

Democratic Erosion (PSCI-498-303)

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[Cross-university website](#)

What this course is about

It is often assumed that once a country achieves a certain level of economic and political development, democratic consolidation is permanent. Recent trends in American and European politics have led some commentators to question this assumption. In this course, we will explore the causes and consequences of democratic erosion in comparative and historical perspective, with a focus on better understanding our own unique political moment. Importantly, this course is not intended as a partisan critique of any particular American politician or political party. Rather, it is designed to provide an opportunity for you to engage, critically and carefully, with the claims you have doubtlessly already heard about the state of democracy in the US and elsewhere; to evaluate whether those claims are valid; and, if they are, to consider strategies for mitigating the risk of democratic erosion here and abroad. Readings will address both empirical and normative questions, and will be gleaned from a combination of academic and media sources.

This course is a cross-university collaboration. During the 2017-18 academic year, faculty at about two dozen universities will teach from roughly the same syllabus. Students at all participating universities will collaborate on a number of assignments, and will be expected to engage not only with their own classmates, but with students at other universities as well.

Goals and Objectives

This course aims to introduce you to some of the most important issues and debates surrounding democratic consolidation and erosion around the world. The course also seeks to familiarize you with the basic epistemological underpinnings of social science, especially the logic and methods of causal inference and case comparison. Readings and activities have been selected to deepen

your knowledge of specific cases while also building more general critical thinking and analytical skills that you will use to form your own understanding of democratic consolidation and erosion, and to present your views in both verbal and written forms.

Course Requirements

1. Class participation: 20%
2. Contribution to cross university blog (blogpost): 20%
3. Reflection on political event (blogpost): 10%
4. Comments on others' blog post: 10%
5. Country case study: 30%
6. Presentation: 10%

1. Class attendance and participation (20%)

This seminar will rely largely on class discussions. Class attendance is thus required in order to do well in the course. Attendance will be recorded for each class, and will constitute a portion of your participation grade. You can miss one class, no questions asked, with no penalty. In the absence of exceptional circumstances, all subsequent missed classes will be reflected in your participation score.

The course schedule details course reading assignments day-by-day. You are expected to come to class prepared to discuss the readings, and be an active contributor in class discussions. *Bring readings with you to class.* For each assigned reading, you should be able to succinctly state the following:

- The question addressed.
- The author's argument.
- The evidence presented in support of that argument.
- Your critique of the argument/evidence.

Preparing notes on these features of each reading will insure that you are prepared for class discussion and will also assist you in class assignments. If you struggle with speaking up in seminars, please reach out to me within the first two weeks of the semester.

This course will involve a relatively substantial amount of reading. while I expect you to come prepared for class, I do not expect you to remember every word in every assigned reading. These handouts will be exceptionally helpful in teaching you how to (a) [get the main point of what you read](#), (b) [remember what you read](#), and (c) [engage with the material](#).

2. Contributions to our cross-university blog (20%; 10% each blogpost)

Over the course of the semester you will be required to write two blogposts for a cross-university blog, accessible [here](#). Each post will analyze some recent or current event (a) in the US and (b) elsewhere (non-US case study) through the lens of materials we have read and discussed in class. Posts should be short—between 800 and 1,200 words—but should be analytical rather than merely descriptive, and should advance and defend a clear, falsifiable argument.

1. **Blog Post on the US:** Analyze a recent or current event *in the US* through the lens of materials we have read and discussed in class; deadline: **2/25**.
2. **Country Case Blog Post:** Analyze a recent or current event *in your assigned country* through the lens of materials we have read and discussed in class; deadline: **3/18**.

The blog will be accessible to the public, and you should write for a broad (and potentially non-academic) audience: short, punchy sentences are preferable to long, meandering ones, and short paragraphs are preferable to long ones. You are encouraged to include links to resources you use in developing your argument **The first blogpost must be completed by February 25 and the second blogpost by March 18, 2018.**

3. Reflection on political event (10%)

Before a designated week of class, you will attend a political event of your choice in Pennsylvania or while visiting your home town (on say Spring break). The type of event you attend is up to you: it could be a protest, a pro- or anti-Trump rally, a town hall meeting with local or state representatives, an Indivisible meeting, etc. You will then write a 800-1,200-word blog post reflecting on your experience, again drawing on the readings where relevant. We'll reserve some time at the end of the semester to compare your experiences to your classmates', and to the experiences of students at other universities. **The deadline for attending the event is March 4, 2018. The deadline for submitting the blogpost is March 11, 2018.**

4. Comments on others' blog post (10%; 5% each of two responses)

You will also be responsible for commenting on three blog posts written by other students enrolled in the class, either here or (preferably) at one of the other participating universities. Comments should be short as well—no longer than 300 words—but, again, should be analytical rather than merely descriptive. The blog will be accessible to the public, though only students enrolled in the course will be able to post or comment. **This must be completed by April 2, 2018**

5. Country case study (30%)

This spring term, a similar course will be offered as a "capstone" for second-year master's students at the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University (TAMU). Unlike a typical seminar, TAMU's capstone courses work with clients for whom they produce policy-relevant, research-based deliverables. This is like a practicum in lieu of a master's thesis.

