

Professor Ben Berger  
bberger1@swarthmore.edu  
Office Hours: Tu. & Th., 1 PM- 2:30 PM  
(and by appointment)

**Fall Semester, 2010**  
**POLS 19: Democratic Theory and Practice**

***Abstract:* POLS 19 combines traditional, classroom learning and “community-based learning” – in this case, a range of engagements with educational, political, and journalistic community partners undertaken with a diverse set of local residents—to help students better understand the state of American democracy.**

At the heart of this course you’ll find three lines of questioning:

- 1.) What is democracy, and why is it desirable?
- 2.) What conditions does democracy require?
- 3.) Does the contemporary U.S. fall short of these requirements? If so, what might be done?

Literally, the word *democracy* means “rule of the people.” It can denote the direct democracy of ancient Athens, in which citizens met face to face to debate political issues. It can denote the representative democracy of present-day America, in which the people rule indirectly through their chosen representatives. But some critics question whether today’s “people” really rule at all. In theory, all citizens' voices should count equally in decisions about the political community’s shape and direction. In the modern state, however--and certainly in the U.S.--that has never been reality. Many people don't participate and many aren't heard.

These observations lead us to ask: what does modern democracy require? Does it require economic equality? Does it require that all (or most) citizens be socially connected with thriving networks of friends and acquaintances? Does it require that all (or most) citizens participate in politics? Does it require any particular kind of citizen -- active, engaged, informed, virtuous, or even selfless? If any of these conditions are necessary, how might they be promoted?

Many scholars have asserted that democracy requires a high degree of “civic engagement,” which is taken to mean citizen involvement with community and political affairs. Swarthmore alumnus and Harvard professor Robert Putnam famously claims that civic engagement has declined in America and that American democracy thus faces serious challenges. Is he right? Have citizens pulled away from politics and each other? How is civic engagement supposed to promote the health of democratic politics, and how can it be encouraged? Is there a difference between political engagement, social engagement and moral engagement, three kinds of connectedness that are often lumped together under the civic engagement rubric? If so, are they equally important for making democracy work?

Our starting point is thus an attempt to figure out what is going on in American political and communal life. Once we have some initial answers--necessarily incomplete, of course--we will begin to ask the most important of social science questions: "so what?" In other words, we will be trying to figure out what exactly would be so bad about a decline in political, social and moral engagement. Maybe we need high levels of each type of engagement. Maybe we don't. A venerable school of democratic theory, generally known as "democratic elitism," actually contests the notion that the people should be broadly and frequently involved in political decision-making. We will read Joseph Schumpeter's and Walter Lippmann's classic statements of that position. From those provocative arguments we will proceed to the direct response of egalitarian democratic theory, as espoused by Carol Pateman and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Pateman in particular stresses economic democracy as well as political equality.

Civic republicans such as Michael Sandel and Hannah Arendt also oppose Schumpeter, although with less emphasis on economic democracy. Civic republicanism praises active citizenship as the "good life" for human beings or the locus of human freedom, intrinsically valuable aside from any consideration of utility.

With regard to political engagement, some might defend it on far less lofty grounds, seeing it as a bulwark between democracy and social collapse. We read from Hannah Arendt's and William Kornhauser's classic accounts of the disintegrating civil society and atomized masses that allegedly gave rise to totalitarian movements. The following week we read critics who might be willing to endorse limited political engagement as a "defense against the worst" (Rosenblum) but who contest the assumption that more political engagement is always better.

Such readings force us to grapple with the question of whether American democracy requires any particular character traits or virtues from its citizens--traits such as tolerance, empathy, or independent thinking-- and whether political engagement always (or usually) promotes those traits. In other words, we will be asking whether political engagement always accompanies *moral* engagement, and if not, whether moral engagement should be promoted in different ways.

