Political Science 395 (Winter 2022)
Democracy Under Siege
Northwestern University, Department of Political Science
Thursday 10:00AM - 12:50PM
In-person seminars: Scott Hall 201 (Ripton Room)
Remote-format seminars: https://northwestern.zoom.us/j/96991808691

**Syllabus Version: January 20, 2022**

Instructor: Jordan Gans-Morse
Office Hours: Monday 11:00AM-12:00PM and Wednesday 9:00AM-10:00AM
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**COURSE SUMMARY**

Since the mid-2000s, democracy has been under siege. In countries such as Russia, Turkey, and Venezuela, democracy has collapsed entirely. In longstanding democracies including the United States, democratic institutions have faced historically unprecedented strain from populist movements such as Trumpism. Looking to the future, democracies likely will encounter novel challenges resulting from phenomena such as artificial intelligence and climate change. This course will survey recent trends in democratic backsliding, drawing on both classic studies of why democracies collapse and emerging research about uniquely 21st century threats to democracy. We will also consider potential political strategies and reforms for promoting the resilience of democracies.

The course is organized around the following themes:

Week 1: Introduction
Week 2: Defining democracy
Week 3: Democratic backsliding and breakdown
Week 4: Political Polarization
Week 5: Economic Inequality
Week 6: Populism
Week 7: 21st Century Challenges – Disinformation, Robots, and Climate Change
Week 8: The United States in comparative perspective
Week 9: What can be done?
COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Evaluation in the course will be decided as follows:

Participation: 35%
Research Paper: 50%
In-Class Presentation: 15%

Participation

Students are expected to complete all readings prior to each session and to attend every seminar. Seminar participation will count for 35% of each student’s overall grade. Students are expected to make multiple comments in every session, but more is not necessarily better; the objective is to make thoughtful contributions to the discussion.

Research Paper

The primary assignment for this course is a research paper of approximately 15 to 20 pages. The writing assignment will count for 50% of the overall grade. Students may pick a research topic of their choice, as long as the topic is related to general themes of the course.

This is not a project that can be completed at the last minute, and there will be deadlines to meet throughout the term:

Thursday, January 27: By or on this date, students should discuss possible research topics with the professor during office hours.
Thursday, February 3: A two-paragraph research topic proposal and preliminary bibliography of at least five sources due.
Thursday, February 10: Annotated bibliography of at least ten sources due.
Thursday, February 24: Preliminary outline of paper due. By or on this date, students should discuss progress with the professor during office hours.
Friday, March 4: Partial rough draft (at least 7 double-spaced pages) due.
Friday, March 11: Final draft of paper due by noon.

Late assignments will be penalized a half-grade (e.g., an A becomes an A-) per day, with the exception of documented cases of illness or family crisis. In such cases, a request must be made to the professor prior to the assignment’s due date. Papers previously or simultaneously submitted for another course will not be accepted.

Possible types of research papers include, but are not limited to, the following:

Literature Review: Choose one of the topics from the weekly seminars and write a critical literature review on the topic. A critical literature review, drawing on multiple sources, highlights key debates in a research agenda, the positions of prominent scholars in these debates, the extent to which debates have or have not been settled, and areas for future research. Although a literature review involves a summary of existing works, it is essential
to recognize that a good review also includes original critical analysis. Such analysis may critique specific studies, present an original way of classifying or organizing an ongoing debate, or offer insights on important avenues of future research.

Region or Country Study: Choose a region or country and develop analyze the state of democracy in your chosen case study. Examine sources of democratic backsliding and/or resilience. Based on your findings, consider the extent to which your case study confirms or disconfirms the conclusions of readings we will be doing for the course.

Empirical Analysis: Choose a claim from the literature we have been reading and examine the empirical support for this claim. Offer a critique of the sources of data and methodological approaches used in various studies. Address how types of data and methodological approaches affect each study’s findings and offer conclusions about which studies are most methodologically convincing.

