

Repository Entry Template
Embedded EthiCS @ Harvard Teaching Lab

Overview

Course: CS 238: Optimized Democracy
Course Level: Undergraduate and graduate
Course Description: “Optimized Democracy examines the mathematical and algorithmic foundations of democracy, running the gamut from theory to applications. The goal is to provide students with a rigorous perspective on, and a technical toolbox for, the design of better democratic systems.

Topics include computational social choice (identifying optimal voting rules), fair division with applications to political redistricting (avoiding gerrymandering) and apportionment (allocating seats on a representative body), sortition (randomly selecting citizens' assemblies), liquid democracy (transitively delegating votes), and weighted voting games (analyzing legislative power through cooperative game theory).¹

Module Topic: Democracy, Ignorance, and Power Over Others
Module Author: Krupa K. Appleton
Semesters Taught: Spring 2022
Tags: Democracy [phil], sortition [both], epistocracy [phil], ignorance [phil], competence [phil], power [phil], justice [phil], vote [phil], political equality [phil]

Module Overview: In this module, we discuss the phenomenon of voter ignorance and the objection it generates to current practices of democracy. Students are introduced to philosopher Jason Brennan's competence principle and taught to apply this principle to the context of voting in modern representative democracy. They are brought to identify as unjust the ways in which incompetent voters exercise power over others through voting on representatives who make high-stakes decisions affecting important interests of not only the electorate itself but also of resident aliens, children, foreigners, future generations, and so on. We conclude by considering two alternative political models – epistocracy and sortition – and examining what many perceive as a conflict between measures to filter for competent voters and the value of political equality.

Connection to Course Material: The central goal of this course is to provide students with a rigorous perspective on, and a technical toolbox for, designing better democratic systems than the one we currently have. This module brings students to hone in on one particularly forceful objection to our current democratic system – that it is characterized by and acquiesces in voter incompetence – and provides them a conceptual (rather than a technical) toolbox for theorizing (rather than designing) better

The nature of this course, with the expansive scope of topics surveyed, lends itself to a range of content foci. A previous version of this module covered not only voter ignorance, epistocracy, and sortition, but also the ethics of individual voting, legitimacy, *rational* voter ignorance, and the distinction

¹ <https://sites.google.com/view/optdemocracy22>

political systems. The module does not address the course's technical content head-on so much as build on the concepts it addresses by having students think critically about them from a philosophical perspective.

between proceduralist and instrumentalist decision procedures.

Any and all of these topics would have made for engaging and aptly targeted content in the context of this class, but I chose to hone in on the topics of voter ignorance, epistocracy, sortition, and political equality because (1) students had encountered sortition as part of the course's technical content, making it possible to dive deeper into something with which they had basic familiarity; (2) they presented novel issues that I anticipated would be (and that proved) thought-provoking and engaging; and (3) voter ignorance and political equality have been live topics, though not always framed in these terms, in debates about democracy in recent years. Moreover, (4) there was a natural through-line connecting these topics. I set the content up so that the lesson began by considering the phenomenon of prevalent voter ignorance in modern democracies as a problem of justice, framing epistocracy as one solution that has been proposed to this problem, considering a moral objection to epistocracy (based on the value of political equality), and offering sortition as a compromise that promotes both competence and political equality.

Goals

- Module Goals:**
1. Enable students to identify the stakes – and stakeholders – in different voting contexts.
 2. Expose students to the problem of voter ignorance.
 3. Bring students to identify the problem of voter ignorance as a problem for democracy – a problem of justice – through the lens of the competence principle.
 4. Have students examine and generate arguments for and objections to two alternative political models that have been proposed by political philosophers, among others: epistocracy and sortition.

<p>Key Philosophical Questions:</p>	<p>5. Help students see the way in which measures to promote voter competence may run up against the value of political equality.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the stakes of collective decision-making – and who are the stakeholders – in representative democracy? 2. What makes voter incompetence unjust in the democratic context? 3. How do different models of voting or policymaking promote or violate the demands of justice? 	<p>Other questions that are implicated include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is epistocracy, and how does it address the problem of voter incompetence? 2. What is the value of political equality, and how does it motivate an objection to epistocracy? 3. How can we promote both voter competence and political equality simultaneously? 4. What is sortition? <p>Much of the philosophical content of the module revolves around introducing different proposals for political models and bringing students to identify arguments for and against each of them in relation to the competence principle. A future module for a more advanced course or with more time could build on this content by having students consider other philosophical dimensions of these models, such as the extent to which they promote values of fairness, representativeness, or democratic legitimacy. Alternatively, it could engage students in deeper critique of <i>one</i> of the alternative models (epistocracy or sortition).</p>
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<p>Key Philosophical Concepts:</p>	<p>Materials</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● democracy ● power ● competence ● political equality ● justice ● epistocracy ● sortition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students interrogate the way in which democracy enables voters to exercise power over others without necessarily being competent with respect to the issues at stake in the exercise of that power. ● Students also interrogate the way in which measures to promote competence may be in friction with the commitment to political
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Assigned Readings:

