

# **Democracy in the 21st Century: Reality and Reinvention**

## **CAS PO 246/IR 391**

Instructor: **David Collier, PhD**  
Schedule: Mondays and Wednesdays, 6:30pm – 9:00pm  
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### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

Democracy is in crisis. The most successful political idea of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is now in worldwide retreat. Political rights and civil liberties around the globe have deteriorated to their lowest point in more than a decade. People are losing faith in democracy and returning to alternative systems of populism and autocracy. These alternatives are now providing a challenge to democracy as the most effective systems of government while the traditional democratic powerhouses of the United States and western Europe flounder politically, socially, and economically.



This course will seek to explain why democracy has weakened and why global development is increasingly trending towards autocracy. To do so, we will first provide an overview of democracy's history to date, where it came from and what made it once so unique and successful. The main versions of democracy – parliamentary and presidential – will be studied, as will the various types of electoral systems to assess what impact they have on society. Once grounded, we will examine case studies to analyze how democracy functions throughout the world. The first will be a thorough examination of the American system which in many ways encompasses the myriad of factors that explain democracy's

global decline. From there, we will touch on European issues before moving on to an examination of democracy – or a lack thereof – in Asia and the Middle East. We will end the semester with a look at possible reforms that could reinvent democracy as a successful political system for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

No prior knowledge of democracy or the various political systems in the US, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East is necessary. These will all be discussed in class and in the readings.

### **COURSE OBJECTIVES**

This course will teach you to:

- Understand the historical underpinnings of democracy as a concept
- critically assess the strengths and weaknesses of democracy in comparison to other systems
- Explain why countries move towards democracy and what factors hinder its progress
- Understand differences between electoral systems and how these impact democracy
- Assess the strength of democracy in the United States and identify its main challenges and future prospects
- Explain the major regional differences in democratization and development
- Evaluate the potential challengers to democracy as the most effective system of government
- Situate current events into the context of democratic theory and practice

### **HUB LEARNING OUTCOMES**

<b><i>Ethical Reasoning (DIVERSITY, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, AND GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP)</i></b>	
<b>Learning Outcome 1</b>	<p>Students will be able to identify, grapple with, and make a judgment about the ethical questions at stake in at least one major contemporary public debate, and engage in a civil discussion about it with those who hold views different from their own.</p> <p>Throughout this course, students will contend with the core question of how people should be governed. Under what system are people able to achieve happiness and contentment? Is democracy the most ethical system of governance or is it fundamentally flawed? Is democracy inherently good and are authoritarianism systems inherently evil or is whichever can best provide economic and personal security the only appropriate moral gauge? This course will wrestle with these questions that have been debated for centuries within philosophy, theology, psychology, and politics amongst other disciplines. While it may be widely agreed that democracy is the only moral system, most people within democratic systems have wide and varied criticisms of how their democracy operates, most notably here in the United States. Students will have different reasons for why they do or do not support democracy and these differences of opinion will form the basis of class discussions and provide a foundation for the semester-long project where each student will be tasked with creating their own political system and explaining why they chose a form of democracy or some other system.</p>

<p><b>Learning Outcome 2</b></p>	<p>Students will demonstrate the skills and vocabulary needed to reflect on the ethical responsibilities that face individuals (or organizations, or societies or governments) as they grapple with issues affecting both the communities to which they belong and those identified as “other.” They should consider their responsibilities to future generations of humankind, and to stewardship of the Earth.</p> <p>During this course students will examine various ethical questions at play in the theory and practice of democracy. Starting with Plato’s critiques and continuing to the present decline of democracy, students will acquire the critical thinking skills to reflect on the ethical role of government, and how well various systems meet human demands. Is democracy the final evolution of governance or do we owe it to future generations to rethink what we understand by the term how it is currently practiced? The semester-long project will allow students to apply concepts learned in this course as they grapple with the ethical dilemma of democracy, benign dictatorships, and economically innovative authoritarian systems.</p>
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**Social Inquiry I (SCIENTIFIC AND SOCIAL INQUIRY)**

