Repository Entry Template
Embedded EthiCS @ Harvard Teaching Lab

	Overview
Course:	CS 238: Optimized Democracy
Course Level:	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:	Megan Entwistle
Semesters Taught:	Spring 2023
Tags:	democracy [phil], epistocracy [phil], ethics of voting [phil], lottocracy [phil], voter ignorance [phil]
Module Overview:	The module focuses on the problem of voter ignorance (ignorance about information relevant to voting well). It explores how voter ignorance can come about as a rational response to the structural features of modern electoral democracy, and asks how the phenomenon bears on both (i) individual duties regarding voting and (ii) the legitimacy of democratic decision procedures.	
Connection to Course Material:	The course discusses issues in the mathematical foundations of democratic decision procedures, with an eye towards designing better democratic systems than the one we currently have. The module complements this goal by introducing moral and political arguments regarding individual voting and collective decision procedures. In so doing, the module provides students with a conceptual (rather than a technical) toolbox for theorizing about better political systems.	The topic of voter ignorance was chosen as a through-line for the module not only because it presents a particularly pressing concern about our current democratic system, but because it connects pressing ethical questions at both the individual and collective levels of democracy. Worries about voter ignorance have also been a driving force in recent developments in political philosophy (see Brennan (2018), Guerrero (2014), Landemore (2020)), which makes for an abundance of rich and exciting philosophical material to incorporate into the module. This version of the module is heavily indebted to the original

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[1] https://sites.google.com/view/optdemocracy23/?pli=1

version, which covered a wider range of content, including the distinction between proceduralist and instrumentalist justifications for decision procedures, and the comparative benefits of referendums. The present iteration of the module, by contrast, placed a special emphasis on motivating the central problem, for example by drawing attention to the structural features of modern electoral democracy that could make voter ignorance *rational.*

Goals		
Module Goals:	1. Compare three views about the ethics of voting (duty; conditional duty; all voter behavior permissible) 2. Motivate the problem of political ignorance, in connection with voting as a collective action problem 3. Consider whether the problem of political ignorance could ever justify knowledge-based restrictions on suffrage 4. Discuss the political legitimacy of sortition-based governance (lottocracy), in contrast with representational democracy and epistocracy	
Key Philosophical Questions:	1. What are the moral duties–if any–of individual voters? 2. What is rational voter ignorance? 3. Is voter ignorance a problem for democracy? 4. Would it be unjust for a state to restrict voting on the basis of political knowledge? 5. Is a sortition-assembled governing body a more procedurally just alternative to universal suffrage, under conditions of widespread political ignorance?	Question 1 is sharpened by thinking about whether it is better to abstain than to cast a vote without knowledge of the relevant issues. Question 2 is motivated in part by structural features of electoral democracy (e.g. a single vote is not likely to impact an election outcome, and policy making is not transparent to voters), and in part by the empirical findings of social scientist Ilya Somin on the extent of political ignorance in the U.S. and the U.K. Question 3 is raised in connection with Brennan's claim that democratic decision-making enables groups to wield power over others incompetently (i.e. when the electorate is politically ignorant) and to that extent is

unjust. Question 4 asks students to assess the merits of Brennan's alternative proposal that the right to vote should be restricted to those who demonstrate some sufficient level of political knowledge. Question 5 arises in response to another alternative proposal to universal suffrage, namely sortition or 'lottocracy' wherein a governing body is selected at random from a larger pool of candidates.

