
Jackson, Steven J.

SI 532/732: Digital Government I:
Information Technology and Democratic Politics

School of Information, University of Michigan
Winter 2009 (1st term: Jan 13th-Mar 3rd)
Tuesdays, 4-7 pm

Instructor: Steven Jackson

OVERVIEW:

This 1.5 credit course is the first in a two-part sequence exploring contemporary practices, challenges, and opportunities at the intersection of information technology and democratic governance. Whereas the second course focuses on challenges and innovations in democratic administration, this first course focuses on theories and practices of democratic politics – and the shifting role of information technologies in shaping, transforming, and understanding these. The first half of the course seeks to ground contemporary discussions around IT and politics in various flavors of democratic, political, and social theory. The second half builds on this foundation to explore ways in which information and information technologies have come to support, constrain, and otherwise inflect a range of contemporary democratic practices.

REQUIRED TEXTS:


These books are available for purchase from Shaman Drum Bookstore on State Street (just off the far end of the diag), through most major online booksellers, and will also be available on 4-hour reserve through the Shapiro Undergraduate Library. Assigned passages from Gastil and Levine, along with all other assigned class readings, will also be made available in PDF format through the course Ctools site.

MSI REQUIREMENTS and EVALUATION (SI 532):

Book review + presentation -- 25%
Weekly small group exercises -- 20%
Seminar and small group participation -- 15%
Group project + presentation -- 40%

Book review + presentation:
Once during the term, each student will be required to complete a 1200-1500 word book review drawn from the list following each weekly reading set. This review should offer a concise summary of the main arguments, ideas, and organization of the book, and note its distinctive contributions to: a) the weekly reading set; and b) the themes of the course as a whole. (Note that this will require some judgement and selection on your part!). Individual book reviews are due in your Ctools drop box by 8 a.m. on the Monday immediately preceding the seminar in question. Before and/or after submitting your individual review, you will be required to work with 1-2 other students reviewing the same book to prepare a clear and concise in-class presentation of the book’s main arguments and contributions. These should be no more 4-5 minutes in length (this limit will be strictly enforced), and should consist of no more than 3 presentation slides. Both written reviews and presentations should be well argued, carefully organized, and professionally presented.

**Weekly small group exercises:**
Most or all SI532 classes will involve substantial portions of in-class small-group work, with groups assigned on a rotating basis. Each of these will carry specific deliverables, to be submitted by the group scribe on behalf of the group at the conclusion of each class session. More details on these exercises will be distributed on a week-by-week basis.

**Seminar and small group participation:**
Beyond the submitted small group assignments, students will be evaluated on their overall contributions to seminar and small group discussions. This constitutes a crucial and serious part of the work for the course; to be effective in it, students are expected to arrive in class having completed, thought carefully about, and ready to discuss the assigned readings. Students are also expected to have access to the readings in class, so please bring along whatever paper or electronic copies you might be working from. (For those shy to speak before the larger group, it should be noted that serious engagement in both the full seminar and small group discussions count towards successful completion of the participation grade).

**Group project:**
Beyond book reviews, weekly readings, and in-class exercises, the major piece of work for the class will consist of a final project proposal on a topic of your choosing. Working in groups of 3-5, students will be asked to develop a concrete project proposal that speaks to some democratic problem, limit, challenge or opportunity identified in or aligned with the theoretical and practical concerns of the course. The project description should be concrete and well-developed enough to be implementable *in principle* (but it is not required that the project be carried out for purposes of the class itself). The proposal should be professionally prepared and follow the rough format of a grant application made to a foundation, academic funder, or non-profit agency. It should clearly specify:

a) the democratic problem, lack, or challenge the project is meant to address (including where relevant references to readings and arguments from the course, or parallel projects already existing in the world (be sure to specify how your project differs from and improves on any models it draws from);

b) the intellectual merit and/or likely broader impact of the proposed project (please be as specific and concrete as possible);
c) real or potential stakeholders; and
d) a clear plan of action for executing the project, including project timelines, personnel,
equipment needs or facilities, and budget (where relevant, project teams may also include
mock designs of technologies, systems, processes, etc.)

Project teams are welcome but not required to consult or work with existing organizations and
stakeholders in developing their project plans (this may help with proposal development, and
also improve the likelihood of eventual implementation). Project groups will be required to
work independently in identifying and developing these relationships, though Anthea and myself
will be happy to offer feedback, provide letters of introduction, etc.

