

Cīvicus

The term *Civicus* derives from the Latin *civis*, meaning “citizen,” a word that signified not only membership in a political community but also the duties, privileges, and shared destiny that came with belonging. In the ancient world, to be a *civis* was to be recognized as someone whose voice and actions mattered in shaping collective life. It implied participation, responsibility, and identity within a civic order. Reclaiming this root for our own time reminds us that citizenship is not a passive condition but an active practice of engagement, deliberation, and care for the common good.

In the 21st century, the idea of Cīvicus takes on renewed urgency. Democracies today face strains from polarization, erosion of trust, and disruptive technologies that challenge our ability to discern truth and act collectively. Against this backdrop, Cīvicus calls us back to the essence of citizenship: to be stewards of democratic life through informed participation, critical reasoning, and meaningful dialogue.

The course *Cīvicus: Advancing Civic Education* embodies this ethos by tracing the historical evolution of citizenship, examining its philosophical foundations, and confronting the challenges that threaten it in our own age. To embrace *Civicus* is to affirm that democracy depends not merely on institutions, but on the citizens who sustain them.

Civicus: Advancing Civic Education

While democracy is often celebrated as "rule by the people," its underlying principles and practical application are far from simple. *Civicus: Advancing Civic Education*, unpacks the multifaceted nature of democracy by examining its philosophical roots, historical evolution—from foundational documents like the Magna Carta to the U.S. Constitution—and contemporary challenges. Ultimately, this course aims to equip students with a nuanced understanding of citizenship, enabling them to engage critically and meaningfully within the democratic process and navigate its inherent complexities.

Foundational Ideas and Readings

The syllabus highlights critical writings that have shaped democratic thought and continue to inform our understanding today:

1. **Selected Philosophical Foundations of Governance**
 - *Plato's The Republic* critiques democracy as flawed but acknowledges its necessity in fostering justice and equality.
 - *Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan* underscores the need for authority in preventing societal chaos, contrasting with democratic ideals.
 - *Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action and discourse ethics* proposes that legitimate democratic norms arise not through force or tradition but through rational dialogue among free and equal participants. His work challenges students to see democracy not just as a set of institutions but as a communicative process grounded in mutual understanding and respect.
2. **The Origins of Democratic Principles**
 - The *Magna Carta* (1215) marked a pivotal moment in limiting absolute power and laying the groundwork for constitutional democracy.
 - *John Locke's Second Treatise of Government* introduced the ideas of natural rights and the consent of the governed, principles that profoundly influenced the U.S. Constitution.
 - *US Constitution*
3. **Modern Democratic Practices and Challenges**
 - *Alexis de Tocqueville's Democracy in America* examines democracy's unique implementation in the U.S., highlighting strengths like equality and individualism alongside vulnerabilities like civic disengagement.
 - *Robert Putnam's Bowling Alone* sheds light on the decline of social capital and its impact on democratic participation.
 - *Ronald Dworkin's Is Democracy Possible Here?* argues that "...Americans of all political stripes—as well as citizens of other nations with similar cultures—that they can and must defend their own convictions through their own interpretations of these shared values."

- *Danielle Allen's Our Declaration* argues that the American founding document makes a compelling case that equality is the necessary foundation for freedom. Professor Allen's work aims to reclaim the Declaration for all Americans and to restore equality to its central role in American political thought.
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Course Themes and Objectives

The course is structured to guide students through:

1. A comparative exploration of governance forms, fostering an appreciation of democracy's adaptability, with a particular focus on what it means to be a citizen.
2. A critical examination of foundational texts to understand democracy's philosophical roots and evolving interpretations.
3. Real-world applications, including evaluations of democratic systems in countries like the U.S., India, and Switzerland.
4. Emphasis on democratic discourse: Drawing from *Habermas' communicative ethics*, students will explore the role of rational dialogue in navigating pluralism, resolving conflict, and legitimizing democratic decisions. This focus invites reflection on how public reasoning—especially in deliberative forums—can serve as a counter to polarization and misinformation.
5. Exploration of contemporary issues, such as:
 - *Can Democracy Survive the Disruptive Power of AI?*
<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/12/can-democracy-survive-the-disruptive-power-of-ai?lang=en>

Students will grapple with pressing questions: How can democratic values be preserved in an era of polarization and misinformation? What role should individuals and institutions play in sustaining democracy? How should we understand what it means to be a citizen in the 21st century?

Course Title: PHL 305 Civicus: *Advancing Civic Education*

Course Description:

This course examines various forms of government, the philosophies underlying democracy, and the evolution of democratic principles in the United States and selected countries from around the world. It emphasizes critical thinking, dialogue, and engagement with seminal texts and real-world examples to foster active and informed citizenship.