The client for this course will be USAID's Democracy Rights and Governance (DRG) Division, and the deliverable will be a meta-analysis assessing the antecedents and manifestations of democratic erosion around the world. While the students at TAMU will be responsible for producing the meta-analysis itself, you will contribute by writing a 12-15-page country case study on a specific country, **due before midnight on April 1, 2018**. The format of the case studies will be defined in coordination with USAID, and will be standardized across universities to facilitate comparison. Cases will be distributed across students and universities to maximize geographical coverage; students who prefer to cover a specific country will be given the chance to voice that preference, and we will do our best to accommodate. You will select a case from a predetermined list in class on January 29th.

Your case studies will be included as annexes to the meta-analysis, under your own bylines. The meta-analysis will be submitted to USAID in May of 2018. Students who wish to remain engaged in this process through the spring semester will be able (and encouraged) to do so. We will discuss possibilities later in the semester, again in coordination with USAID.

6. Presentation (10%)

Between March 26 and April 13, 2018 you will give a 20-minute presentation on the country you choose for your case study (described above). Your presentation should be analytical rather than descriptive, and should focus on assessing the risks, causes and consequences of democratic erosion in your country of choice.

Course site

All the materials for this course will be posted on the course site on Canvas. You can login at canvas.upenn.edu. Your user name is your university ID (UUID) and your password is your normal password.

There is also a cross-university site: democratic-erosion.com

Logistics

Office Hours

Please come to office hours. Outside of office hours, I will be busy doing other parts of my job (writing scientific papers, supervising graduate student dissertations, serving on faculty committees, etc.). Office hours are the time I have set aside to specifically focus on you personally. Even if you don't have specific questions, the interactions generated during a good office hour discussion should help clear up any confusion you might have on a topic. To sign up for office hours, please use calendly.com/ggros.

Grade policy

- Assignments will drop one-third of a grade for each day they are late.
- Every effort will be made to grade blogposts, case studies and responses fairly and impartially; however, mistakes sometimes occur. If you have a serious reservation about how you have been graded, write a description of the mistake as you see it, staple it to a printed copy of your paper, and deliver it to my mailbox in the department. Re-grade requests will only be accepted within a week after the return of the graded work. Note that all problems on a submitted paper (response / blogpost) may be regarded, not just the problem in question; it is therefore quite possible that your grade could go down. If you believe you were penalized differently from another student who committed the same error, then you must include your friend's paper in your grade appeal.
- Letter grades correspond to the following percentages:

A: 93-100	B: 83-86	C: 73-76	D: 60-66
A-: 90-92	B-: 80-82	C-: 70-72	E: <60
B+: 87-89	C+: 77-79	D+: 67-69	

Etiquette

You are not alone in the class, so please be considerate of your fellow students: arrive on time, take notes of what has been discussed, and do not leave early unless absolutely necessary. Turn off cell phones during lectures.

Accommodation for students with disabilities

The University of Pennsylvania encourages the full participation of students with disabilities. Students with disabilities are invited to meet with me to discuss special accommodations that may be needed for successful participation in this course. Specifically, the University accommodates students with disabilities who have registered with the [Office of Student Disabilities Service](#). Students must register with the Student Disabilities Services (SDS) to be granted special accommodations for any on-going conditions. For more information on the services that you are entitled to, please refer to the following [guide](#).

Religious Accommodation

The University accommodates students whose religious obligations conflict with attendance, submitting assignments, or completing scheduled tests and examinations. However, you must notify me in the first week of class if you will require any accommodation on these grounds. For more information, please refer to the Penn's Policy on Religious Holidays.

Policy on Academic Misconduct

Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. As outlined in the Student Handbook, "cheating" and "plagiarism" will result in severe disciplinary action on the part of the instructor. Either offense will be grounds for receiving a failing grade (zero points) on the assignment or examination and possibly an "F" for the course, depending on the severity of the offense.

