

AS.196 (AGORA INSTITUTE)

Courses

AS.196.110. Big Data and Social Media: Behavior, Ethics, and Civic Engagement. 1 Credit.

Curious about how big data and social media shape democracy and everyday life? This course offers an interdisciplinary exploration of big data, focusing on its applications and ethical concerns at the intersection of neuroscience, psychology, civic engagement, and data security. You'll examine how algorithms and big data influence brain function, behavior, and political polarization. The course addresses ethical implications such as privacy, misinformation, and security, alongside the role of social media in shaping democratic processes. Through hands-on programming in Python, you'll manipulate large datasets, with a final project exploring data's role in democracy, entertainment, safety, or social media. Discussions and quizzes will cover broader societal and ethical impacts, providing a well-rounded understanding of data origins, analysis, and use in civic life. This course is ideal for students interested in careers in computer science, data science, neuroscience, psychology, cybersecurity and civic engagement. No prior coding experience is required.

Distribution Area: Humanities, Quantitative and Mathematical Sciences
AS Foundational Abilities: Science and Data (FA2), Citizens and Society (FA4)

EN Foundational Abilities: Engagement with Society (FA4)

AS.196.201. Introduction to Civic Life. 3 Credits.

What does it take for people to engage productively as informed, skilled, and effective members of democratic communities and the world? Whether we are scientists, doctors, engineers, advocates, public servants, or anything else, we are all members of pluralistic communities. This introductory course seeks to introduce students to the theory and principles of civic life and the rights and responsibilities of active citizenship. We'll examine the history of and struggles for freedom, inclusion, and civic participation, the role of information, deliberation, and free expression in the public sphere, and the threats and opportunities for global democracy. Students will read and discuss materials by civic studies and democracy scholars, building a foundational understanding of civic life across disciplines and perspectives. Many of these scholars and practitioners will appear in class to discuss their work directly with students. The course will pay particular attention to the ways that students from all backgrounds can apply these ideas in their everyday lives, regardless of the professions they pursue. This course is also the first course for students interested in minoring in the SNF Agora Institute Minor on Civic Life, but is designed to inspire a commitment to participation in civic life for all students, including those who do not major or minor in related fields.

Distribution Area: Social and Behavioral Sciences

AS Foundational Abilities: Citizens and Society (FA4), Democracy (FA4.1), Ethics and Foundations (FA5)

EN Foundational Abilities: Engagement with Society (FA4)

AS.196.211. Is the U.S. Congress representative? Is America democratic?. 2 Credits.

Alexander Hamilton (in Federalist No. 9) recognized "the representation of the people in the legislature by deputies of their own election" as one of the distinctively modern innovations of government that set the United States up for success. In this short course, we will begin with some big picture questions about the origins and logic of representative democracy, including the question of what duties elected officials owe to their constituents. We will then consider whether contemporary American political institutions live up to our ideals. Do anti-majoritarian practices such as the filibuster and judicial review represent unacceptable deviations from democracy? Why do so many Americans find our government so offensively unrepresentative? Philip Wallach is one of the country's leading thinkers about Congress and its place in America's constitutional system. The Wall Street Journal named his 2023 book, *Why Congress*, one of the year's best on politics. He has been writing about what leads people to accept policies as legitimate since his first book, *To the Edge: Legality, Legitimacy, and the Responses to the 2008 Financial Crisis* (2015). He is currently a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, and previously worked at the Brookings Institution and as a Fellow for the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress.

AS Foundational Abilities: Citizens and Society (FA4), Democracy (FA4.1), Ethics and Foundations (FA5)

EN Foundational Abilities: Engagement with Society (FA4)

AS.196.301. Social Entrepreneurship and Democratic Erosion. 3 Credits.

This course will explore the dynamics and interplay between social entrepreneurship, social change, and policy. Students will explore this specific moment in our democracy, and contextualize erosion happening in international and domestic contexts. The course will examine the intersection between social change and policy change, examining how the two concepts intersect while focusing on the end goal of systems change and furthering democracy. Students will examine different case studies of social transformation (or proposed social transformation) from across the United States and world. Guest speakers will include diverse practitioners of social entrepreneurship who think about long-term pathways to transformative social change, and dynamic policymakers. While the course will include case studies on broader domestic and international challenges and models of democratic erosion, a larger focus will be on specific local social problems and solutions. This will manifest through class discussions and a final project based on the surrounding community.

