It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government -- except for all the others. Prior to the early 19th century, it was difficult to find a respectable person who would call himself a democrat. Plato and Aristotle regarded democracy an aberration, the swelling of political power in a mob unable to distinguish statesmen from demagogues, which often betrays its liberty to tyrants. Yet today nearly all Americans agree in supporting democracy. How, then, has the reputation of democracy benefited from so striking an ascent in the estimate of decent people? Were remedies found for the maladies that plagued democracy in earlier times? Or have social conditions conspired to blind us to the danger? What are these dangers? If remedies have been found, what are they and how effective are they? It is the aim of this course to shed light on the nature of democracy, to assess its strengths and vulnerabilities, and so to better inform our understanding of politics and the challenges of our own citizenship.

Requirements, Expectations and Grading

You are to attend every meeting of this class, having read the assigned texts carefully. During class sessions, you will be asked to form small group panels to introduce passages, to raise and to respond to questions, and to write three brief but detailed accounts of what you have learned. These three papers will determine 30% of your final grade, and the in-class panel presentations another 30%. Your contribution to general class discussion will determine 20%, and your citizenship (effort, respect for class mission, and general deportment) another 10%. There will be a comprehensive final exam or final paper determining the remaining 10% of your final grade. Absences may be excused, upon written request made via email by class time of the day of your absence, at your instructor’s sole discretion. In any case, you will be expected to make up any missing work.

Class Schedule

Unit One: The Glory and Self-Destructiveness of Democracy

Weeks 1-4 Introductions; Preliminary consideration of democracy as a form of government; Thucydides, Peloponnesian War, I.67-78; 2.34-46; Shakespeare, Julius Caesar I; II; Shakespeare, Julius Caesar III; Thucydides, Peloponnesian War, 5.84-116

Unit Two: Classic Analyses of Democratic Life

Weeks 5-6 Plato, Republic 550c-564a; 564a-576b; Aristotle, Politics III chs.7-13; J.S. Mill, On Liberty, chs.1-2

Unit Three: Democracy in the American Political Experience

Weeks 7-8 Declaration of Independence; Federal Papers #s 1, 10, 51; Diamond, “Ethics and Politics: The American Way” pp.75-92; pp.92-108

Spring Break

Weeks 9-15 Tocqueville, Democracy in America (Mansfield and Winthrop, trans.) pp.3-15; 27-53; 56-120; Easter Break; 120-186; 187-235; 235-302; 302-396; 399-428; 428-476; 479-524; 525-578; 578-635; 639-676