

Political Epistemology

PHIL 450 · Fall 2026

Instructor	Robert Gressis
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Office hours	Thursdays, 9:00 AM to 12:00 PM, Sierra Tower 527
Meetings	Mondays & Wednesdays, 2:30 PM to 3:45 PM, Goodman Hall 110
Prerequisite	Six units of philosophy

Course description

Politics is where people disagree most and change their minds least. This course asks whether that fact calls for an epistemology of its own — whether political beliefs are formed, justified, and revised differently from other beliefs, and if so, what follows.

We work through Oliver Traldi's *Political Beliefs: A Philosophical Introduction* as the spine of the course, and pair it throughout with the primary texts it draws on and argues against: Carl Schmitt, Karl Marx, Tommie Shelby, Miranda Fricker, F. A. Hayek, John Rawls, W. K. Clifford and William James, and others. Traldi's chapters are short and synthesizing; the primary readings supply the depth and the counterpressure. A recurring theme of the course is what happens at the seam between them — where a book states a position accurately and then argues against it without anyone in the room to answer back.

Topics include: what a political belief is; verbal disputes and deep disagreement; ideology and standpoint; epistemic injustice; debunking arguments and peer disagreement; the epistemic case for democracy; expertise and testimony; the ethics of belief; liberal neutrality; polarization and echo chambers; conspiracy theories, propaganda, and fake news; and the relationship between political epistemology and the philosophy of history.

Student learning outcomes

By the end of the course, you should be able to:

SLO1: State a philosophical position fairly and in its own terms, distinguishing what a view claims from whether it succeeds.

SLO2: Reconstruct and evaluate arguments in social and political epistemology, including formal ones.

SLO3: Identify where an author's framing is doing argumentative work that the argument itself has not earned.

SLO4: Apply epistemological concepts — testimony, disagreement, debunking, expertise, independence — to live political phenomena.

SLO5: Write a sustained philosophical essay that defends a position against its strongest opposition.

Texts

Oliver Traldi, *Political Beliefs: A Philosophical Introduction* (Routledge, 2024). Physical copies are available at the Campus Bookstore. A free PDF is available on this course's Canvas website.

All other readings are provided on Canvas or are freely available online.

Assessment

Component	Weight
Participation — leading discussion (once during the term)	6%
Participation — ongoing contribution	9%
Reading responses (credit/no-credit; best 10 of 14)	15%
Midterm examination (Monday, October 12)	25%
Term essay (workshop Wednesday, November 4; due Monday, December 14)	45%

Reading responses (15%)

Most weeks you will write a short response to one of that week's readings.

What to write: 250–400 words on any one reading assigned that week. This is not a summary. A good response does one of these things: presses on an argument you think fails; defends a view the author dismisses; identifies an assumption the author needs but does not defend; or connects the reading to something we read earlier. One idea, developed, beats four observations.

When: By 8:00 PM the evening before the class session on that reading, posted to Canvas where your classmates can read them.

How they are graded: Credit/no-credit. You receive credit for a response that engages the reading substantively, meets the word count, and arrives on time.

How many: There are fourteen response-eligible weeks, but I will count only your ten best. The week of the midterm is exempt.

Because four responses are already dropped, *there is no late policy and no need to explain a missed week*. If you are ill, travelling, or buried in the term essay, use a drop. Four is generous by design; it is also the whole allowance, so spend it deliberately.

I will read these before class and often build discussion around them. Writing a good one is the most reliable way to shape what we spend our time on.

Participation (15%)

Participation in this course means two distinct things, graded separately.

Leading discussion — 6%

Once during the term you will open a class session. You will sign up for a date in the first two weeks; sessions are claimed first-come, so choose a reading you actually want to spend time with.

You will prepare a one-page handout, circulated to the class by 8:00 p.m. the night before, containing three things:

- One claim from the reading, stated fairly, in its own terms. Not the claim you find easiest to attack — the claim as its author would want it put. This is the hard part and it's the point.
- The strongest objection to that claim. Not the most obvious objection; the best one.
- Two questions for the class — one you think has an answer, and one you think does not. Say which is which.