Distribution Area: Humanities, Social and Behavioral Sciences

AS Foundational Abilities: Writing and Communication (FA1), Citizens and Society (FA4), Democracy (FA4.1), Ethics and Foundations (FA5)

EN Foundational Abilities: Engagement with Society (FA4)

Writing Intensive

AS.196.302. Science and Democracy. 3 Credits.

What role does scientific expertise play (or not play) in American democracy? What role should scientific expertise play (or not play) in American democracy? These are the key questions we'll address in this class, focusing on a wide range of examples such as government responses to public health crises, environmental crises, and war. We'll tackle these questions from multiple angles, drawing on ideas from across the social sciences, including political science, psychology, sociology, economics, history, and communication. We'll focus largely on the United States, though in some cases compare the US experience with other democracies to understand how unique aspects of our democratic institutions influence the link between science and democracy.

Distribution Area: Humanities, Social and Behavioral Sciences

AS Foundational Abilities: Science and Data (FA2), Citizens and Society (FA4), Democracy (FA4.1), Projects and Methods (FA6)

EN Foundational Abilities: Engagement with Society (FA4)

AS.196.304. Democratic Challenges. 3 Credits.

Modern democracies like the U.S. are undergoing severe challenges from within and elsewhere. Internally, many of their citizens are newly skeptical of democracy, believing for example that elections are rigged. Outside, they face new competition from authoritarian systems such as China's government, which show no signs of converging towards democracy, and offer a possible alternative system of rule. Finally, democracies also have to engage with new policy challenges, such as racial justice and climate change. In this course, we will draw upon the collective wisdom of faculty at Johns Hopkins' new SNF Agora Institute, to understand better the political challenges that democracy faces, and the policy challenges that it has to respond to. We will put modern democratic challenges in their appropriate historical context. Has America really been a democracy in the past? We will ask about the social and political conditions under which democracy does well, and under which it fails. Finally, we will look at the new agenda of questions that democracy faces, and the means that it can draw on to confront them.

Distribution Area: Humanities

AS Foundational Abilities: Writing and Communication (FA1), Citizens and Society (FA4), Democracy (FA4.1), Ethics and Foundations (FA5)

Writing Intensive

AS.196.306. Democracy by the Numbers. 3 Credits.

How is democracy doing around the world? This course will help students to answer this question and ask their own questions about political systems by examining a variety of quantitative measures of facets of democracy in the U.S. and internationally. We consider general indices as well as those that focus on specific normatively-appealing aspects—the absence of fraud in and broader integrity of the electoral process itself, the guarantees of fundamental human rights to all, governments' effectiveness and accountability to the public, the equity of both representation and policy outcomes for minority groups and those historically disadvantaged or excluded, and the possibility and extent of civic engagement in non-government institutions. Wherever possible, the course will present evidence about the kinds of institutions and policies that seem to bolster democracy. Students can expect to gain hands-on experience with publicly-available subnational and national indicators of electoral and democratic quality.

Distribution Area: Humanities, Social and Behavioral Sciences

AS Foundational Abilities: Science and Data (FA2), Citizens and Society (FA4), Democracy (FA4.1)

EN Foundational Abilities: Engagement with Society (FA4)

AS.196.308. Voting Power: How to Win Policy Reform in The U.S. Election Ecosystem. 3 Credits.

"Voting Power: How to Win Policy Reform in The Election Ecosystem" is an interdisciplinary SNF Agora seminar course designed to provide students with a background on the Voting Wars, and a comprehensive exploration of U.S. elections over the past twenty-five years. The instructor has served in leadership roles in the executive branch, Chief Counsel of the Senate Rules Committee, help start a new foundation focused on Democracy issues and worked for the oldest voting rights organization in the country. The course examines the roles and interactions of government actors, nonprofit advocates, philanthropic funders, and media organizations in shaping electoral policies and outcomes. Through a focus on how these stakeholders utilize levers of power to impact change, students will develop the skills necessary to critically evaluate electoral issues, develop strategic advocacy approaches, and engage in informed discourse about the future of U.S. elections. While the approach is focused on the content and subject matter of election reform, the tactics and tools developed as part of the classwork will allow students to analyze and develop strategies to tackle other problems from a 'systems lens'. By working together in small groups, students will plan campaigns to win reform by utilizing a systems approach in the class to tackle desired election reform.