As we wrestle toward some provisional answers to the "so what?" question--as we gain insights about why political engagement matters for democracy-- we begin to investigate different areas of American society in which both political and social engagement might have declined and could be promoted. We also inquire into the institutional reforms that would be needed to make additional engagement efficacious. We consider social and political marginalization among minority groups, the role of education in promoting social and political engagement, the problem of social and political disengagement among America's youth, and the potential for the internet and other communications technology to resuscitate social and political engagement among the citizenry. We close by considering some lessons from successful community activists and political mobilizers.

Throughout the semester, as a complement to these readings, we will engage with the citizens and social and political environments of Swarthmore, PA and Chester, PA. This "community-based learning component" involves touring Swarthmore and Chester guided by local residents, visiting town council meetings in each city, and being visited by community leaders

in our classroom. Further, students will get involved with residents of local communities in a variety of programs designed to improve the daily lives of residents. Some students will work with Chester High School students, administrators and parents in the exciting new, student-run Chester Youth Courts project (designed to promote responsibility and efficacy among young people); some will work with members of Swarthmore's and Chester's local governments, to get a better sense of what local governance actually means in practice; some will work with local political campaigns of their choosing; still others will work with community institutions that provide a number of essential services for citizens and by citizens. Our aim is not simply to do things *for* other citizens but to do things *with* them, and in the process to learn about the ways in which citizens in different areas, from different backgrounds, think and talk about the experience of democracy. Students will be investing an average of three hours per week on the internships and tours, with some weeks demanding more and some weeks less than that amount. Transportation will be provided when necessary.

The goal of this extra project is to provide a non-traditional complement to classroom learning and thus to enrich students' understanding of the democratic process. We hope to see, without the mediation of textbooks, how different kinds of individual and environmental factors (income and wealth, educational attainment, race and class, and the extent of a community's social connectedness, for example) can affect citizens' experience of democracy. We will look for ways in which the democratic process *works* and also ways in which it *fails*, not in order to condemn the "system" outright (although students are free to arrive at such a criticism) but primarily in order to help us ponder the means of making democracy work *better*.

We will be joined frequently by Dr. Duane Belgrave Sr., a local professor, minister and community activist who works in Chester and daily combines theory and practice. Dr. Belgrave will aid us in talking and reflecting about our preconceptions of democracy in America and our experiences in Chester and Swarthmore.

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

### Books for Purchase:

Alinsky, Saul: *Reveille for Radicals*

Fung, Archon: *Empowered Participation: reinventing urban democracy*

John Morrison McLarnon III, *Ruling Suburbia: John J. McClure and the Republican Machine in Delaware County, Pennsylvania*

Putnam, Robert: *Bowling Alone*

Sandel, Michael: *Democracy's Discontent*

Skocpol, Theda: *Diminished Democracy*

Tocqueville, Alexis de: *Democracy in America* (Mayer translation)

Verba, Sidney; Scholzman, Kay; Brady, David: *Voice and Equality*

In addition to the books to be purchased I will make available a number of articles and book excerpts on Blackboard. The authors in this category include Hannah Arendt, Sheri Berman, W.E.B. DuBois, William Kornhauser, Carol Pateman, Nancy Rosenblum, Joseph Schumpeter, Dennis Shirley, and William Julius Wilson. Blackboard readings are designated with an asterisk (\*) on the syllabus.

### Grades

Students' grades will be calculated from the following components:

Participation in class discussions: **15%**

See the attached remarks (below) for more about my expectations *vis a vis* class participation. Attendance in class comprises part of your participation grade.

CBL journal: **15%**:

Each student will be responsible for keeping a journal chronicling her or his experience with the course's community-based learning (or "CBL") component. I expect at least one double-spaced page on average, although during especially eventful weeks students are free to go well beyond that level. I will collect journals on a *weekly* basis in order to get a sense of students' thought processes and to aid our classroom discussions. (**Please submit your week's entry via Blackboard every Sunday night.**) Students may write about reflections on community visits, classroom speakers, community engagements, or even about reactions to contemporary political events, while trying to relate these reflections to the formal syllabus readings.