In-class deliverables for the group project will take two principal forms:

• An 8-10 page (single-spaced) project description, prepared along the lines outlined
  above; and
• A 1-page project poster of the sort typically presented at academic conferences and non-
  profit events (conveying the overall shape and value of the project in a form compelling
  and readily accessible to a generalist audience)

Further guidelines and potential examples of both the project proposal and poster will be shared
in class.

Given the shortness of the term, students are encouraged to start thinking of potential projects,
topics, and groups early. Students may self-select into groups up until the second week of class
(Jan 20th); after this, Anthea and I will sort all remaining students into groups, on the basis of a
highly scientific survey of skills and interests (though ultimate decisions around topics will
remain the strict responsibility of the groups themselves).

Due dates: A preliminary (1-page) sketch of the project will be due in class on Tuesday, February
10th (Anthea and I will review and give feedback on these proposals by Friday, Feb 13th). Final
proposals and posters will be due in class on Tuesday, March 3rd.

**DOCTORAL REQUIREMENTS (SI 732):**

Seminar participation 20%
Weekly reading notes 20%
Research paper 60%

Note: Doctoral students enrolled in 732 do NOT have the option of taking 532/533 separately;
accordingly, the requirements noted below extend across the full semester (i.e. both 532 and
533). Doctoral students enrolled in the class will be expected to complete all regularly assigned
readings and participate actively in all weekly seminar and small-group discussions. Additional
readings in the student’s particular area of research activity may be determined in consultation
with the instructor. In the weeks where options are listed (‘plus ONE of the following’), it is
recommended that doctoral students read two or more of the optional readings. Doctoral
students will also post approximately 2-3 single-spaced pages of reading notes to the discussion
section of the C-Tools site each week, summarizing key arguments, contributions, and questions
raised by the weekly reading set (the precise form and style of these may vary, and will be
negotiated on an individual basis between student and instructor). These notes will not be individually graded, but WILL be reviewed on an ongoing basis prior to class; I will try to return comments and thoughts about form and/or major content of these 2-3 times throughout the term (if you have concerns about the form and content of these, you are also welcome to contact me with questions or for feedback). The major piece of doctoral student work for the course will consist of a substantial research paper (25-30 pages double-spaced) in an area related to either or both of the 532 and 533 content; precise topics should be chosen and developed in consultation with me. Doctoral students will NOT be required to participate in the 532 project proposals or to complete formal book reviews, but the WILL participate in and contributed to all other aspects of small group work (though they won’t receive a grade for any of the in-class graded assignments).
READINGS AND WEEKLY SCHEDULE:

**January 13th – Introduction and Overview**

**January 20th – Deliberative Democracy and its Discontents (pt 1)**
*Plus ONE of the following:*

**Book reviews:**
Robert Dahl, *On Democracy*
John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*
Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*
Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*

**January 27th – Deliberative Democracy and its Discontents (pt 2)**
**guest lecture: Scott Aikens, eDemocracy.org**
*Plus ONE of the following:*

**Book reviews:**
Iris Marion-Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*
Peter Levine, *The Future of Democracy: Developing the Next Generation of American Citizens*
Archon Fung, *Empowered Participation: Reinventing Urban Democracy*
Nina Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life*

**February 3rd – Building Democratic Publics**

*Plus ONE of the following:*

**Book reviews:**
Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*
Cass Sunstein, *Republic.com*
Diana Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative vs. Participatory Democracy*

**February 10th – Power, Advocacy, and Mobilization: Social Movements**
Mario Diani and Doug McAdam, *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action* (excerpt)
Gerald Davis et. al., eds. *Social Movements and Organization Theory* (excerpt)

*Plus ONE of the following:*

Book reviews:
Charles Tilly, Social Movements, 1768-2004
Sidney Tarrow, The New Transnational Activism
Howard Rheingold, Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution

February 17th – Power, Advocacy, and Mobilization: Electoral Politics
*** group project sketches due ***

Book reviews:
Bruce Bimber, Information and American Democracy: Technology in the Evolution of Political Power
Philip Howard, New Media Campaigns and the Managed Citizen
Kirsten Foot and Steven Schneider, Web Campaigning
Nowell Feld and Nate Wilcox, Netroots Rising: How a Citizen Army of Bloggers and Online Activists is Changing American Politics

March 3rd – Projects, Review & Makeup
No assigned readings. Students are asked to review the project proposals of other groups, available through the Discussion section of the class Ctools site.
*** final project presentations ***