AS Foundational Abilities: Citizens and Society (FA4), Ethics and Foundations (FA5), Projects and Methods (FA6)

EN Foundational Abilities: Engagement with Society (FA4)

AS.196.310. Fighting the Information War: Democracy, Autocracy and the Battle of Narratives in the 20th and 21st Centuries. 3 Credits.

Once, many believed the information revolution would undermine autocracies and energize democracies. Instead, we live in an era of unprecedented disinformation, propaganda and media manipulation. Can we reverse these developments? How do we fight back? This course will look at examples of propaganda and disinformation in the past, especially in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, as well as the present: Russia, Latin America, Europe, and the US. We will analyze how our information environment has been transformed, and think about how to create alternatives that will help deliberative democracy flourish.

Prerequisite(s): Students may earn credit for AS.196.310 or AS.196.610 or AS.196.364, but not all three.

Distribution Area: Social and Behavioral Sciences

AS Foundational Abilities: Citizens and Society (FA4), Democracy (FA4.1)

AS.196.311. Democracy. 3 Credits.

Democracies around the world are under threat. This course introduces students to the philosophical foundations of democracy as well as the history of democratic revolutions, institutions, and principles. How can we defeat the most important contemporary challenges to democracy, including populism, authoritarianism and disinformation? And how can we revive the "democratic spirit" - in America and around the world?

Distribution Area: Humanities

AS Foundational Abilities: Citizens and Society (FA4), Democracy (FA4.1), Ethics and Foundations (FA5)

AS.196.320. Civic Life Seminar. 2 Credits.

The Civic Life Seminar engages with foundational questions of civic life and supports students in developing and practicing skills that are needed for active citizenship. At the heart of these activities is the need to work with others to tackle problems in communities we care about, and so students will become well-versed in principles of collective action, communication, and the science of collaboration. Weekly meetings will involve a mix of reading, presentations by guest speakers, discussion, and reflection. As part of the Minor in Civic Life, students take this seminar class for two semesters. Those taking it for the first time will engage in several relatively-short community engagement activities in which they practice putting ideas from the class into practice. Those taking it for the second time will be taking it as a capstone class, and be required to independently develop, implement, and present a more extensive community engagement project.

AS Foundational Abilities: Citizens and Society (FA4), Democracy (FA4.1), Ethics and Foundations (FA5)

EN Foundational Abilities: Engagement with Society (FA4)

AS.196.325. AI and Democracy. 3 Credits.

How will the advent of AI affect democracy in the US and elsewhere? And how should democratic principles shape technologies such as AI? In this course, we will explore the potential consequences of technologies such as large language models for democratic culture and institutional stability. We will investigate whether we ought incorporate democratic values into the design of AI, to address problems such as bias and safety. We will discuss the new questions that arise as AI agents become active in society, and the consequences for employment. Finally, we will examine how or whether democracies ought govern AI and related technologies.

Distribution Area: Social and Behavioral Sciences

AS Foundational Abilities: Citizens and Society (FA4), Democracy (FA4.1), Ethics and Foundations (FA5)

EN Foundational Abilities: Engagement with Society (FA4)

AS.196.326. How to Beat Autocrats: lessons from the front lines in the battles to defend democracies. 3 Credits.

Dictators have changed. No longer wedded to ideology, they now use corruption, disinformation and surveillance to cement control. But those who fight them are adapting too. This course will cover the latest stories and lessons from the global battles against autocracy. From Brazil to Georgia, Russia to Zimbabwe and China, we will meet the activists, politicians, campaigners and journalists who are reinventing how to take on autocrats in the 21st century. Students will then apply these lessons to the US. What can we learn from Russian activists' battle against corruption, for example, for America today? The aim of this course is to familiarize students with the evolving tactics of autocrats and democratic activists, and use that to understand the strengths and weaknesses of American democracy- and how we can defend it. The course will be taught by Anne Applebaum, Peter Pomerantsev, and Denise Dresser. It will feature regular special guests from the front lines of campaigns against autocrats, followed by workshops where students will apply international lessons to the US. As a final paper students will produce a proposal for a campaign to defend democracy in the US.