Short essays: **40%**

Each student will be responsible for writing TWO 5-6 page (double-spaced) essays during the semester. Papers are due in the indicated weeks by Sundays at 11:59 PM. Please deliver a hard copy of the paper to the mailbox outside my office (306 Trotter) **as well as** a digitized copy in the Blackboard "drop box." Each essay will count for 20% of your grade.

Final paper (12 pages): **30%**

The final paper is intended to integrate your personal experiences and reflections from the semester with your insights into our texts and course themes. It can thus be more personal than most academic papers but is more than simply a journal. Tell me about the ways in which our "class project" has related to our academic discussions and ways in which your own thinking about democracy has been challenged, changed, or re-

affirmed. In the process you should quote liberally from at least 4 of the assigned texts and evaluate their analytic potency.

**A Few Extra Words on Participation:**

Without active class participation this course would lose a vital component of its capacity to teach. I have found that continuous engagement with the material works much better for our subject matter than intense, last-minute cramming. The only way I can gauge your continuous absorption and understanding of the material is by reading your response papers, by watching your faces in class, and by listening to your questions, comments, and responses. In order to encourage your engagement and participation, therefore, I make those very things a significant component of your final grade. You are responsible for coming to class every day prepared to discuss the material, to answer my questions and raise questions of your own, and to listen alertly to each other and to me. If on a given day you feel so sleep-deprived or ill-prepared that you question your ability to fulfill those obligations, stay home. Sluggishness is contagious and I do not want it spreading to others. You are allowed two unexcused absences without penalty to your grade; use them if you're not at your best. If you miss more than two classes your grade will be affected, but on the other hand if you come to class unable to stay awake or stay alert or to participate your grade will also be affected.

This is simply an informed response to the realities of Swarthmore's demanding environment, a response that has your best educational interests at heart. I know from personal experience that unless the course leader's expectations are clearly and firmly set forth, even hardworking students can be tempted to "wing it" when other commitments compete for their time.

## **POLS 19: Course Outline**

(Readings marked with a \* can be found on Blackboard)

### **I.) CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN AMERICA-- LAYING OUT THE ISSUES**

#### Week 1) Setting the Stage with the Civic Engagement Debate

08/31: Course intro: Who Killed Civic Engagement?

09/02: Robert Putnam, "The Strange Disappearance of Civic America"

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/detoc/assoc/strange.html>

Elizabeth McLean Petras, "From Paternalism to Patronage to Pillage: Chester PA, a chronicle of the embedded consciousness of place in the second most economically depressed city in the US," pp. 2-32 \* (2 PDF files)

**09/04: Saturday: Chester 101 (8:30 AM meet @ Bond Parking Lot; return 1:30 PM)**

#### Week 2) Measuring America's Civic & Political Health

09/07: Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, ch. 1-3

Ben Berger, "Political Theory, Political Science, and the End of Civic Engagement" \*

**Visit to Chester City Council Wed. 9/8 7:00 PM (meet 6:30 PM @ Lang Center)**

09/09: Sid Verba, Kay Schlozman & Henry Brady, *Voice and Equality*, pp. 1-48

**09/12: Sunday: Tour of Swarthmore with Mayor Rick Lowe; 1 PM @ Borough Hall**

#### Week 3) It's the Economy, Stupid: Economic Factors in Civic Engagement

09/14: Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, ch. 5, 10, 11

Marshall Ganz, "Voters in the Crosshairs," in *The American Prospect* v.5 no. 16, December 1 1994 \*

McLarnon, *Ruling Suburbia: John J. McClure and the Republican Machine in Delaware County, Pennsylvania*: Ch. 1 ("Genesis of a Machine")

**Classroom Visit from Chester City Council Representative Portia West**

09/16: Verba *et al.*, *Voice and Equality*, ch. 7 and 10

McLarnon, *Ruling Suburbia* Ch. 6 ("The Master Sorcerer")

#### Week 4) Democracy and Engagement in America- Historical View

09/21: Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Author's Introduction (pp. 9-20); pp. 61-98; pp. 173-95; pp. 246-76

Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy* ch.2

09/23: Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, v.I, ch.1-4 (173-95); v.II, pt.II, ch.4-14 (509-41)

