



Democratic Erosion

Course Description

As the Cold War ended, the world witnessed the “third wave” of democratization, bringing democratic governance to many nations in the 1990s and early 2000s. However, since the mid-2000s, a reverse wave of democratic erosion appears to be taking shape, threatening the stability and resilience of democracies worldwide.

This course examines the causes, symptoms, and strategies for resisting democratic erosion in historical and comparative perspective. Students will explore key questions, including but not limited to: What is democratic erosion? What are its root causes or precursors? How does it occur and manifest? What roles do political and economic elites, institutions, and citizens play in this process? How can democracies resist and recover from erosion processes? Through a combination of broad thematic readings and country case studies, as well as individual and collaborative assignments, students will develop the skills to critically analyze and evaluate challenges to democracy around the globe.

The course is part of the [Democratic Erosion Consortium](#) (DEC), a global partnership of researchers, students, policymakers, and practitioners dedicated to understanding and addressing threats to democracy worldwide. Every year, faculty across dozens of institutions teach components of our shared syllabus in parallel. Students will participate in collaborative assignments, engaging not only with their own classmates but also with peers from other universities, fostering dialogue and critical engagement across campuses on threats to democracy and potential resistance strategies.



Class Schedule

Part 1. Theoretical Foundations of Democracy and Democratic Erosion

Week 1: Course Overview and Introduction

Bermeo, Nancy. 2016. ["On Democratic Backsliding."](#) *Journal of Democracy* 27 (1): 5-19.

Nord, Marina, et al. 2024. [Democracy Report 2024: Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot.](#) Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg.

Week 2: Definitions and Theories of Democracy and Democratic Consolidation

Dahl, Robert. 1972. [Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition.](#) New Haven: Yale University Press. Chapter 1.

Schmitter, Philippe C., and Terry Lynn Karl. 1991. ["What Democracy Is...and Is Not."](#) *Journal of Democracy* 2 (3): 75-88.

Przeworski, Adam, and Fernando Limongi. 1997. ["Modernization: Theories and Facts."](#) *World Politics*, 49 (2): 155-183.

Linz, Juan J., and Alfred Stepan. 1996. [Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-communist Europe.](#) Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. Chapter 1.



Week 3: Definitions and Theories of Democratic Erosion

Waldner, David, and Ellen Lust. 2018. "[Unwelcoming Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding.](#)" *Annual Review of Political Science* 21 (2): 93-113.

Levitsky, Steven and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. [How Democracies Die](#). New York: Crown. Chapter 1.

Little, Andrew T., and Anne Meng. 2024. "[Measuring Democratic Backsliding.](#)" *PS: Political Science & Politics* 57 (2): 149-161.

Baron, Hannah, Robert A. Blair, Jessica Gottlieb, and Laura Paler. 2024. "[An Events-Based Approach to Understanding Democratic Erosion.](#)" *PS: Political Science & Politics* 57 (2): 208-215.

Krekó, Péter, and Zsolt Enyedi. 2018. "[Explaining Eastern Europe: Orbán's Laboratory of Illiberalism.](#)" *Journal of Democracy* 29 (3): 39-5. **OR**

Thaler, Kai M. 2017. "[Nicaragua: A Return to Caudillismo.](#)" *Journal of Democracy* 28 (2), 157-169.

NB: Half the class will be assigned to read Krekó and Enyedi, and the other half will be assigned to read Thaler.

Part 2. Symptoms of Democratic Erosion

Week 4: Weakening Horizontal Accountability

Varol, Ozan. 2015. "[Stealth Authoritarianism.](#)" *Iowa Law Review* 100(4): 1673-1742. Parts I, II and III.

Levitsky, Steven and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. [How Democracies Die](#). New York: Crown. Chapter 4.

O'Donnell, Guillermo A. 1994. "[Delegative Democracy.](#)" *Journal of Democracy* 5 (1): 55-69.



Roznai, Yaniv. 2018. ["Israel—A Crisis of Liberal Democracy?"](#) *Constitutional Democracy in Crisis*. **OR**

Anria, Santiago. 2016. ["Delegative Democracy Revisited: More Inclusion, Less Liberalism in Bolivia."](#) *Journal of Democracy* 27 (3): 99-108.

NB: Students will be assigned to read either Roznai or Anria depending on the in-class activity selected for this session

Week 5: Weakening Vertical Accountability

Przeworski, Adam, Susan C. Stokes, and Bernard Manin, eds. 1999. [Democracy, Accountability, and Representation](#). Vol. 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapters 1 and 5.

Bentele, Keith G., and Erin E. O'Brien. 2013. ["Jim Crow 2.0? Why States Consider and Adopt Restrictive Voter Access Policies."](#) *Perspectives on Politics* 11 (4): 1088-1116.

Weitz-Shapiro, Rebecca, and Matthew S. Winters. 2017. ["Can Citizens Discern? Information Credibility, Political Sophistication, and the Punishment of Corruption in Brazil."](#) *The Journal of Politics* 79 (1): 60-74.

Albertus, Michael, and Guy Grossman. 2021. ["The Americas: When Do Voters Support Power Grabs?"](#) *Journal of Democracy* 32(2): 116-131.

Part 3. Precursors of Democratic Erosion

Week 6: Economic Inequality

Haggard, Stephan, and Robert R. Kaufman. 2012. ["Inequality and Regime Change: Democratic Transitions and the Stability of Democratic Rule."](#) *American Political Science Review* 106(3): 495-516.



Acemoglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. 2006. *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapters 1 and 2.

Bartels, Larry M. 2017. *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*. 2nd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Chapter 1.

Solt, Frederick. 2008. "Economic Inequality and Democratic Political Engagement." *American Journal of Political Science* 52 (1): 48-60.

Week 7: Ethno-Religious Conflict

Wilkinson, Steven I. 2004. *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 1.

Dhattiwala, Raheel, and Michael Biggs. 2012. "The Political Logic of Ethnic Violence: The Anti-Muslim Pogrom in Gujarat, 2002." *Politics and Society* 40 (4): 483-516.

Gerring, John, Michael Hoffman, and Dominic Zarecki. 2016. "The Diverse Effects of Diversity on Democracy." *British Journal of Political Science* 48: 238-314.

Stepan, Alfred C. 2000. "Religion, Democracy, and the 'Twin Tolerations'." *Journal of Democracy* 11 (4): 37-57.

Week 8: Populism

Mudde, Cas, and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser. 2017. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press. Chapter 1.

Müller, Jan-Werner. 2016. *What Is Populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. Introduction and Chapter 1.

Berman, Sheri. 2021. "The Causes of Populism in the West." *Annual Review of Political Science* 24 (1), 71-88.



Weyland, Kurt. 2024. ["Why Democracy Survives Populism."](#) *Journal of Democracy* 35 (1): 43-58.

Week 9: Polarization

McCoy, Jennifer, Tahmina Rahman, and Murat Somer. 2018. ["Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities."](#) *American Behavioral Scientist* 62 (1): 16-42.

Iyengar, Shanto, and Masha Krupenkin. 2018. ["The Strengthening of Partisan Affect."](#) *Political Psychology* 39 (S1): 201-218.

Orhan, Yunus Emre. 2022. ["The Relationship between Affective Polarization and Democratic Backsliding: Comparative Evidence."](#) *Democratization* 29 (4): 714-35.

LeBas, Adrienne. 2018. ["Can Polarization Be Positive? Conflict and Institutional Development in Africa."](#) *American Behavioral Scientist* 62 (1): 59-74.

Hochschild, Arlie R. 2018. [*Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*](#). The New Press. Chapters 1, 9, & 15.

Week 10: Fake News, Misinformation, and Disinformation

Lecheler, Sophie, and Jana L. Egelhofer. 2022. ["Disinformation, Misinformation, and Fake News: Understanding the Supply Side."](#) In *Knowledge Resistance in High-Choice Information Environments*, edited by Jesper Strömbäck et al. London: Routledge. 69-87

Tucker, Joshua A., et al. 2018. ["Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature."](#)

Nyhan, Brendan, and Jason Reifler. 2010. ["When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions."](#) *Political Behavior* 32 (2), 303-330.



Bandeira, Luiza et al. 2019. [*Disinformation in Democracies: Strengthening Digital Resilience in Latin America*](#). Washington, DC: The Atlantic Council.

Week 11: Clientelism, Corruption, and Money in Politics

Kitschelt, Herbert, and Steven I. Wilkinson, eds. 2007. [*Patrons, Clients and Policies: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition*](#). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 1.

Mares, Isabela, and Lauren Young. 2016. ["Buying, Expropriating, and Stealing Votes."](#) *Annual Review of Political Science* 19 (1), 267-288.

Vaishnav, Milan. 2017. [*When Crime Pays: Money and Muscle in Indian Politics*](#). New Haven: Yale University Press. Chapter 1.

Winters, Jeffrey A., and Benjamin I. Page. 2009. ["Oligarchy in the United States?"](#) *Perspectives on Politics* 7 (4), 731-751.

Part 4. Resisting Democratic Erosion?

Week 12: Institutional Resistance

Ginsburg, Tom, and Aziz Huq. 2020. [*How to Save a Constitutional Democracy*](#). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chapter 1, 4, and 5.

Graham, Benjamin A., Michael K. Miller, and Kaare W. Strøm. 2017. ["Safeguarding Democracy: Powersharing and Democratic Survival."](#) *American Political Science Review* 111 (4), 686-704.

Gherghina, Sergiu, and Petar Bankov. 2023. ["Troublemakers and Game Changers: How Political Parties Stopped Democratic Backsliding in Bulgaria."](#) *Democratization* 30 (8): 1582-1603.



Gamboa, Laura, Benjamin García-Holgado, and Ezequiel González-Ocantos. 2024. [Courts Against Backsliding: Lessons from Latin America](#). *Law & Policy*.

Week 13: Civil Society Resistance

Chenoweth, Erica, and Maria J. Stephan. 2012. [Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict](#). New York: Columbia University Press. Chapter 1.

Bernhard, Michael, Allen Hicken, Cristopher Reenock, and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2020. ["Parties, Civil Society, and the Deterrence of Democratic Defection."](#) *Studies in Comparative International Development* 55: 1-26.

Gamboa, Laura. 2017. ["Opposition at the Margins: Strategies Against the Erosion of Democracy in Colombia and Venezuela."](#) *Comparative Politics* 49 (4): 457-477.

Yarwood, Janette. 2016. ["The Struggle Over Terms Limits in Africa: The Power of Protest."](#) *Journal of Democracy* 27 (3): 51-60.