<p><b>Learning Outcome 1</b></p>	<p>Students will identify and apply major concepts used in the social sciences to explain individual and collective human behavior including, for example, the workings of social groups, institutions, networks, and the role of the individual in them.</p> <p>This course introduces students to key concepts in political science and international relations such as political systems, from totalitarianism to perfect democracy, individual and group behavior in a democratic context, and theories of democratization such as modernization theory, historical sociology, and democratic peace theory. We will consider the various types of democracy and assess their impact on individual and collective human behavior such as the 2-party presidential system in the United States or the multi-party parliamentary systems in countries such as Spain or Italy. Students will appreciate the theoretical background behind such concepts as Duverger’s law, why people do or do not vote, why populists succeed, and what role factors such as religion, culture, social group play in the success of various democracies. Students will deploy these concepts in their own analyses of democracy through blog posts, class discussion, and their final project.</p>
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**Creativity / Innovation (INTELLECTUAL TOOLKIT)**

<p><b>Learning Outcome 1</b></p>	<p>Students will demonstrate understanding of creativity as a learnable, iterative process of imagining new possibilities that involves risk-taking, use of multiple</p>
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	<p>strategies, and reconceiving in response to feedback, and will be able to identify individual and institutional factors that promote and inhibit creativity.</p> <p>Throughout this course, students will engage in creativity as a process and will learn, through iteration and edits, how to create a workable political system. We will critically assess the state of democracies throughout the world to allow students to identify the problems impacting democracy in the 21st century. The semester-long Re/Creating Democracy assignment will actively engage students in the creative process by asking that students redesign how democracy might work in the United States, China, or how it can be built from scratch in some imaginative community. This will encompass the entire process of creativity from identifying the problems facing democracy, learning about various iterations of democracy that exist around the world, brainstorming alternatives in a collaborative setting, before finalizing the creation of their own system that may better respond to the challenges of the 21st century. It will focus on what roles individuals can play as well as how institutional factors can impede or promote successful democratization. This will be an iterative process with many stops along the way for feedback both from the instructor and fellow students so that the final creation will differ substantially from the initial outline. No country is born a democracy and no two democracies are identical. The emergence of democracy in each country is the result of a process of creativity by individuals and groups bounded by institutional constraints that involves risk-taking, individual action, trial and error, as well as frequent failure before a successful consolidation. Through the Re/Creating Democracy assignment, students will engage first hand in the entire creative process.</p>
<p><b>Learning Outcome 2</b></p>	<p>Students will be able to exercise their own potential for engaging in creative activity by conceiving and executing original work either alone or as part of a team.</p> <p>The Re/Creating Democracy Project is a large act of creativity that will directly engage students with the creative process. Students will conceive, outline, revise, present, and execute their project which is one large act of creative original work. Students can choose to direct their creativity towards creating democracy in the United States by enacting sweeping reforms to how democracy is realized, by building a democracy in China following a future regime collapse, or by imagining a Martian colony where the student must imagine an entirely new system with no antecedents. This will involve individual work but also moments of collaboration and teamwork. Specifically, those that choose the same prompt for the Re/Creating Democracy assignment will be asked to compare and contrast their response to their fellow students as well as take questions from the rest of the class. Students will need to problem solve issues with democracy in theory and/or practice around the world.</p>

**ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING**

**Attendance and Participation (15%)** Attendance is mandatory but accommodation will be made if class time conflicts with a special event at your internship. This only works if I am told in advance and not at the last minute. Failure to receive permission will impact your final grade and you will be required to demonstrate that you have sought out the notes of a classmate in order to catch up. If you have any questions regarding the material you missed, please stop by and see me before the next class. Students are also expected to contribute to in-class debates and discussions in every session.

**Pop Quizzes x4 (5% each)** To assess student understanding of the major concepts used in democracy studies, three quizzes will be held at random points throughout the semester. These will be short answer and multiple-choice questions based upon the readings [Social Inquiry I].