Materials

| Key Philosophical Concepts: | Democracy Political Ignorance Power Competence Political Legitimacy Political Equality Epistocracy Lottocracy | The notion of political ignorance (or voter ignorance) serves to raise worries about democratic decision-making. The topic is problematized first at the individual level, as students are asked to consider the risks and impacts of voting without knowledge of the relevant issues. The next step is to generalize from an individual case and think about the conditions under which it is acceptable for a group of people to hold power over others. There is a case to be made, drawing on Brennan (2017), that one group (the voters) should only be allowed to exercise power over another (all those impacted by election outcomes) if they exercise that power competently. This raises a challenge for democratic decision-making, at least under current conditions of widespread political ignorance. The remainder of the module is designed to interrogate the moral and political prospects of two solutions to the problem: epistocracy and lottocracy. |
| Assigned Readings: | Brennan, J. "The Right to Vote Should be Restricted to Those with Political Knowledge", *Aeon*, https://aeon.co/ideas/the-right-to-vote-should-be-restricted-to-those-with-knowledge Guerrero, A. "Forget Voting: It's Time to Start Selecting Our Leaders By Lottery, *Aeon*, | Both *Aeon* pieces are short, clear and provide a good summary of political ignorance and how these two philosophers think we should respond to it. |

https://aeon.co/essays/forget-voting-it-s-time-to-start-choosing-our-leaders-by-lottery	Another possibility would be to have students read a *New Yorker* article explaining both Guerrero's lottocracy and Helene Landemore's model of open democracy: https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-future-of-democracy/politics-without-politicians Useful resources for the instructor include Brennan's *Ethics of Voting* (2011) and *Against Democracy* (2016), Guerrero's paper "Against Elections" (2014), and Landemore's more recent book *Open Democracy* (2020).

Implementation

Class Agenda:	1. The Ethics of Voting 2. Rational Voter Ignorance 3. The Competence Objection to Democracy 4. Epistocracy 5. Lottocracy	
Sample Class Activity:	Following introduction of Brennan's proposed solution to the problem of voter ignorance, Epistocracy, the instructor posed the following discussion question: Is knowledge-based restricted suffrage preferable to universal suffrage, under conditions of widespread political ignorance? Students split into groups, and were tasked with coming up with a possible objection to epistocracy. They shared their objections with the rest of the class, which kickstarted a larger discussion of the issues.	The goal of the activity was to have students critically assess the proposal on the table, first in discussion with their peers and then as a class. To provide structure for the class discussion, the instructor noted that the student objections to epistocracy can be sorted into the following kinds: 1. Epistocracy is not practically feasible (e.g. there is no way to implement an objective, politically neutral assessment of the relevant kind of knowledge for voting) 2. Even if feasible, epistocracy is intrinsically unjust (e.g. depriving citizens of the right to vote is demeaning) 3. Epistocracy would produce bad consequences for society (e.g. it would reinforce pre-existing social inequalities)

Module Assignment: Although there was no module assignment, one possibility is to assign a short reflection essay in response to a prompt. For example:

(a) In your view, is epistocracy or lottocracy the better solution to the problem of voter ignorance?
(b) In your view, does lottocracy succeed in addressing the problem of voter ignorance without coming into conflict with the ideal of political equality?

Students should be instructed to explain their reasoning for their position, and/or to draw on at least two concepts discussed in class.

The module closes with a discussion of the lottocratic alternative to epistocracy. Attention is drawn to a possible worry for lottocracy: because having a chance of a say in governance (in virtue of entering the lottery) is not the same as actually having a say in governance (through voting), sortitions potentially fall short of ensuring equal political participation. Students should therefore be in a good position to assess the comparative (de)merits of both proposed alternatives to electoral democracy (with universal suffrage), under conditions of political ignorance.

Lessons Learned: Student response to this module was overwhelmingly positive. They were eager to engage with the topic at a high level of abstraction, while keeping in view implementation concerns for the different proposals on the table.

1. Students reported finding the central philosophical concepts (e.g. equal political participation) useful for clarifying the issues and theorizing about potential solutions.
2. Students spend a fair amount of time during the course itself learning about sortitions. In light of this, the instructor could scale back on the level of detail required to get the lottocratic proposal off the ground, and dedicate more time to its critical assessment. (Students were quite interested in the political legitimacy concern raised for lottocracy towards the end of the module, and expressed a wish to explore it in more depth.)