Books

We will read all or much of the following books:

- Bail, Christopher A. 2016. *Terrified: How Anti-Muslim Fringe Organizations Became Mainstream*. Reprint. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Müller, Jan-Werner. 2016. *What Is Populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 6
- Sunstein, Cass. 2009. *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Schneider, Cathy. 2014. *Police Power and Race Riots: Urban Unrest in Paris and New York*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press

With the exception of Müller, all of these books are available through Penn's online catalog. All other readings (again, with the exception of Müller) will be posted to Canvas.

Schedule

Week 01, 01/08 - 01/12: Introduction

Learning objectives:

- Familiarize ourselves with a variety of different cases of (potential) democratic erosion.

Readings:

- Corrales, Javier. [Hugo Boss](#). *Foreign Policy*. February 19, 2006.
- Naim, Moisés & Francisco Toro. [Venezuela's democratic facade has completely crumbled](#). *The Washington Post*. July 1, 2016.
- Ulfelder, Jay. [Daniel Ortega Shows Us How to Dismantle a Democracy, 21st-Century Style](#). *Dart-Throwing Chimp*. November 20, 2011.
- Shifter, Michael. "Nicaragua Is Turning into a Real-Life 'House of Cards.'" *Foreign Policy*. September 5, 2016 ([link](#)).
- Ost, David. [Regime Change in Poland, Carried Out from Within](#). *The Nation*. January 8, 2016.
- Marcinkiewicz, Kamil & Mary Stegmaier. [Poland appears to be dismantling its own hard-won democracy](#). *The Washington Post*. July 21, 2017.

Week 02, 01/15 - 01/19: No class – Martin Luther King Day

Week 03, 01/22 - 01/26: Definitions of democracy and theories of democratization

Learning objectives:

- Understand prominent approaches to conceptualizing and defining democracy.
- Review leading theories of democratization and democratic consolidation.
- Understand how the design of democratic institutions can affect inclusion in, and the equity of, democratic rule.

Readings:

- Schumpeter, Joseph. 1947. *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. New York: Harper & Brothers. Chapters 21 and 22.
- Dahl, Robert. 1972. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven: Yale University Press. Chapter 1.
- Diamond, Larry. 2002. "[Thinking About Hybrid Regimes](#)." *Journal of Democracy* 13(2): pp. 21-35.
- Acemoglu, Daron & Robinson, James. 2006. *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 2.
- **Student Blog Post:** "Lack of Accountability in Appointed Commissions" by Victoria Potts, October 12, 2017.

Week 04, 01/29 - 02/02: Definitions and theories of democratic erosion

Learning objectives:

- Define democratic erosion and distinguish it from other ways that countries can transition into authoritarianism.
- Review the symptoms, observable implications and causes of democratic erosion.
- Begin our discussion of the possibility of democratic erosion in the US.

Readings:

- Linz, Juan J. & Stepan, Alfred. 1989. *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press. Chapters 2 and 3.
- Arendt, Hannah. 1951. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Berlin: Schocken Books. Chapter 11 "The Totalitarian Movement."
- Lust, Ellen & Waldner, David. 2015. [Unwelcome Change: Understanding, Evaluating, and Extending Theories of Democratic Backsliding](#). Washington, DC: USAID. pp. 1-15.
- Bermeo, Nancy. 2016. "[On Democratic Backsliding](#)." *Journal of Democracy* 27(1): pp. 5-19.
- Norris, Pippa. "[Is Western Democracy Backsliding?](#) Diagnosing the Risks." Forthcoming (April 2017).

- **Student Blog Post:** "It's the party system, stupid!" by Victor Brechenmacher, December 12, 2017.

Case Study Assignments

Case study assignments will be decided in class. If you are absent, you will be assigned a case by the instructor.

Week 05, 02/05 - 02/09: Uses and abuses of democratic institutions

Learning objectives:

- Understand the different ways in which democratic institutions can be used to undermine democracy.
- Consider why democratic backsliding through the legal use of democratic institutions has increased in recent years.
- Learn which components of democracy are most vulnerable to democratic decay via democratic institutions.
- Continue our discussion of the possibility of democratic erosion in the US.