AS Foundational Abilities: Citizens and Society (FA4), Democracy (FA4.1), Ethics and Foundations (FA5)

EN Foundational Abilities: Engagement with Society (FA4)

AS.196.363. Populism and Politics. 3 Credits.

Around the world, from Italy to Brazil, and from Hungary to the United States, populist candidates are fundamentally changing the political landscape. In this course, we explore the nature of populism; investigate whether populism poses an existential threat to liberal democracy; explore the causes of the populist rise; investigate the ways in which populism is a response to demographic change; and discuss what strategies might allow non-populist political actors to push back.

Distribution Area: Social and Behavioral Sciences

AS Foundational Abilities: Writing and Communication (FA1), Citizens and Society (FA4), Democracy (FA4.1), Ethics and Foundations (FA5)

EN Foundational Abilities: Engagement with Society (FA4)

Writing Intensive

AS.196.364. This is Not Propaganda. 3 Credits.

We live in an era of 'disinformation' mass persuasion and media manipulation run amok. More information was meant to improve democracy and undermine authoritarian regimes- instead the opposite seems to be happening. This course will take you from Russia to South Asia, Europe to the US, to analyze how our information environment has been transformed, why our old formulae for resisting manipulation are failing, and what needs to be done to create a model where deliberative democracy can flourish.

Prerequisite(s): Students who took AS.191.364, AS.196.310, OR AS.196.610 are not eligible to take AS.196.364.

Distribution Area: Social and Behavioral Sciences

AS Foundational Abilities: Writing and Communication (FA1), Citizens and Society (FA4), Democracy (FA4.1), Ethics and Foundations (FA5)

EN Foundational Abilities: Engagement with Society (FA4)

Writing Intensive

AS.196.420. Civic Life Capstone. 3 Credits.

The Civic Life Capstone engages with foundational questions of civic life and supports students in developing frameworks for and practicing skills that are needed for active citizenship. Weekly sessions will involve a mix of reading, presentations by guest speakers, discussion, and reflection. Capstone students will be required to independently develop, implement, and present a civic engagement project.

Prerequisite(s): AS.196.201 AND AS.196.320

AS Foundational Abilities: Writing and Communication (FA1), Citizens and Society (FA4), Projects and Methods (FA6)

EN Foundational Abilities: Engagement with Society (FA4)

AS.196.435. Democratic Strategies in an Age of Information Conflict. 3 Credits.

This course examines how democracies can respond to propaganda, covert influence, and political warfare. Co-taught by instructors with experience in journalism, intelligence, and policy, the course combines theory with practice, asking what democratic resilience looks like in an era of global information confrontation. Drawing on historical and contemporary case studies—from World War II black radio and Cold War psyops to modern-day Ukraine and recent U.S. elections—the course explores tools and strategies that can be employed today across government, technology platforms, and civil society.

Distribution Area: Social and Behavioral Sciences

AS Foundational Abilities: Citizens and Society (FA4), Democracy (FA4.1), Ethics and Foundations (FA5)

EN Foundational Abilities: Engagement with Society (FA4)

AS.196.500. Independent Study. 1 - 3 Credits.

This is an independent reading and research course at the undergraduate level on topics related to democracy, measurement, and/or social statistics. Registration and syllabus must be agreed upon in advance and prior to College add deadlines, and must include contact hours requisite to the credit level.

Prerequisite(s): You must request Customized Academic Learning using the Customized Academic Learning form found in Student Self-Service: Registration > Online Forms.

AS Foundational Abilities: Science and Data (FA2), Projects and Methods (FA6)

AS.196.502. SNF Agora Institute Student Research Internship. 1 - 3 Credits.

This student research internship offers undergraduates an opportunity to engage in collaborative research with an SNF Agora faculty member or SNF Agora Visiting Fellow.

Prerequisite(s): You must request Customized Academic Learning using the Customized Academic Learning form found in Student Self-Service: Registration > Online Forms.

AS Foundational Abilities: Citizens and Society (FA4), Projects and Methods (FA6)

EN Foundational Abilities: Engagement with Society (FA4)

AS.196.505. Internship - Disinformation. 1 Credit.