In class you take the first fifteen minutes: walk us through the handout and open the floor. You are not lecturing and you are not expected to have resolved anything.

I will grade these into one of three bands: **strong**, **satisfactory**, or **incomplete**. Nearly everyone who does the work as described earns **satisfactory**, which is the intended outcome. **Strong** is reserved for handouts where the fair statement of the view is genuinely illuminating. **Incomplete** means the handout was missing, late, or did not attempt the first part.

Why the first part carries so much weight: this course spends fifteen weeks on a book that repeatedly states a position accurately and generously, then (usually) argues against it without anyone present to answer back. We will flag this as it happens. Requiring you to state a view fairly before you are allowed to hit it is the same discipline, asked of you. It is also most of what philosophical writing consists in.

Ongoing contribution — 9%

This is not a tally of how often you speak. I won't count. Twice during the term — around the midterm, and at the end — I will place you in one of four bands:

- **Excellent:** Consistently prepared. Contributes regularly and responds to classmates, not just to me. Takes up what someone else said and moves it somewhere. Engages seriously in small-group work and in our in-class experiments.
- **Good:** Prepared. Contributes with some regularity. Engaged in small-group work and in-class exercises.
- **Adequate:** Present and attentive. Contributes occasionally, and participates when the format calls for it.
- **Insufficient:** Frequently absent, frequently unprepared, or disengaged when present.

Speaking in full-class discussion is one route among several, and not the privileged one. Substantive work in small groups and in our in-class experiments counts. Engaging with a classmate's posted reading response counts. Questions count, including questions that admit confusion — a well-placed "I don't see why that follows" can be worth more than a comment placed to be heard (as long as you explain *why* you don't see why that follows!).

If speaking in a room of twenty-two is difficult for you, come see me early in the term. There are other routes, and this rubric is written so they count.

Two things you should expect from me. Around the midterm I will tell each of you, in one line, which band you are currently in — you will not learn your participation grade at the end of the term, when it is too late to act on it. And at each checkpoint I will ask you for two things: which band you think you are in, and why. I will take these seriously. If we disagree, we will be talking about evidence rather than impressions.

Attendance

Participation is not attendance, but there is no participating in absentia. More than four unexcused absences caps your participation band at **adequate**. As with the reading responses, four is generous and four is all there is — I won't adjudicate excuses, so save them for the things that actually come up.

Midterm (25%)

In class, Monday, October 12. It will cover chapters 1–13 of Traldi's *Political Beliefs* and all supplementary readings through session 12. Format and review materials distributed at session 13.

Term essay (45%)

Ten to twelve pages (2,500 to 3,000 words) on a topic of your choosing, developed in consultation with me. A draft is due for the workshop on **Wednesday, November 4**, where you will exchange work with classmates. The final version is due in the final examination slot.

The essay carries the largest share of your grade because it is the only part of this course that asks you to do political epistemology rather than report it. Start early; the workshop is far more useful with real drafts than with outlines.

Course policies

Academic integrity: a link to CSUN's policy on academic integrity is available here:

<https://www.csun.edu/student-conduct/academic-integrity>.

Accessibility and accommodations: If you have a disability and need accommodations, please register with Disability Resources and Educational Services (DRES). They will inform me of the accommodations to make for you. a link to DRES is available here: <https://www.csun.edu/dres>.

Generative AI: you may use generate AI such as ChatGPT to help you draft your final paper. However, your use of such AI must be collaborative, not passive. Just having it write a paper for you doesn't count as writing your paper. When you turn in your final paper, I will ask you to include an acknowledgement about whether you did or didn't use AI. If you did use AI, I will ask you for links to the discussions you used to write your paper, *so don't delete any conversations!* If I conclude that you have relied too much on AI, especially if you don't acknowledge that you used it (or don't acknowledge that you used it as much as you, in fact, did), then I will consider this a violation of academic integrity, and we will have to discuss the matter. Note that you are not to use AI in your reading responses.

