"Democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

-Winston Churchill

The election of 2016 raised fundamental questions about democracy, including complaints about the role of money in political campaigns, warnings of voter fraud and voter suppression, allegations of foreign interference with the electoral process, and concerns about media bias and access to accurate information. The percentage of voter turnout was the third-highest in the past forty years, but for the second time this century, Americans will be governed by a president that received fewer votes than his opponent.

This seminar will examine key aspects of American government and political culture—constitutionalism, representation, the rights and responsibilities of citizenship—through the lens of democratic political theories and contemporary debates concerning the nature and value of democracy itself. Key questions will include: What does it mean for a nation to be democratic? How democratic did the Founders intend the United States to be? How can democratic decisions be reached in a pluralist society? How can we ensure that dissenting voices are not stifled by the ‘tyranny of the majority’? What happens when democratic majorities contradict the judgment of experts on issues such as climate change? If most voters are uninformed, who should make decisions about the public good?

This will be an interdisciplinary seminar that is informed by readings and discussions in philosophy, history, literature, and current events. In that sense, it will build on common core skills in reading, writing, and speaking grounded in content-rich nonfiction texts. It will emphasize themes in the Delaware social studies standards for K-12. In addition, ideas such as citizenship, national identity, and the relation of the individual to the state are prominent themes in art, drama, and literature (from Antigone to Thoreau to young adult dystopian fiction), so English language arts and other humanities teachers should be able to make meaningful connections to the main ideas in this seminar. STEM teachers who want to develop curriculum units related to science and public policy may also find it useful. Overall, I hope this seminar will engage public school students in their civic rights and responsibilities and help them make sense of contemporary politics that must seem confusing and unprecedented.