave in Plato’s *Republic*. How might this image suggest problems for the rule of expert knowledge and democratic knowledge alike?
3. What arguments on behalf of expert rule do Nichols and Brennan present? Which do you find most persuasive? Where do you have questions?

Nov. 3 Equality and Knowledge in Athens

Readings: Aristotle, *Politics* 1.1–2, 12; 3.1, 4–13; 16; 4.9; 6.2; 7.8, 14 ; Tampio, “Treat People as Citizens”

Reading questions:

1. According to Aristotle, who is a citizen? What are the defining traits of a good citizen?
2. In deciding who should rule in a particular polis, what factors are important to keep in mind?
3. In particular, under what circumstances should “the many” rule, and what are the advantages and disadvantages to giving them political power?
4. On the whole, which form of rule do you believe is superior—rule by the expert few or rule by the many citizens? Why?

Nov. 5 Are Elections a Good Idea?

Readings: Somin, “Should we replace Traditional Elections with Sortition?” Scott, “Britons Should Learn to Vote Like the Ancient Greeks.” Schliesser and Van Der Meer, “New Proposals would let lotteries or experts replace voting: here’s what’s wrong with that.” Procaccia, “Lotteries Instead of Elections? Not so Arbitrary?”

Reading questions:

1. What are the strongest arguments for and against elections?
2. Should the United States exchange elections for sortition?

Nov 10. Dialogue Group Activity

UNIT 7: DEMOCRATIC HOPE

Nov. 12 *Democratic Hope?*

Readings: Thucydides 1.68–85 (Woodruff, pp. 17–28); 3.37–51 (Woodruff, pp. 67–76) 5.84–109, 7.7587 (Woodruff, pp. 102–109, 145–154) ; Christopher Lasch, [The True and Only Heaven](#) (Norton, 1991), 78–81* ;Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 35–47, 547–549.

[Read Obama, Keynote Speech at 2004 Democratic National Convention.](#)

Reading questions:

1. What is Thucydides' view of hope? Pay attention to the treatment of hope in four episodes: (i) Debate in Sparta in 432 AD; (ii) Mytilenian Debate; (iii) Melian Dialogue; (iv) Athens' defeat in Sicily.
2. How does Lasch define progressivism? What are its characteristic traits? Why is he critical of this tradition?
3. How does Lasch distinguish hope from optimism?

Nov. 17 *Class Debate: Is Epistocracy or Democracy the superior form of governance?*

Nov. 19 *Democracy: From Athens to Brexit*

Readings: Paul Cartledge, Emeritus A.G. Leventis Senior Research Fellow, Clare College (Cambridge) "[Brexitology, Brexitography](#)" (as an example)

Reading questions:

Write down the talk's thesis, a point you found interesting, and a question you would like to ask. Then during the Q & A consider asking it!

Dec. 2 *Perform Dialogue 1*

Dec. 4 *Perform Dialogue 2*

Paper Due Dates (all papers are due at 11:59 PM):

Paper 1: Oct. 6th

Paper 2: Nov. 4th

Final Exam: Dec 12th

Additional Course Information and Policies:

Learning Outcomes

These are the learning outcomes expected of students after completing the course.
This course satisfies the FC Values:

Students will

1. develop knowledge of different figures and institutions from the development of American and Athenian Democracies.
2. come to grapple with different perspectives and arguments of value around central concepts within American and Athenian political thought.
3. Come to understand the different moral arguments for justifying various forms of democracy.
4. Analyzing the arguments for and against democracy.

This course satisfies the new Foundations of American Democracy Requirement:

Students will

1. Identify and analyze the political, historical and cultural impact of founding documents on governance and democracy in America.
2. Identify and analyze the political, historical and cultural impact of key milestones in American history on the evolution of democratic republicanism in America.
3. Evaluate key concepts, principles, arguments and contexts in founding documents of the American republic, including the United States Constitution, the Declaration of Independence and a representative selection of the Federalist Papers.
4. Evaluate key milestones in progress and challenges in the effort to form “a more perfect Union,” including the arguments and contexts surrounding the Gettysburg Address, the Emancipation Proclamation and the Letter from Birmingham Jail, as well as other texts that reflect the breadth of American experiences.

Class Expectations

Students are expected to come to every class, and to arrive with all reading assignments completed. Because we will refer to specific passages from the assigned readings in class, students must bring their texts to each class and be prepared to follow along. Points will be deducted from the overall grades of students who consistently fail to bring the texts under discussion to class. Students should be prepared to engage in discussions and debate each time we meet.

Attendance Policy: see above.

Electronics Policy: Use of electronics (e.g. laptop, ipad, phone) are prohibited in the class. If you qualify for an exemption under the ADA, please provide the proper documentation to Professor Atkins at the start of the semester.

University Policy: As stated in the University’s [Class Attendance Policy](#), no right or privilege exists that permits a student to be absent from any class meetings, except for these University Approved Absences:

1. Authorized University activities: [University Approved Absence Office \(UAAO\)](#) website provides information and [FAQs for students](#) and [FAQs for faculty](#) related to University Approved Absences
2. Disability/religious observance/pregnancy, as required by law and approved by the [Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office](#) (EOC)
3. Significant health condition and/or personal/family emergency as approved by the [Office of the Dean of Students](#), [Gender Violence Service Coordinators](#), and/or the [Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office](#) (EOC).

Code of Conduct

All students are expected to adhere to University policy and follow the guidelines of the UNC Code of Conduct. Additional information can be found at studentconduct.unc.edu.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Policy – CAS units only

Use of generative AI tools of any kind is not permitted in this course. Any use of these tools will be considered an instance of academic dishonesty and will be referred to the Honor System.

Syllabus Changes

Information for Students (to be included on the syllabus):

The instructor reserves the right to make changes to the syllabus including project due dates and test dates. These changes will be announced as early as possible.

Equal Opportunity and Compliance - Accommodations

[Equal Opportunity and Compliance Accommodations Team](#) ([Accommodations - UNC Equal Opportunity and Compliance](#)) receives requests for accommodations for disability, pregnancy and related conditions, and sincerely held religious beliefs and practices through the University's Policy on Accommodations. EOC Accommodations team determines eligibility and reasonable accommodations consistent with state and federal laws.

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)

UNC-Chapel Hill is strongly committed to addressing the mental health needs of a diverse student body. The [Heels Care Network](#) website is a place to access the many mental health resources at Carolina. CAPS is the primary mental health provider for students, offering timely access to consultation and connection to clinically appropriate services. Go to the [CAPS website](#) or visit their facilities on the third floor of the Campus Health building for an initial evaluation to learn more. Students can also call CAPS 24/7 at 919-966-3658 for immediate assistance.

Title IX and Related Resources

Any student who is impacted by discrimination, harassment, interpersonal (relationship) violence, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, or stalking is encouraged to seek resources on campus or in the community. Reports can be made [online to the EOC](#) or by contacting the [University's Title IX Coordinator](#), Elizabeth Hall, or the [Report and Response Coordinators](#) in the Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office. Please note that I am designated as a Responsible Employee, which means I must report to the EOC any information I receive about the forms of misconduct listed in this paragraph. If you'd like to speak with a confidential resource, those include Counseling and Psychological Services and the [Gender Violence Services Coordinators](#). Additional resources are available at safe.unc.edu.