Late work: Reading responses have no late policy; four drops are built in. For the essay, my policy is that if your essay is late, then it will suffer a 10% penalty unless you discuss an extension with me beforehand and I agree to that extension.

A note on this syllabus

In the fifteenth session of this course we will read a chapter on free speech and the marketplace of ideas, and one of the discussion questions asks whether rules of the kind that govern classroom discussion are a form of speech regulation — and if so, whether they are a defensible one.

We are going to run that question on this document (i.e., this syllabus). You will have read Mill, Hayek, and Goldman by then. The participation policy above is written to be defensible, and I will defend it. You are invited to quote it back at me.

Schedule of readings

Complete the reading before the session it is listed under. Where several texts appear, read them in the order given.

#	Date	Topic	Reading
1	Mon 8/24	Introduction	No assigned reading. In class: Traldi, Preface; Hannon & Woodard, Introduction
2	Wed 8/26	What political beliefs are	Traldi, chs. 1–3
3	Mon 8/31	The political	Schmitt, The Concept of the Political, §§1–3
4	Wed 9/2	Verbal disputes	Traldi, chs. 4–5
—	Mon 9/7	—	Labor Day: No Class
5	Wed 9/9	Deep disagreement	Fogelin, “The Logic of Deep Disagreements”
6	Mon 9/14	Ideology	Traldi, chs. 6–7; Marx & Engels, The German Ideology, “ruling ideas” excerpt
7	Wed 9/16	Ideology, continued	Shelby, “Ideology, Racism, and Critical Social Theory”
8	Mon 9/21	Motivated reasoning and expressivism	Traldi, chs. 8–11
9	Wed 9/23	Standpoint epistemology	Toole, “Recent Work in Standpoint Epistemology”
10	Mon 9/28	Epistemic injustice	Fricker, Epistemic Injustice, ch. 1
11	Wed 9/30	Debunking	Traldi, ch. 12; White, “You Just Believe That Because...”
12	Mon 10/5	Peer disagreement	Traldi, ch. 13; Christensen, “Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News”
13	Wed 10/7	Review	Midterm preparation. No new reading.
14	Mon 10/12	MIDTERM EXAMINATION	Covers chs. 1–13 and all supplementary readings to date
15	Wed 10/14	Epistemic democracy	Traldi, chs. 14–15
16	Mon 10/19	Democracy and dispersed knowledge	Hannon & Woodard, ch. 2; Hayek, “The Use of Knowledge in Society”
17	Wed 10/21	Expertise	Traldi, ch. 16
18	Mon 10/26	Trusting experts	Goldman, “Experts: Which Ones Should You Trust?” (excerpts)
19	Wed 10/28	The ethics of belief	Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” Part I; James, “The Will to Believe,” §§I–IV and IX–X; Traldi, ch. 17 (Read in that order.)
20	Mon 11/2	The epistemology of liberalism	Traldi, ch. 18; Rawls, Political Liberalism, Lecture II, §§1–3

#	Date	Topic	Reading
21	Wed 11/4	Essay workshop	Bring a draft. No assigned reading.
22	Mon 11/9	Polarization	Traldi, chs. 19–20
—	Wed 11/11	—	Veterans Day: No Class
23	Mon 11/16	Echo chambers	Nguyen, “Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles”
24	Wed 11/18	Conspiracy theories	Traldi, ch. 21; Cassam, “Bad Thinkers”
25	Mon 11/23	Propaganda and fake news	Traldi, chs. 22–23; Stanley, <i>How Propaganda Works</i> (excerpts)
26	Wed 11/25	Buffer	No assigned reading.
27	Mon 11/30	Political epistemology and history	Traldi, ch. 24 and Conclusion; Burke, “Reflections on the Revolution in France” (excerpts)
28	Wed 12/2	Moral progress	Moody-Adams, “The Idea of Moral Progress”
29	Mon 12/7	Review and synthesis	Re-read Traldi’s Conclusion (2 pp.).
30	Wed 12/9	Wrap-up	No assigned reading
—	Mon 12/14	TERM ESSAY DUE	No final examination

This schedule is subject to adjustment; any change will be announced in class and on Canvas at least one week in advance.