**Blog Postings (15%)** Each week, students will post their thoughts or commentary on a news story, article, video, or other form of media that relates to concepts of democracy. This will help ensure that we talk about the most up-to-date debates on democracy today as well as allowing you, the student, to bring certain countries or topics that may not be formally covered by syllabus into the discussion. The blog assignment should be used to research democracy as an ethical system and as a form of "literature review" to highlight examples of existing issues with current democracy or about creative solutions to democracy's problems that are being put forward [Ethical Reasoning, Social Inquiry I, Creativity/Innovation].

**Democracy Debate (10%)** In order to assess your understanding of the ethical and moral elements of democracy, students will engage in a civil debate and discussion on at least 2 topics that students will prepare for in advance [Ethical Reasoning].

**Re/creating Democracy Project (40%)** "What conditions make democracy possible and what conditions make it thrive?" were questions posted by the political scientist Dankwart Rustow in 1970. Over fifty years later we still do not fully understand the process and what factors lead to democracy's success or failure. However, the current global democratic recession demands that we reexamine democracy and work to either make it fit for the 21st century or seek alternatives. This is a contemporary debate taking place throughout the world: is democracy inherently good and therefore should be preserved, or can good governance be best attained through other systems? The Re/Creating Democracy Project is a semester-long creative and iterative assignment that will put you in the driving seat of understanding how democracy works - or doesn't work - in theory but also in practice. What are the institutional, socioeconomic, and cultural challenges that must be addressed when creating or recreating democracy? Does democracy need to learn from more autocratic systems such as in Singapore to better provide for the good life? Is democracy so fundamentally flawed that a different system should be entertained and what would that look like? [Ethical Reasoning, Social Inquiry I, Creativity/Innovation]

Building on what you learn from the course, students should apply the major concepts of political science and international relations to address one of the following prompts in a creative and imaginative manner:

1. **Reimagining the United States** – after years of decline, the United States is no longer recognized as a full or stable democracy according to organizations such as Freedom House and the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index. Learning from how other countries have conceived their governments, how can the United States be reformed to best address the demands of modern society? Will democratic reforms resolve issues or has democracy run its course?
2. **Democratizing China** – it is 2032 and the Communist regime that has controlled China since 1949 has collapsed in scenes reminiscent of the fall of the Soviet Union. A huge popular uprising toppled the government with its former leaders either fleeing or imprisoned. While the movement was united in its opposition to the regime, there is no clear agreement on what should come next. You are the de facto leader of the main democratic movement that wants to bring China into the global community of democracies. Detail how a democracy can emerge from this wreckage and what it would need to look like to achieve success.

3. **Starting Again** – It is 2065 and you and a colony of 5,000 people have landed on Mars with the technology to build livable communities, grow fruits and vegetables, and access the copious reserves of liquid water under the Martian surface. You are the leader of this diverse colony made up of people from all the countries of earth. It is up to you to decide how it should be politically organized. Do you implement a form of democracy and, if so, what are its characteristics? If not, provide an alternative but explain the reasons behind each decision you make.

Regardless of which option you choose, you must provide:

- **Outline (10%)** – due the nth week of class
- **Presentation (15%)** – due the nth week of class. Be creative in how you wish to explain your project to the rest of the class. An interactive slideshow, simulation, a video, or even a podcast. Your instructor and fellow students will provide constructive feedback.
- **Final Project (25%)** – due in finals week. Text plus visual/audio elements

Assignment	Weight	Due Date
Attendance & Participation	15%	Continuous
Pop Quizzes	20%	Surprise!
Blog Postings	15%	Continuous
Democracy Debate	10%	nth week
Re/creating Democracy Outline	5%	nth week
Re/Creating Democracy Presentation	15%	nth week
Re/Creating Democracy Final Project	20%	finals week
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	

#### REQUIRED TEXTS

- *The Spirit of Democracy: The Struggle to Build Free Societies Throughout the World*, Larry Diamond, (New York: Times Books, 2008) – available for [free online rental](#) or there are hard copies available to check out in the BUDC library
- Other readings will be made available via the course blog or Blackboard site

#### CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

This class will touch occasionally on subjective topics where I hope to hear from people with different viewpoints and open some lines of communication about difficult or potentially emotional topics. All opinions are welcome as long as they are grounded in the evidence and presented respectfully. I reserve the right to manage, intercede, side-line, or stop a conversation if it is leading us too far off track or if it is disrespectful to others.