While democracy is often celebrated as "rule by the people," its underlying principles and practical application are far from simple. Civicus: Advancing Civic Education, unpacks the multifaceted nature of democracy by examining its philosophical roots, historical evolution—from foundational documents like the Magna Carta to the U.S. Constitution—and contemporary challenges, including the role of AI. Ultimately, CivicUS aims to equip students with a nuanced understanding of citizenship, enabling them to engage critically and meaningfully within the democratic process and navigate its inherent complexities.

Course Objectives:

By the end of the course, students will:

1. Understand various forms of governance and their implications.
 2. Analyze philosophical underpinnings of democracy through seminal texts.
 3. Explore the history and evolution of democracy in the United States.
 4. Compare democratic systems around the world.
 5. Evaluate the current state of democracy and its future challenges.
 6. Participate in civic engagement projects, promoting active citizenship.
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Selected (tentative) Texts and References:

- Plato, *The Republic*
- John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*
- J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*
- Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*
- John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*
- Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*
- Ronald Dworkin, *Is Democracy Possible?*
- Ronald Daniels, *What Universities Owe Democracy*
- Danielle Allen, *Our Declaration: a Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality*
- Can Democracy Survive the Disruptive Power of AI?
<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/12/can-democracy-survive-the-disruptive-power-of-ai?lang=en>

Week-by-Week Plan

Week 1: Introduction to Forms of Governance

- **Key Concepts:** Aristocracy, Autocracy, Oligarchy, Plutocracy, Theocracy, Meritocracy, Anarchy, Democracy
 - **Readings:**
 - Excerpts from *The Republic* by Plato (on aristocracy and the philosopher-king)
 - Select sections from *Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes (on autocracy)
 - **Activities:**
 - Interactive activities comparing forms of government with real-world examples.
 - Small group discussions: Which form of government is most stable and why?
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Week 2: Philosophical Foundations of Democracy (Part I)

- **Key Concepts:** Origins and evolution of democratic thought.
 - **Readings:**
 - Plato, *The Republic* (on democracy as flawed yet necessary).
 - Excerpts from *The Magna Carta* (1215) – its influence on constitutional law.
 - **Activities:**
 - Debate: Plato's critique of democracy vs. the principles of the Magna Carta.
 - Reflective writing: How does the Magna Carta relate to democracy today?
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Week 3: Philosophical Foundations of Democracy (Part II)

- **Key Concepts:** Social contract and liberty.
 - **Readings:**
 - John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (on natural rights and consent of the governed).
 - J.S. Mill, *On Liberty* (the balance between individual freedom and societal good).
 - John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (the ideas of 'veil of ignorance,' 'original position.'...)
 - **Activities:**
 - Group presentations: Influence of Locke and Mill on the founding of American system.
 - Workshop: Application of Locke's ideas to modern political issues (e.g., privacy, social contract, and freedom of speech).
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Week 4: Tocqueville and Democracy in America

- **Key Concepts:** Democracy as practiced in the United States.
 - **Readings:**
 - Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (on equality and individualism).
 - **Activities:**
 - Seminar discussion: Tocqueville's observations on American democracy.
 - Case study analysis: Comparing Tocqueville's insights to current U.S. democratic practices.
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Week 5: The Evolution of Democracy in the United States

- **Key Concepts:** Founding principles, branches of government, and political evolution.
 - **Readings:**
 - The U.S. Constitution (selected excerpts).
 - Federalist Papers No. 10 and 51 (on factions and checks and balances).
 - Danielle Allen, *Our Declaration* (selected chapters)
 - **Activities:**
 - Constitutional Convention debates.
 - Group discussion: How have political parties evolved over time?
 - Initiatives to improve democratic institutions.
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Week 6: • Key Concepts:

Democratic values in institutions and society; the importance of trust, inclusion, and public reasoning in sustaining democratic legitimacy.

- **Readings:**
 - Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (on social capital and civic engagement).
 - *Women and Leadership*.
 - Jürgen Habermas (selections from *Between Facts and Norms* or *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*): on the role of communicative action and deliberative democracy—highlighting how open, inclusive dialogue forms the normative foundation for legitimate democratic governance.
- **Activities:**
 - **Seminar:** The role of trust and community in democracy.
 - **Citizenship:** Definition
 - **Civil discourse exercise:** Engage in a structured dialogue modeled on Habermas' notion of rational-critical debate, emphasizing mutual respect, argument-based reasoning, and the goal of reaching understanding.

