

**Democracy and Social Science**  
**SS131.01**

**Prof. John Brehm**  
**Pick 502**  
**702-8075**  
**[jjbrehm@uchicago.edu](mailto:jjbrehm@uchicago.edu)**

What role should the social scientist play in a democracy? Should social scientists outline the facts and consequences of choices? Should social scientists adhere to the broad goals and values of the citizenry, or perhaps just a voting majority? Or should social scientists adopt a more active role as technocratic supervisors?

To the end of exploring these questions, this first quarter will begin by reading John Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems*, a work of political pragmatism which sets out to first identify what we mean by "democracy" and "the public," and to then consider how scientific elites might assist in remedying "the problems" of the public.

We will then turn to discussion of some of the basic methods that social scientists aim to contribute to a better understanding of democracy. We begin with the *deductive* approach common among economists (as well as some political scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists): start from a set of axiomatic assumptions about the nature of a democracy and deduce logical propositions that then follow.

We next turn to an *inductive* approach, exemplified by Robert Dahl's *Who Governs?* This book starts from a common worry of those who study city governance: just who is most influential over city decisions? The inductive method (especially common among political scientists and sociologists) starts from an existing empirical condition and attempts to discover law-like regularities.

We finish the course with an *ethnographic* approach, exemplified here by Jonathan Rieder's *Canarsie*, an intense observational study of the transformation of a particular neighborhood in Brooklyn from one with a largely liberal culture into one with a pro-Republican culture.

There are three required books:

- Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*
- Dahl, *Who Governs?*
- Rieder, *Canarsie*

Your assignments for this course will be a paper, completed in stages, a midterm exam, and a final exam. For your paper, we ask you to identify a recurring problem faced by democracy (in your discussion of Dewey), and then to discuss how each of the three approaches (deductive, inductive, ethnographic) would set out to systematically study the problem you propose in the first part. In your conclusion, you should make a case for which one of the methods is best suited to this problem, explaining why. You should plan to re-write your paper as you go along: Unidrafts won't earn very high grades. We will discuss details about the midterm and final as we proceed.

- Sept 27 Introduction
- Sept 29 *What is “the public?” What is the “state?”*
- Dewey, Ch. 1, 2
- Oct 4 *What is a “democratic” state? Where has the public gone?*
- Dewey, Ch. 3, 4
- Oct 6 *Where is the “Great Community?”*
- Dewey, Ch 5
- DRAFT #1 (DEWEY) DUE NO LATER THAN OCT 11**
- Oct 11 *The logic of deductive approaches; the logic of voting*
- Friedman, “The Methodology of Positive Economics”
  - Downs, Ch. 3
- Oct 13 *Voting cycles*
- Condorcet, “On the Constitution and Function of Provincial Assemblies, 1788”
  - Jonathan Levin and Barry Nalebuff, “An Introduction to Vote Counting Schemes”
- Oct 18 *Ideologies and Information*
- Downs, Ch. 7
  - delli Carpini and Keeter, *What Americans Don’t Know About Politics*, Ch. 2
- Oct 20 *Spatial models*
- Downs, Ch 8
  - Charles Plott, “Axiomatic Social Choice Theory: An Overview and Interpretations”
- Oct 25 *Rational abstention*
- Riker and Ordeshook, “A theory of the calculus of voting”
  - Federalist #10
  - Brian Barry, “Is Democracy Special?”

Oct 27                    **MIDTERM**

**DRAFT #2 (DEDUCTIVE METHODS) DUE NO LATER THAN NOV 1**

Nov 1                    *Oligarchy or pluralism?*

- All: Dahl, Ch. 1, 6, 7; Divide Dahl, Ch 2-5

Nov 3                    *Who has influence?*

- All: Dahl, Ch. 8, 12, 15; Divide Dahl 9-11, 15-18

Nov 8                    *Who has resources?*

- Dahl, Ch. 19-23

Nov 10                    *What results from influence and resources?*

- Dahl, Ch. 24, 25, 27, 28

**DRAFT #3 (INDUCTIVE METHODS) DUE NO LATER THAN NOV 15**

Nov 15                    *Early ethnography: Groups in America*

- Tocqueville, Ch. 4., “Political Association in America”
- *The Economist*, “The glue of society”
- Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, Ch. 9, “Against the Tide?”

Nov 17                    *Canarsie (Then)*

- Rieder, Ch. 1-4

Nov 22                    *Canarsie (Now)*

- Rieder, Ch 5-8

Nov 29                    *Abduction: A synthesis?*

- Dewey, Ch. 6

**DRAFT #4 (ETHNOGRAPHY, CONCLUSION) DUE NO LATER THAN NOV 29**