My name is Professor Collier and I use the pronouns he/him/his. Using the right pronoun, like using someone's correct name or title, is a way to show respect. In our first class I will give space for everyone to mark their pronoun preference if they wish, and how they would like to be addressed in class.

## APPROACH TO LEARNING

The course will be largely based around interactive lectures, that is, a mixture of lecture, seminar, and discussion. Information will be presented but also discussed as a group, so it is imperative for students to come to class ready to engage and having completed the assigned readings for each week. Current events will be a major focus throughout the semester as the issues and debates we discuss are being wrought in real time in both the United States and abroad. To that end we will have a course blog for students to post interesting and relevant news articles and opinions related to democracy which we will then discuss at the beginning of each class.

## ACADEMIC CONDUCT CODE AND ACADEMIC ASSISTANCE

Students taking this class are expected to maintain Boston University's high standards of professionalism and academic honesty and integrity. Student are expected to be familiar with these policies located in the Academic Conduct Code which is available on the web at:

<http://www.bu.edu/academics/policies/academic-conduct-code/>

If you experience academic difficulties in this course, please do not hesitate to consult with me. I am happy to meet with students at any point to further discuss the course or the readings. If you have a disability and might require accommodations, please notify me with a letter from BU Disability Services as soon as possible in the semester so that we can arrange to meet your needs. Many services are available to enable you to meet the course requirements and stay healthy.

## CLASS SCHEDULE

### **Class 1 – Monday, June 6: Introduction – is democracy “natural” for human beings?**

*ETHICAL REASONING.* Students will begin to grapple with the key ethical question regarding democracy – is it a system that needs to be cherished and protected or is it fundamentally flawed? Is it natural for humans to want to be governed by a form of democracy or are humans psychologically incapable of acting democratically?

### **Class 2 – Wednesday, June 8: Conceptual Foundation of Democracy**

*ETHICAL REASONING.* Continuing our look at the key democratic debate, is it a universal value or are Plato's critiques of democracy still relevant today?

Prework:

- Diamond, Chapter 1, “The Universal Value”

Optional Prework:

- DSB: Diamond, “Defining and Developing Democracy,” 29-39.
- Schmitter, Philippe C., and Terry Lynn Karl, “What Democracy Is... and Is Not,” *Journal of Democracy* 2, no. 3 (1994): 75-88.
- David Collier and Steven Levitsky, “Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research,” *World Politics*, Vol. 49 (April 1997): 430-51.

### **Class 3 – Monday, June 13: Democratic Institutions and Democratic Systems**

*SOCIAL INQUIRY* – Students will identify key tenants of what makes democracy unique and how democratic institutions interact with one another? What are the main differences and strengths of presidential and parliamentary systems? How do these systems impact group and individual action? *CREATIVITY / INNOVATION* – Students will begin to assess the strengths and weaknesses of various types of democratic systems and begin to formulate their ideal system of governance.

Prework:

- [Differences Between Presidential and Parliamentary System](#)
- DSB: Linz, Juan, “[The Perils of Presidentialism](#),” 258-265.

Optional Prework:

- Horowitz, Donald, "Comparing Democratic Systems," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 1, no. 4 (1990): 73-79.
- Zakaria, Fareed, "Illiberal Democracy," *The Future of Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003): 89-118.

**Class 4 – Wednesday, June 15: Electoral systems and citizen participation**

*SOCIAL INQUIRY* – what are the various voting systems used by democracies today and how do they differ? What are the trade-offs associated with each institutional choice in terms of representation and governance?

*ETHICAL REASONING* – Do we want a democracy that can govern effectively or is it more important that the system represents the diversity of the population? Students will grapple with this essential question by analyzing and reflecting upon various voting systems and how they impact society.

*CREATIVITY / INNOVATION* – Students will continue to learn about the various styles of democracy and will begin to apply it to their Re/Creating Democracy project. What would be the repercussions if the United States switched from a majoritarian system to a form of proportional representation?