W.E.B. DuBois, "On Being Ashamed of Oneself" \*

Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy* ch.5

**1st SHORT PAPER DUE SUNDAY 9/26, 11:59 PM (Blackboard)**

**II.) CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN DEMOCRATIC THEORY**

Week 5) Welcoming Disengagement: Elite Theories of Democracy

09/28: Joseph Schumpeter, "Capitalism, Socialism, Democracy," pp.250-302 \*  
McLarnon, *Ruling Suburbia*, Ch. 7 ("Black Republicans")

09/30: Ilya Somin, "Political Ignorance and the Counter-majoritarian Difficulty" \*  
McLarnon, *Ruling Suburbia*, Epilogue

Week 6) Egalité, Liberté, Fraternité: Economic and Participatory Democracy

**Visit to Swarthmore Borough Council Mon. 10/04 7:30 PM @ Borough Hall**

10/05: Carol Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, pp.20-84,

10/07: Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, pp. 85-111 \*

10/12: FALL BREAK

10/14: FALL BREAK

Week 7) Participatory Democracy as Intrinsic Good: Civic Republicanism

10/19: Michael Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent*, pp. 3-28; 317-35 \*

10/21: Hannah Arendt, "The Revolutionary Tradition and its Lost Treasure" \*  
(from the book *On Revolution*)

Week 8) Participation and Community as Defenses against the Worst

10/26: Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, ch.10: 305-40 \*

10/28: William Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society*, 21-38, 114-5, 173-4, 223-38 \*

**2nd SHORT PAPER DUE SUNDAY 10/31, 11:59 PM (Blackboard)**

Week 9) Democracy's Dark Side: When Civic Engagement Goes Bad

11/02: Simone Chambers & Jeffrey Kopstein, "Bad Civil Society"\*

11/04: Nancy Rosenblum, *Membership and Morals*, pp. 47-61 \*

Sheri Berman, "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic." *World Politics* 47 (April 1997): 401-430 \*

**III.) CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE**

Week 10) Democratic Practice: Race, Marginalization & Low Social Capital

11/09: Loic J.D. Wacquant and William Julius Wilson, "The Cost of Racial and Class Exclusion in the Inner City," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 501 (1990): 25-31. \*

William Julius Wilson, "Studying Inner-City Social Dislocations: The Challenge of Public Agenda Research" (1990 Presidential Address)," *American Sociological Review* 56 (1991): 1-14 \*

**STUDENTS ENGAGED WITH ELECTION DAY ACTIVITIES EXCUSED**

11/11: Elijah Anderson, *Streetwise: Race Class & Change in an Urban Community*, Ch.2 \*  
Jeff Manza and Christopher Uggen. "Punishment and Democracy: The Disenfranchisement of Nonincarcerated Felons in the United States." *Perspectives on Politics* 2: 491-505 \*

**Classroom Visit from Professor Keith Reeves: Chester native and prison reform expert**

Week 11) Democratic Practice: Social Capital & Educational Reform

11/16: Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, chapter 17  
Dennis Shirley, *Community Organizing for Urban School Reform* (1997), chapter 8 ("Texas"), pp. 200-220. \*  
Archon Fung, *Empowered Participation*, ch.1

11/18: Archon Fung, *Empowered Participation*, ch. 2-4

Week 12) Democratic Practice: Political Engagement, Social Capital & Educational Reform

11/23: Archon Fung, *Empowered Participation*, ch. 5-7

11/25: NO CLASS-- THANKSGIVING

Week 13) Democratic Practice: Successful Organizing in the 20th Century and Beyond

11/30: Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, pp. vii-xvii, 38-128 (top)

12/02: Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, pp. 128-173, 196-204

Week 14) Democratic Practice: virtual and human faces

12/07: Berger & Neuhaus, *To Empower People: from state to civil society* ch. 1, 3, 4  
Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy* ch.7

**FINAL 10-PAGE PAPER DUE SUNDAY 12/12, 11:59 PM (Blackboard)**