

## **SOSC 1700 What Is Democracy?**

Spring Semester of 2026

Classroom: LG5202

Time: Wednesday and Friday, 13.30-14.50 pm

### **Instructor:**

Wenkai He

Associate Professor, Division of Social Science

Room 3376, Academic Building

Email: [hewenkai@ust.hk](mailto:hewenkai@ust.hk)

Office hour: 2 pm to 3 pm, Tuesday; or by appointment

Teaching Assistant: Roy Ho

Email: [psrho@ust.hk](mailto:psrho@ust.hk)

### **Course Description:**

Should China become a democracy? How to achieve a true democracy in Hong Kong? Is democracy the only good regime? These questions are being debated among the students not only in classrooms and dormitories, but in the street protests as well. Nonetheless, there is no course at HKUST that teaches basic theories of democracy. The students thus do not have a chance to systematically learn various viewpoints for or against democracy. Without a deeper understanding of democracy and training in critical reasoning, miscommunication and confusion result when students debate the merits and shortcomings of democracy. This is why I plan to offer “What Is Democracy?” as a common core course to undergraduate students of HKUST.

This course will cover the classic theories about democracy from ancient Greece to the contemporary world. The major topics introduced will include the relationship between individual rights and rule by majority; equality as the normative foundation of democracy; the tension between a procedural understanding of democracy and the substantive, participatory aspects of democracy; and how to conceptualize the common good or public interest in a democratic society. By teaching the students how to engage in reasoned discussions of various aspects of democracy with people holding different views, this course aims to enhance their capacity for critical reasoning as applied to social issues and help them become responsible, well-informed citizens.

### **AI Policy:**

You are encouraged to use AI for the purpose of literature review or knowledge of background of the books being discussed in classes.

Using AI to write response essays is strictly prohibited. AI composed essay will receive F and there is no chance of re-submission.

**Grading:**

Participation: 10%

Three response essays: 30%

Starting from the second week, you are required to write three short responses to the weekly readings according to your interest and schedule. The response should be your question or argument in regard to the issues addressed in that week's reading. The response should be submitted before the class on Tuesday on that week. Each response is around 2 double-spaced pages.

Final exam (close-book): 60%

The final exam will consist of two parts: Part I are some questions about standard definitions while Part II is short-answer analytic questions.

**Assigned Readings:****Week 1: Introduction and Plato's Republic**

Plato, *The Republic*, edited by G. R. F. Ferrari and translated by Tom Griffith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Book 1, Book 2, Book 4, Book 5, Book 7, and Book 8.

**Week 2: Excellence and the best state**

Aristotle, *The Politics and Constitution of Athens*, edited by Stephen Everson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 11-24; 30-38; 43-46; 61-63; 65-83; 85-93; 95-109; 112-114; 119-122; 127-128; 134-139; 154-161; 166-168; and 170-173.

**Week 3: Machiavelli: The Moment toward real politics?**

Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chapter 9

Niccolo Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Book I: Chapter 2-10; 18-20; 33-40; 46-48; 57-58.

Both are in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, edited by Alan Gilbert, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989)

**Week 4: Jean Bodin: Sovereignty and the People**

Jean Bodin, *On Sovereignty*, edited by Julian H. Franklin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), Book I, chapter 8 On sovereignty and Book II, chapter 1 On the kinds of state in general.

**Week 5: The state of nature and sovereignty**

Thomas Hobbes, *The Leviathan*, chapters 13-19; 21; 26; 29-30.

Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, edited by Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 91-101 and pp. 115-126.

**Week 6: The state of nature and popular sovereignty**

John Locke, *Two Treatises on Government* (1679-1689), edited by Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 268-278; 280-282; 283-295; 318-326; 330-333; 347-349; 350-363; 370-374; 406-415; 427-428.

**Week 7: The state of nature and the general will**

J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract and other Latter Political Writings*, edited by Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 41-86; 90-94; 99-108; 110-116; 121-125; 146-151.

**Week 9: Equality and Judicial Review**

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1988), pp. 58-105; 138-170; 230-253; 262-308; 503-524; 561-571; 604-608.

**Week 10: The minimal version of democracy**

Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1976), pp. 235-302.

**Week 11: Democratic equality and democracy**

John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 3-19, 47-70, and 102-139.

**Week 12: Fundamental Rights and Democracy?**

Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, state, and utopia* (New York: The Basic Books, 1974), chapter 7.