Democracy in America: Politics and Vision
Political Science 121      Fall Term 2004      Tuesday and Thursday, 12:30-1:45
Instructor: James Johnson   Office Hours: Tuesday 9:30-11:00 & By Appointment
Harkness Hall 314   275-0622   jd.johnson@mail.rochester.edu

Democracy literally means “rule by the people.” This seminar in political theory will explore various questions that this basic definition raises in the context of 20th Century American politics. What can we expect of “the people”? How, indeed, do we even envision “the people?” What is the role of communication, especially modern media, in creating and sustaining “the people?” How might we think about the ways in which power and communication intersect in modern democracies?

In many respects this course is experimental. It aims to draw connections between texts and theorists that, to the best of my knowledge, have not been made before. So we will be exploring new terrain. I hope in this way to get you to see what it means to think like a political theorist!

Enrollment is restricted to freshmen - no exceptions. Grades will be based on class participation - given that this is a small seminar be prepared to talk! - and three short papers (meaning @ five pages each) on assigned topics that emerge from the readings and class discussion.

Readings: The reading load for the course is heavy both in terms of the sheer number of pages assigned and in terms of difficulty. There is no “textbook” for the course that provides pre-digested recipes or correct answers. Instead the assigned readings are meant to provoke questions and (often contentious) discussion. This means that I expect that you have done readings before class and that you come to class with questions, complaints, observations and elaborations of various sorts. I have ordered all the books (marked *) at the University bookstore. Other papers/book chapters will be placed on reserve in the library.

(1) “Realism” About Democracy?
Michael X Delli Carpini & Scott Keeter. 1996. What Americans Know About Politics and Why it Matters. Yale. (Chapters 2,5,6)

(2) Pragmatism & Democracy
Charles Peirce. 1877. “The Fixation of Belief”

(3) Picturing a Public in America circa 1935

(4) How a Public can Picture Itself

(5) Picturing Aggregates


(6) Media & Democratic Politics


(7) Power & Communication