- **Reflective exercise:** Identify challenges to democratic values in today's society, including the erosion of public discourse and the need to rebuild shared spaces for democratic deliberation.
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Week 7: Democracy in the 21st Century

- **Key Concepts:** AI and Democracy in the 21st Century. Challenges, paradoxes, and vulnerabilities.
 - **Readings:**
 - Ronald Daniels, *What Universities Owe Democracy*
 - Ronald Dworkin, *Is Democracy Possible?*
 - Selected readings on misinformation, disinformation, and polarization in democratic societies.
 - **Activities:**
 - Debate: Is democracy still the best form of government?
 - Group project: Identify ways to strengthen democracy in the U.S.
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Week 8: Comparative Democracies Around the World

- **Key Concepts:** Different models of democracy and their effectiveness.
 - **Readings:**
 - Case studies:
 - Parliamentary democracy: UK and India.
 - Participatory democracy (Switzerland).
 - **Activities:**
 - Comparative analysis of democratic systems.
 - Brainstorm session: Lessons the U.S. can learn from other democracies.
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Week 9: Concept of Citizenship

- **Key Concepts:** Designing civic engagement projects. Citizenship in the age of AI
 - **Activities:**
 - **Democracy Project.**
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Week 10: Reflections

- **Key Concepts:** What we have learned. Sharing knowledge and fostering dialogue.
 - **Activities:**
 - Workshop on democracy.
 - Course evaluation and recommendations for future iterations.
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Assessment Methods:

1. **Participation: In class discussion/mock debates**
 2. **Reflection Papers**
 3. **Individual/Group Project/Democracy Project**
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Signature Assignment:

PHL 305 **Civicus: Advancing Civic Education**

Signature Assignment Overview:

Students will design and implement a civic engagement project that addresses a contemporary democratic issue of their choice. The project will involve **research, multimodal communication, engagement, and reflection**, integrating the philosophical, historical, and practical dimensions of democracy explored throughout the course.

Assignment Components:

1. **Issue Selection & Research (Identify & Develop Ideas)**
 - Students will choose a **current issue related to democracy** (e.g., voter participation, misinformation/disinformation, AI, political polarization, civil rights, freedom of speech...).
 - They will conduct **research on the historical, philosophical, and policy dimensions** of the issue, using academic sources, media analysis, and expert perspectives.
 - An **Analysis Report** will identify key groups affected by the issue and their perspectives.
2. **Communication Strategy (Express Ideas Through a Purposeful Medium)**
 - Students will develop a **multimodal communication plan** to raise awareness or advocate for a solution.
 - They must choose at least **two different media formats** to present their ideas effectively (e.g., written article, video, social media campaign, infographic, podcast, public speech).
 - The project must **adapt messages** to different audiences, considering cultural contexts, ethical implications, and rhetorical strategies.
3. **Implementation & Public Engagement (Applying Theoretical Knowledge to Practice)**
 - Students will put their communication strategy into action by engaging with at least **one real-world audience** (e.g., presenting to a community group, launching a digital campaign, submitting a policy proposal to local officials).
 - Students will document audience reception, feedback, and engagement with their message.
4. **Analysis & Reflection (Explain & Evaluate Ideas Communicated by Others)**
 - Students will write a **critical reflection paper** analyzing the effectiveness of their communication strategy and ethical considerations.
 - They will evaluate the role of civic engagement in democracy and reflect on how their understanding of democratic participation has evolved.

Result:

- Research, Report & Analysis (5-7 pages)
- Communication Project (video, podcast, social media campaign, speech, or a combination)
- Public Engagement Documentation (interviews, feedback, social media analytics, etc.)
- Final Reflection Paper (3-5 pages)

Assessment Criteria:

Category	Criteria	Weight
Research & Analysis	Depth of research, understanding of historical and philosophical context, stakeholder analysis	25%
Communication Effectiveness	Clarity, audience adaptation, rhetorical strategies, multimodal creativity	25%
Civic Engagement	Thoughtful real-world application, engagement with a public audience, impact assessment	20%
Ethical & Critical Reflection	Evaluation of intent, influence, and impact; self-awareness in civic discourse	20%
Presentation & Organization	Clear, professional, well-structured materials	10%

Why This Assignment?

This **Signature Assignment** captures the essence of the course by combining **philosophical inquiry, historical analysis, communication strategies, and real-world civic action**. It ensures that students **do not just learn about democracy but actively participate in it**, fostering **critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and engaged citizenship**.

This may include participation in one of the Democracy Project summer trips.