This course requires instructor approval. There will be administrative work to complete with some hands-on field research.

Prerequisite(s): You must request Customized Academic Learning using the Customized Academic Learning form found in Student Self-Service: Registration > Online Forms.

AS Foundational Abilities: Citizens and Society (FA4), Projects and Methods (FA6)

EN Foundational Abilities: Engagement with Society (FA4)

AS.196.600. Data-analysis for Social Science & Public Policy I. 2 Credits.

We will gain experience with data-analysis geared towards understanding the social world. Our scope ranges from simple descriptions and predictions under strong assumptions to intervention analyses that provide a more trustworthy foundation for quantifying causal effects. The course will be offered in a hybrid modality and will have a heavy focus on computation. We will alternate between discussion sessions devoted to fundamental concepts, and lab sessions devoted to a combination of web- and instructor-led data-analyses. Whenever possible, examples using both R and Stata and using a range of national and cross-national data-sources relevant to the study of democracy will be provided.

Distribution Area: Humanities, Social and Behavioral Sciences

AS.196.601. Data-analysis for Social Science & Public Policy II. 2 Credits.

We will gain experience with data-analysis geared towards understanding the social world. Our scope ranges from simple descriptions and predictions under strong assumptions to intervention analyses that provide a more trustworthy foundation for quantifying causal effects. The course will be offered in a hybrid modality and will have a heavy focus on computation. We will alternate between discussion sessions devoted to fundamental concepts, and lab sessions devoted to a combination of web- and instructor-led data-analyses. Whenever possible, examples using both R and Stata and using a range of national and cross-national data-sources relevant to the study of democracy will be provided.

Distribution Area: Social and Behavioral Sciences

AS.196.602. Engaged Research with Community Organizers. 2 Credits.

This seminar is designed to provide students with an overview to one approach to conducting publicly-oriented, academically-rigorous, community-engaged, reflexive research with organizers. Learning how to do this kind of work is a craft; as with all research, there is no formula for doing it well. Instead, researchers have to develop motivational, ethical, conceptual, and technical capacities: to do the work well, researchers must want to do the work; they must develop an ethical framework and a set of animating values; they must understand the theory and concepts that underpin reflexive research; and they must have the technical skills necessary for carrying out the research. In other words, as with many complex capabilities, there is a head, hands, and heart component to the research. This seminar is designed to introduce students to all of these aspects of the work and equip those who are interested to practice doing a concrete project. It is important to emphasize, however, that because doing this work is a craft, we expect that this is one part of an ongoing journey— not the end.

AS.196.610. Fighting the Information War: Democracy, Autocracy & the Battle of Narratives in the 20 & 21 Century. 3 Credits.

Once, many believed the information revolution would undermine autocracies and energize democracies. Instead, we live in an era of unprecedented disinformation, propaganda and media manipulation. Can we reverse these developments? How do we fight back? This course will look at examples of propaganda and disinformation in the past, especially in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, as well as the present: Russia, Latin America, Europe, and the US. We will analyze how our information environment has been transformed, and think about how to create alternatives that will help deliberative democracy flourish.

Prerequisite(s): Students who took AS.196.364 OR AS.196.310 are not eligible to take AS.196.610.

Distribution Area: Social and Behavioral Sciences

AS.196.635. Democratic Strategies in an Age of Information Conflict. 3 Credits.

This course examines how democracies can respond to propaganda, covert influence, and political warfare. Co-taught by instructors with experience in journalism, intelligence, and policy, the course combines theory with practice, asking what democratic resilience looks like in an era of global information confrontation. Drawing on historical and contemporary case studies—from World War II black radio and Cold War psyops to modern-day Ukraine and recent U.S. elections—the course explores tools and strategies that can be employed today across government, technology platforms, and civil society.

AS.196.801. Independent Study. 1 - 3 Credits.

This is an independent reading and research course at the graduate level on topics related to democracy, measurement, and/or social statistics. Registration and syllabus must be agreed upon in advance and prior to College add deadlines, and must include contact hours requisite to the credit level.

AS.196.805. Graduate Internship - Disinformation. 3 - 9 Credits.

This course requires instructor approval. There will be administrative work to complete with some hands-on field research.