

Section B. Proposal Narrative

1. Title

Political Philosophy and the Crisis of Democracy

2. UTA Assignment

In the Department of Philosophy, there are three undergraduate courses that are related to political philosophy: PHIL 3700, PHIL 3730, and PHIL 5700. PHIL 3700 is a general survey of political philosophy, while PHIL 3730 mainly covers international justice and affairs. PHIL 5700 is an advanced political philosophy course that is traditionally taught by tenure-line professors. In this project, I propose a lower-level political philosophy course that differs from all three political philosophy courses just mentioned.

What is original about this course is that it aims to discuss and evaluate liberal democracy, especially American democracy, from a comparative philosophical perspective. While the course will draw on abundant philosophical texts about democracy in the Western tradition, it will also choose the so-called “China model” as a reference, and focus on ancient Chinese philosophical texts that deeply influenced this model, as a basis for comparison. The other novel aspect is that in addition to the intellectual orientation of philosophy, this course will also integrate diverse tools from disciplines such as history, political science, and law. Rather than persuading students to endorse any particular model of government, this course’s first objective is to help students develop their own thinking about liberal democracy, from both *internal* and *external* perspectives. Its second objective is to help students consider some pressing problems faced by American democracy and possible solutions to these problems.

To see the value of this course, let me briefly describe the relevant historical context. In 1989, after the Berlin Wall fell, political theorist Francis Fukuyama famously argued that human beings had witnessed the end of history and Western liberal democracy would become the final form of human government. After several decades, has Fukuyama’s prediction come true? Obviously not! While many countries have failed to become or remain democratic, some undemocratic countries performed very well in many aspects. In particular, due to its merit-based (though undemocratic) political system, the Chinese government has had unprecedented economic success, and it also has excelled in many other aspects such as technology innovation, poverty eradication, and transition to green energy. Some political scholars have characterized the way Chinese government has succeeded as the “China Model.” While such undemocratic states have created a great challenge to Western liberal democracy *externally*, many Western liberal democratic states also face difficulties *internally*. In particular, America, as the “beacon” of Western liberal democracy in the past decades, has been swamped by pressing social issues (such as ideological polarization, poverty, environmental distress, etc.) that its government has struggled to deal with. During the pandemic, there were only about 90,000 infected cases and around 4,600 people who died from Covid-19 in China, whereas in America, more than 23 million people were infected and more than 250,000 people have died from it. Does this difference show the China Model is succeeding, while the Western Model is failing? What should we think of this difference in outcome?

These two questions also lead to a number of critical questions about liberal democracy. What is the value of liberal democracy? Is it good because it ensures self-government? Or is it good because it ensures effective government? Can liberal democracy be conceptually justified to be superior? In addition to these intellectual questions, we ask questions related to the realities of democracy. What should we learn from ways that the China model outperforms American democracy? Does this mean that, as some Western scholars (e.g., Daniel Bell) have recently advocated, liberal democracy is deeply irreparable and thus we should switch to other modes of governance such as the China model instead? Or, less pessimistically, do perhaps all these problems merely indicate a temporary political decay of liberal democracy and can we make changes to make it perform better?

Thus, the proposed course will engage with students in novel ways. By assessing cross-cultural philosophical texts, students are expected to reflect critically on liberal democracy. Moreover, I hope to invite professors who study comparative politics and Chinese politics from the Department of Political Science at our university. By relying on local expertise and using diverse disciplinary tools, students are expected to obtain a good understanding of the theoretical justifications for American democracy and to come up with their own opinion about how we can fix its potential shortcomings.