Prework:

- Radiolab Podcast, "Tweak the Vote"  
<<https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/articles/tweak-vote>>

Optional prework:

- The New International IDEA Handbook: Electoral System Design, pp.5-26
- Norris, "Choosing Electoral Systems: Proportional, Majoritarian, and Mixed Systems"
- Bormann and Golder, "Democratic Electoral Systems Around the World, 1946-2011"



**Class 5 – Tuesday, June 21 @ the Deb: Waves of Democracy**

*SOCIAL INQUIRY* – Students will identify trends in democratic growth throughout history and will apply major concepts to explain what makes countries democratize. This will include the wave theory, modernization, historical sociology, and the agency approach.

Prework:

- Diamond, Chapter 4, "What Drives Democracy: the internal factors"

Optional prework:



- DSB: Samuel P. Huntington, "Democracy's Third Wave," 93-98.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin. "Some Social Requisites of Democracy," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 53, no. 1 (March 1959): 69-105
- Przeworski, Adam and Fernando Limongi. "Modernization: Theories and Facts," *World Politics*, Vol. 49, no. 2 (Jan. 1997): 155-84.



### **Class 6 – Wednesday, June 22: British Parliamentary Politics – a democracy in crisis**

*ETHICAL REASONING* – Students will assess the impact of too much democracy. What happens when a country is faced with numerous elections, referendums, and other votes in a short period of time. Is there an ethical dilemma between democracy and populism when it comes to responding to major societal issues? Is democracy a poor tool to settle such issues as Brexit?

*SOCIAL INQUIRY* – This class will examine the growing crisis in the United Kingdom and the disparity between voter preference and government formation. What are referendums and were votes such as Brexit, democratic?

Prework:

- Electoral Reform Society, "[Does the 2017 election show that the UK has a broken electoral system?](#)"
- BBC Guide to Brexit, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-46318565>
- Kathleen R. McNamara, "Brexit's False Democracy" Foreign Affairs
- Friedman, "[Should the Brexit Vote Have Happened At All?](#)"

### **Class 7 – Monday, June 27: Democracy in the United States I – foundational problems**

*ETHICAL REASONING* – Students will assess the foundation of the United States and whether the key documents and institutions represented democracy then and how they fare today.

*SOCIAL INQUIRY* – How have the structures of the United States impacted collective action as well as individual representation?

*CREATIVITY / INNOVATION* – Students should use this class to learn how to identify issues and weaknesses in democratic systems and start thinking how these weaknesses can be reformed or transformed.

Prework:

- Freakonomics Podcast, "Trust Me" <<https://freakonomics.com/podcast/trust-me/>>

- Adam Ruins Everything, "Why the Electoral College Ruins Democracy,"  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=90RajY2nrgk>>

Optional prework:

- APSA task force, "American Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality," 2004:  
<<http://www.apsanet.org/Files/Task%20Force%20Reports/taskforcereport.pdf>>
- Gilens, Martin and Benjamin I. Page, "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens," *Perspectives on Politics* (2014): 564-581



### **Class 8 – Wednesday, June 29: Democracy in the United States II – 21<sup>st</sup> century problems**

*SOCIAL INQUIRY* – What is the role of the media in a democracy How does the media impact democracy in America and beyond? Why are conspiracy theories so popular here? Can the US still be classed a democracy or is there a better label for the American system?

*CREATIVITY / INNOVATION* –What reforms can be made to rejuvenate American democracy?

\*Re/Creating Democracy Project outline due\*

Prework:

- Diamond, chapter 15, "Physician, Heal Thyself"
- The Atlantic, "How to Put Out America's Dumpster Fire,"  
<<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/04/the-internet-doesnt-have-to-be-awful/618079/>>

### **July 4 \*NO CLASS\* Independence Day**

### **Class 9 – Wednesday, July 6: The Democracy Debate**

*ETHICAL REASONING* – A democracy thrives when its citizens exercise their right to engage in informed and meaningful debate. This class will consist of a group presentation and debate over a contentious and ethical aspect of democracy.

