THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF DEMOCRACY

Instructor: Simon Rippon
Teaching Assistant: Zsolt Kapelner
Department: Department of Philosophy
Central European University

Number of credits: 2 CEU credits (4 ECTS credits)
Course status: Elective class for MA and PhD students

Semester: Winter, 2019-20
Course e-learning site: https://ceulearning.ceu.edu/course/view.php?id=10323
Meeting Time and location: Tuesdays 1:30-3:10 in Budapest N13/223

Simon Rippon’s Office hours:
Normally Mondays and Wednesdays 2-4 in my office N13/204.
Please visit: http://simonrippon.youcanbook.me to check availability and reserve a slot.

Course Description
This course is a seminar in applied philosophy. Democracy gives ordinary citizens power over the institutions that govern them. To exercise power well, voters must have sufficient knowledge to make good political choices. The question of whether ordinary people have sufficient knowledge to govern, and how it is possible that they do, is part of the so-called problem of democratic citizenship. We will explore this aspect of the problem of democratic citizenship in contemporary democracies, as well as related questions, such as: What kind of epistemic advantages and, conversely, epistemic weaknesses and drawbacks do democratic systems have? What epistemic virtues do leaders, voters, or other participants in democratic systems need to possess, and what epistemic vices are to be avoided? What kind of formal and informal institutions and technologies help citizens acquire knowledge about things they need to know as voters, and conversely, what forces threaten to undermine knowledge?

Unless we make ourselves hermits, we shall necessarily influence each other's opinions; so that the problem becomes how to fix belief, not in the individual merely, but in the community.
[CS Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief” (1877)]

Learning outcomes
By the end of the course, students will be able to:
• demonstrate a clear understanding of the problem of democratic citizenship
• formulate and evaluate arguments for and against democracy, based on its epistemic advantages and drawbacks
• formulate and evaluate arguments about how much knowledge and what kind of knowledge voters need in a functioning modern democracy
• identify epistemic institutions that enable a democracy to function, or threaten democracy, and formulate and evaluate arguments about the significance of these institutions

Requirements
For all students, whether registered to audit or taking the class for credit, the basic expectations are:

1. Regular, punctual attendance,
2. Carefully completing the assigned readings before class, and
3. Active participation in discussions in the seminar

Auditors may also be required also to give a presentation, depending on class size.

For students taking the class for credit, there will be the following assignments:

1. An in-class presentation. Each student will give a short (15-20 minute) presentation of selected issues. The presentation should introduce an important argument from, or related to, the assigned readings, and raise questions and potential criticisms for discussion. Students may wish to prepare a handout (2 pages maximum strongly advised), or slides, to assist their presentation to the class, but will not be required to do so. Advance consultation during office hours on the presentation is welcome, and recommended. Although in-class presentations will be based on the readings, it is most important that they do not merely reproduce them in a briefer form: they should offer significant clarifications, raise important questions, and/or add the presenter's own well-grounded opinions and arguments.

2. Presentation of a 1-page draft outline plan for the final paper. This assignment is intended help you to work out, logically organize, and concisely communicate the central points you intend to make in your final paper, and to provide an opportunity to discuss and think through potential objections and amendments. The outline should clearly state the intended thesis of the paper, and concisely present the main steps of your argument for it (bullet points are
recommended!). Students may present and discuss their outlines either in class, time permitting, or in appointments with the instructor. Due date: TBA

3. A 2,000-word final paper. Due date: April 14

**Assessment and Grading Criteria**

The class grade will be based on the grade for the final paper. The grade for the class may be adjusted from the grade for the final paper by up to 1/3 of a grade to take account of participation and other assignments completed during the term.

*All course requirements must be completed in order to earn a passing grade for the class.*

**Grading criteria for final papers**

**Quantity:**

All other things being equal, it's better if the paper is close to the required length. Writing a good paper using fewer words is more difficult than writing a good paper using more words, and that will be taken into account in the grading. So any additional length will need to be well-justified. In any event, don't go more than 20% over the required length.

**Quality:**

To earn a B+, the paper must clearly and concisely address the question and must be written in good academic English. Insofar as these are relevant, the paper must demonstrate a solid understanding of the arguments from readings in the course as well as in-class presentations and discussions. Important principles and concepts should be clearly explained. The views of others should, where necessary, be accurately, charitably, clearly and succinctly reconstructed, and properly cited with a bibliography. The paper must show that you have analyzed and independently organized the material yourself in response to the question, rather than simply following the organization of in-class presentations or parts of the literature.

To earn an A-, the assignment must demonstrate all the above plus evidence of genuine progress as a result of your own independent thinking, such as your own substantive evaluation and critique of the validity and soundness of the arguments of others, or your own original positive argument. If there are any problems with the exposition or arguments in the paper, these will be minor. Any obvious objections to your argument will have been anticipated and answered.

Papers that earn an A will demonstrate all the above virtues to the extent that they are nearly flawless in writing style, organization, exposition and soundness of arguments. While remaining entirely relevant to the question, such a paper will be relatively ambitious in scope and will demonstrate an exceptional degree of understanding and of the topic.
Resources that you may find useful throughout the course

The online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy is an up-to-date professional reference work for all areas of philosophy. Articles are often long and challenging, but nearly always worth consulting: http://plato.stanford.edu

WEEKLY SCHEDULE OF TOPICS AND READINGS

NB This is a research seminar class, and the schedule could change during the term according to the particular interests of participants.

PART I: Weeks 1-2 Democracy, legitimacy, and the problem of democratic citizenship

We will discuss how democracy might ground legitimate authority, and the epistemic assumptions involved in this relationship. We will discuss the problem of democratic citizenship: the fact that most voters are apparently not sufficiently informed to wield power well (and that they have no good reason to be better informed).

Week 1
Required
• Brennan, J., 2016, Against Democracy. ch.1 "Hobbits and Hooligans" and ch.2 "Ignorant, Irrational, Misinformed Naturalists" (pp.1-53), especially pp.1-17, 23-43, 49-53.
Recommended

Week 2
Required
Recommended
• Plato, The Republic book VI

PART II: Weeks 3-4 Epistemic arguments for democracy

We will discuss epistemic instrumentalist arguments and epistemic proceduralist arguments for democracy.

Week 3
Required
Recommended

Week 4
Required

Recommended

PART III: Weeks 5-6 Testimony, trust and expertise
We will discuss how much of our knowledge depends on testimony and trust in experts, the particular role of experts in a deliberative democracy, the institutions that enable this, and some limits of expert knowledge.

Week 5
Required

Recommended

Week 6
Required


PART IV: Weeks 7-11 Trouble in paradise: Partisanship, polarization, conspiracy theory, and fake news
We will discuss epistemic problems that have become very apparent in several Western democracies in recent years. Among other things, we will examine the phenomena of polarization, conspiracy theory, and fake news and discuss what role social media plays in these phenomena.

Week 7
Required
(on epistemic insouciance, epistemic malevolence, and intellectual arrogance)

Week 8
Required

Week 9
• Watch documentary Behind the Curve

Week 10
Required
Recommended
Part V: Week 12 Wrap Up. Reasons for hope?
Can democracy be saved from the epistemic threats to its existence?

Week 12
Required