Readings:

- Varol, Ozan O. 2015. [Stealth Authoritarianism](#). *Iowa Law Review* 100(4). Parts I, II, and III (p. 1676-1715)
- Scheppele, Kim Lane. 2013. ["Not Your Father's Authoritarianism: The Creation of the 'Frankenstate.'"](#) *European Politics & Society Newsletter* 5-9.
- Huq, Aziz Z. & Ginsburg, Tom. 2017. ["How to Lose a Constitutional Democracy."](#) *UCLA Law Review* 65. Working Paper. (pp. 3-72)
- Levitsky, Steven & Ziblatt, Daniel. 2017. [How a Democracy Dies](#). *New Republic*, December 7, 2017.
- **Student Blog Post:** "Prolonged State of Emergency Status May Lead to Democratic Backsliding in Mali" by Molly Winders, November 15, 2017.

Week 06, 02/12 - 02/16: Populism and demagoguery

Learning objectives:

- Define populism, and consider how it relates to democratic or authoritarian rule. Review the conditions that give rise to populism of both the left and right.
- Consider the kinds of politics and policies that are likely to prevent the rise of populism, and how democracy can be preserved in the face of threats from authoritarian populist parties and leaders.

Readings:

- Müller, Jan-Werner. 2016. *What Is Populism?* University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Berman, Sheri. 2017. "The Pipe Dream of Undemocratic Liberalism." *Journal of Democracy* 28(3): 29–38.
- Voigtländer, Nico & Voth, Hans-Joachim. 2017. *Highway to Hitler*. Working paper.
- Weyland, Kurt. "There are 4 big barriers to the populist model in America (and your democracy is safe)." *The Washington Post*. August 11, 2017.

Blog Post Workshop

We will discuss how to write an effective blog post in class. In preparation for this workshop, please:

1. Read the following blog posts at <http://democratic-erosion.com/blog/>:
 - "Why bureaucratic resistance is not a fundamental threat to democracy" by Isabela Karibjanian, December 12, 2017.
 - "Position of the Tennessee Secretary of State on Voting Rights Restrictions" by Cayna Sharp on October 12, 2017.
2. Bring a *printed* draft of your blog post on the US (due on 2/25) for peer-review.

Week 07, 02/19 - 02/23: Propaganda and restrictions on the press

Learning objectives:

- Describe the effect of propaganda and misinformation on individual attitudes and behavior.
- Discuss in comparative perspective whether and how misinformation contributes to larger processes of democratic erosion.

Readings:

- Wedeen, Lisa. 2017. *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*. University of Chicago Press. Chapter 2.
- Hill, Daniel and Yonatan Lupu. "Restrictions on the news media are a bellwether for two disturbing trends." *The Washington Post*. April 17, 2017.
- Rodriguez, Barrera, et al. 2017. "Facts, Alternative Facts, and Fact Checking in Times of Post-Truth Politics." Working paper.
- Adena, Maja, et al. 2015. "Radio and the Rise of the Nazis in Prewar Germany." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 130(4): pp. 1885-1939.
- Gehlbach, Scott. 2010. "Reflections on Putin and the Media." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 26(1): pp. 77-87.

- **Student Blog Post:** “Is Climate Change (and Trump’s Attitude) Threatening to Democracy?” by Julia Banas, November 15, 2017.

Blogpost on the US Due

Blogpost on the US due via Canvas before midnight on February 25.

Week 08, 02/26 - 03/02: Polarization

Learning objectives:

- Understand why and how polarization within society can lead to democratic erosion.
- Understand the history of growing polarization within our own country.
- Understand the nature of polarization and the different forms it can take, including the distinction between social polarization and ideological polarization, and how the first can lead to the second.

Readings:

- Barber, Michael & McCarty, Nolan. 2015. [Causes and Consequences of Polarization](#), *Political Negotiation: A Handbook*. Chapter 2.
- Svolik, Milan. 2017. ["When Polarization Trumps Civic Virtue: Partisan Conflict and the Subversion of Democracy by Incumbents."](#) Working Paper.
- Sunstein, Cass. 2009. *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide*. New York: Oxford University Press. Chapters 1 and 2.
- Mudde, Cas. 2008. *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 9.
- **Student Blog Post:** “Erdogan Leverages Terrorist Threats to Silence Opposition” by Cody Duane-McGlashan, December 15, 2017.

Week 09, 03/05 - 03/09: No class – Spring break

Reflection on Political Event Due

Reflection on political event due via Canvas before midnight on March 11.

Week 10, 03/12 - 03/16: Scapegoating, exclusion and resentment

Learning objectives:

- Learn how extremist hate groups can become mainstream and influence popular culture.
- Understand how both populists and mainstream parties use scapegoating and sense of exclusion to win elections.
- Consider the consequences of scapegoating for democratic decay, racial polarization, violent policing and violent uprisings.