Debate topics:

- Democracy requires limits to freedom of speech
- Is democracy the most effective system for allowing citizens to live "the good life"?
- The United States must promote democracy abroad

### **Class 10 – Wednesday July 13: The Asian Exception**

*ETHICAL REASONING* – Countries in Asia are doing the most to show that democracy may not be the most effective or ethical system of governance. Lee Kwan Yew said, "people want economic development first and foremost" so is the most ethical system the one that maximizes performance rather than process? Is an autocratic system that provides economic and personal security superior to a democratic system that does not?

*CREATIVITY / INNOVATION* – When recreating or creating a political system it is important to assess the viability of alternatives. Students will assess the viability of democracy by assessing the Singapore/China model in order to inform their Re/Creating Democracy proposal.

*SOCIAL INQUIRY* – in 2012 Larry Diamond predicted that the next democratic wave will occur in Asia and that China will democratize within 10 years. Students will engage in social inquiry to evaluate this claim and the reasons why it did not transpire.

Prework:

- Diamond, Chapter 10, “The Asian Exception?”
- Fish, Eric “[Has China Discovered a Better System Than Democracy?](#)”, The Atlantic
- Maizland, Lindsay “[Hong Kong’s Freedoms: What China Promised and How It’s Cracking Down](#)”, Council on Foreign Relations

Optional prework:

- Diamond, Larry, “[Why East Asia –Including China –Will Turn Democratic Within a Generation](#),”
- Nathan, Andrew J., “Foreseeing the Unforeseeable,” *Journal of Democracy*, No. 1 (Jan 2013):20-25.



### **Class 11 – Monday, July 18: The Struggle for Middle East Democracy**

*SOCIAL INQUIRY* – Students will apply various concepts to examine why democracy has been unable to take root in the Middle East. These will include analysis of religion, culture, and the resource curse as well as seeing what the Arab Spring can tell us about democratization and modernization theory.

Prework:

- Diamond, Chapter 12, “Can the Middle East Democratize?”
- Economist: “[Why Democracy Failed in the Middle East](#)”

Optional prework:

- Michael Ross, “Does Oil Hinder Democracy?” *World Politics* Vol. 53, no. 3 (2001): 325-361.

### **Class 12 – Wednesday, July 20: Re/Creating Democracy Presentations**



### **Class 13 – Monday, July 25: How democracies die**

**SOCIAL INQUIRY** – After previously looking at what drives countries to transition to democracy, we will now examine the various ways countries have actually retreated from democracy. In the past, this often occurred through violent revolution or military coup; today's democracies are dying with a whimper. A slow but steady weakening of institutions, the gradual erosion of important democratic norms, the rise of politicians with little interest in democratic checks and balances. Could the United States follow suit? What can today's political scientists tell us about the end of democracy?

Prework:

- Diamond, "[It Could Happen Here](#)" The Atlantic
- Levitsky and Ziblatt, "[How Democracies Die – introduction](#)"

Mouk, Yascha, "[The Undemocratic Dilemma](#)," Journal of Democracy, 2018, Vol.29(2), pp.98-112

### **Class 14 – Wednesday, July 27: Democracy's Future and the "End of History"**

**ETHICAL REASONING** – What does the future hold for democracy and democratization? We will discuss whether democracy needs to exist in the future and, if so, what form must it take to address the needs of the many?

**CREATIVITY / INNOVATION** – Students will examine some of the more imaginative examples of democratic reform to best inform their Re/Creating Democracy assignment. These will include sortition, liquid democracy, Universal Basic Income and more.

Prework:

- The New Yorker Democracy Series 2020 (pick one to read from these three)
  - [The Last Time Democracy Almost Died](#)
  - [The Right to Listen](#)
  - [Politics Without Politicians](#)
- [Foreign Policy's 10 Ideas to Fix Democracy](#), January 2022

**Wednesday, August 3: \*FINAL RE/CREATING DEMOCRACY PROJECT DUE\***

*Democracy is a device  
that insures we shall be  
governed no better than  
we deserve.*

*- George Bernard Shaw*