- Jason Brennan, "The Right to Vote Should be Restricted to Those with Political Knowledge," *Aeon* (September 29, 2016), <https://aeon.co/ideas/the-right-to-vote-should-be-restricted-to-those-with-knowledge>
- Alexander Guerrero. "Forget Voting: It's Time to Start Selecting Our Leaders By Lottery," *Aeon* (January 23, 2014), <https://aeon.co/essays/forget-voting-it-s-time-to-start-choosing-our-leaders-by-lottery>

equality that undergirds many influential justifications for and accounts of democracy.

- Sortition is offered as a way to promote competence without abandoning the ideal of political equality.

These are succinct and clear pieces which both motivate the problem of voter ignorance. Brennan's piece offers epistocracy as a solution, whereas Guerrero's piece offers sortition. Brennan's competence principle is spelled out more fully in his book *Against Democracy* (2016). I did not assign the book in part or full, because the principle was simple and intuitive enough to introduce during the in-class lesson itself, in conjunction with the pre-class reading the students completed. However, a future module could assign excerpts to get students thinking more deeply about this principle ahead of time.

Students were given the following questions to think through as they completed the reading:

1. What values are promoted by our current model of representative democracy in the U.S., particularly its embrace of (relatively) universal suffrage and lawmaking by elected representatives?
2. What risks does it present? Why do these matter?
3. What values would be promoted by the alternative systems - epistocracy and sortition - proposed by Guerrero and Brennan? What would be compromised?

- Class Agenda:**
1. Stakes of voting, including small-group discussion of what students took to be the most important issues at stake in the last election they voted in or paid attention to, and which stakeholders stood to be most affected.
 2. Voter ignorance, including small-group discussion of how informed students perceived themselves to be on the most important issues they took to be at stake in said election.
 3. The competence objection to democracy.
 4. Universal suffrage, including a simulation wherein students vote - based only on any pre-existing knowledge they may have - on a niche public policy issue.
 5. Brennan's epistocracy proposal, including a simulation of epistocracy wherein students pass a knowledge-based screening test to vote on the same issue.
 6. The objection to epistocracy based on the commitment to political equality.
 7. Guerrero's sortition proposal, including a simulation of sortition wherein students deliberate on the same issue as part of a citizen's assembly after reading a "learning phase" handout.

Sample Class Activity: Students simulate the three different political models we discussed in class, all in relation to the issue of whether the UK should engage in public fluoridation of its water supply. In each case, their votes are meant to be binding. We engage in full-class discussion after the first two models, and then again after the last one.

Under the status-quo model, characterized by universal suffrage, every student directly votes on whether to go ahead with this policy. They are told to draw on their pre-existing knowledge (if any) and are not given additional information on this issue.

Under the epistocratic model, students must pass a 3-question screening test of basic information on public fluoridation in order to cast a vote. Again, they must draw on their pre-existing knowledge (if any) and are not given additional information on the issue.

Under the sortition model, students are given a "learning phase" handout that briefs them on what experts, advocates, and other stakeholders have to say on the issue. They then cast a vote after deliberating with their peers.

Given practical constraints, the simulations enacted a referendum method rather than having students vote on a representative who in turn votes on the issue.

I chose the topic of public fluoridation because (1) it is a live and contested issue in the UK at the time of this writing; (2) it is an issue which most students are unlikely to be informed on let alone expert in, enabling us to simulate the phenomenon of voter ignorance; (3) despite being controversial, it is not a particularly divisive issue given its technical nature; (4) its controversial nature is premised largely on factual disputes such that access to information may be expected to (and did, according to the poll results) result in greater agreement as the simulations went on – lending credibility to the two alternative models proposed.

Module Assignment: At the instructor's request, given students' ongoing work on their final projects, students were not given a post-class assignment.

Lessons Learned: Student response to this module was overall very positive. A few lessons stand out:

1. Students were quick to grasp the concepts introduced, and much of the discussion focused on nuancing them, developing critiques, and comparing the relative justice of the different models.
2. Students were eager to consider objections to the different models, and epistocracy in particular, that were based on the ways in which they stood to disadvantage or harm historically marginalized or oppressed groups - in theory, in practice, or given the way this has occurred historically (e.g., literacy tests used to disenfranchise African-Americans in the South). Perhaps a future module could tie the arguments for or against different models more directly to worries of disparate impact.
3. The content generated many arguments and objections, and, in their feedback, students expressed a desire for more discussion and debate between students. The quantity of content constrained the extent to which we were able to engage in such debate. A future module might consider carving out space for structured debate, such as by organizing student input on the different models into a pro/con list and using that as a springboard for a full-class debate of some kind.