Readings:

- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2016. *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. New York: The New Press. Chapters 9 and 15.
- Cramer, Katherine J. 2016. *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*. University of Chicago Press. Chapters 3–4.
- Wood, Thomas. "[Racism motivated Trump voters more than authoritarianism.](#)" *The Washington Post*. April 17, 2017.
- Kuhn, David Paul. "[Sorry, Liberals. Bigotry Didn't Elect Donald Trump.](#)" *The New York Times*. December 26, 2016.

Country Case Blog Post Due

Country Case Blog Post due via Canvas before midnight on March 18.

Week 11, 03/19 - 03/23: Resistance

Learning objectives:

- Describe what resistance to undemocratic institutions looks like.
- Learn to identify and articulate a variety of resistance strategies.
- Consider the conditions under which different strategies are more likely to be used, and more likely to be successful.

Readings:

- Chenoweth, Erica. "[People Are in the Streets Protesting Donald Trump. But When Does Protest Actually Work?](#)" *The Washington Post*. 21 Nov. 2016.
- Stephan, Maria J. & Chenoweth, Erica. 2008. "[Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict.](#)" *International Security* 33(1): pp. 7-44. Document pages 7-15 (theory), 25-32 (East Timor case study)
- Havel, Vaclav. [The Power of the Powerless](#). 1978. (just skim please)

- Gerken, Heather. ["We're about to See States' Rights Used Defensively against Trump."](#) Vox. 12 Dec. 2016.
- Gibler, D. M. and Randazzo, K. A. 2011. [Testing the Effects of Independent Judiciaries on the Likelihood of Democratic Backsliding.](#) *American Journal of Political Science* 55(3): pp. 696-709.
- **Student Blog Post:** "Can comedy counter democratic backsliding in Serbia?" by Isabela Karibjanian, December 5, 2017.

Week 12, 03/26 - 03/30: Regional case study: Latin America

Readings:

- Weyland, Kurt. "Latin America's Authoritarian Drift: The Threat from the Populist Left." *Journal of Democracy* 24(3): 18-32.
- Levitsky, Steven & James Loxton. 2013. ["Populism and Competitive Authoritarianism in the Andes."](#) *Democratization* 20(1): 107-136.
- Corrales, Javier. [Venezuela's government wants to write a new constitution. That way lies autocracy.](#) *The Washington Post*. May 15, 2017.

Case Study Papers Due

Case study papers due via Canvas before midnight on April 1.

Week 13, 04/02 - 04/06: Regional case study: Africa

Readings:

- Gyimah-Boadi, E. 2015. ["Africa's Waning Democratic Commitment."](#) *Journal of Democracy* 26(1): 101-13.
- Bratton, Michael, and E. Gyimah-Boadi. 2016. ["Political Risks Facing African Democracies: Evidence from Afrobarometer."](#) Afrobarometer Working Paper No. 157.
- Cheeseman, Nic. [How Zambia's long-stable democracy ended up in a political crisis in 2017.](#) *Quartz*. July 7, 2017.

Week 14, 04/09 - 04/13: Regional case study: Turkey, Russia and Eastern Europe

Readings:

- Gessen, Marsha. 2012. *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*. New York: Riverhead. Chapters 6, 7 and 8.
- Esen, Berk & Sebnem Gumuscu. 2016. "Rising competitive authoritarianism in Turkey." *Third World Quarterly* 37(9), 1581-1606.

Week 15, 04/16 - 04/20: Conclusion

Learning objectives:

- Review the symptoms, observable implications and (potential) causes of democratic erosion, and consider which are the most important in light of the readings from previous weeks.
- Conclude our discussion of the possibility of democratic erosion in the US.

Readings:

- Lieberman, Robert C. et al. 2017. ["Trumpism and American Democracy: History, Comparison, and the Predicament of Liberal Democracy in the United States."](#) Rochester, NY. Social Science Research Network Scholarly Paper 3028990.
- Ulfelder, Jay. 2016. ["What Now?"](#) Political Violence a Glance (November 12).
- Hughes, Sean Patrick. 2016. ["What Now?"](#) Chartwell West (November 12).
- Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. ["Is Donald Trump a Threat to Democracy?"](#) The New York Times. December 16, 2016.
- Riddell, Kelly. ["Anti-Trump Left a Threat to American Democracy.?"](#) *The Washington Times*. December 19, 2016.
- Colgan, Jeff. ["Six Months of Trump: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly."](#) Authoritarian Warning Survey | Scholars on American Democracy. 18 July 2017.

Week 16, 04/23 - 04/27: Epilogue

- Discuss other students' case studies
- Student presentations