In-Class Presentation

Students will be expected to make a short in-class presentation on their research topic. The presentation will count for 15% of the overall grade. More information will be provided about this assignment later in the quarter.

ZOOM POLICY

Given that this course is based on interaction and discussion, students are expected to keep their video on during seminars conducted via Zoom. I recognize that for technical or other reasons, this sometimes might not be possible. If you face extenuating circumstances, please inform the instructor.

COVID-19 POLICIES

COVID-19 Classroom Expectations

Students, faculty, and staff must comply with University expectations regarding appropriate classroom behavior, including those outlined below and in the COVID-19 Code of Conduct. With respect to classroom procedures, this includes:

- Policies regarding masking and social distancing evolve as the public health situation changes. Students are responsible for understanding and complying with current masking, testing, Symptom Tracking, and social distancing requirements.
- In some classes, masking and/or social distancing may be required as a result of an Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accommodation for the instructor or a student in the class even when not generally required on campus. In such cases, the instructor will notify the class.
- No food is allowed inside classrooms. Drinks are permitted, but please keep your face covering on and use a straw.
Faculty may assign seats in some classes to help facilitate contact tracing in the event that a student tests positive for COVID-19. Students must sit in their assigned seats.

If a student fails to comply with the COVID-19 Code of Conduct or other University expectations related to COVID-19, the instructor may ask the student to leave the class. The instructor is asked to report the incident to the Office of Community Standards for additional follow-up.

**COVID-19 Testing Compliance Statement**

To protect the health of our community, Northwestern University requires unvaccinated students who are in on-campus programs to be tested for COVID-19 twice per week. Students who fail to comply with current or future COVID-19 testing protocols will be referred to the Office of Community standards to face disciplinary action, including escalation up to restriction from campus and suspension.

**Exceptions to Class Modality**

In-person classes at Northwestern are scheduled to resume on January 18. Individual students will not be granted permission to attend remotely except as the result of an Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accommodation as determined by AccessibleNU.

Maintaining the health of the community remains our priority. If you are experiencing any symptoms of COVID do not attend class and update your Symptom Tracker application right away to connect with Northwestern’s Case Management Team for guidance on next steps. Also contact the instructor as soon as possible to arrange to complete coursework.

Students who experience a personal emergency should contact the instructor as soon as possible to arrange to complete coursework. Should public health recommendations prevent in person class from being held on a given day, the instructor or the university will notify students.

**IN-CLASS ELECTRONICS POLICY**

Please turn all phones off before the seminar. Note that this implies no texting as well as no calls. It is permissible to bring your laptop to the seminar discussions, but it goes without saying that laptops should be used for note taking only.

**ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

Students in this course are required to comply with the policies found in the booklet, “Academic Integrity at Northwestern University: A Basic Guide.” All papers submitted for credit in this course must be submitted electronically unless otherwise instructed by the professor. Your written work may be tested for plagiarized content. For details regarding academic integrity at Northwestern or to download the guide, visit:

https://www.northwestern.edu/provost/policies/academic-integrity/index.html
ACCESSIBILITY

Northwestern University is committed to providing the most accessible learning environment as possible for students with disabilities. Should you anticipate or experience disability-related barriers in the academic setting, please contact AccessibleNU to move forward with the university’s established accommodation process (email: accessiblenu@northwestern.edu; phone: 847-467-5530). If you already have established accommodations with AccessibleNU, please let the professor know as soon as possible, preferably within the first two weeks of the term, so we can work together to implement your disability accommodations. Disability information, including academic accommodations, is confidential under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act.

SUPPORT FOR WELLNESS AND MENTAL HEALTH

Northwestern University is committed to supporting the wellness of our students. Student Affairs has multiple resources to support student wellness and mental health. If you are feeling distressed or overwhelmed, please reach out for help. Students can access confidential resources through the Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), Religious and Spiritual Life (RSL) and the Center for Awareness, Response and Education (CARE). Additional information on all of the resources mentioned above can be found here:

https://www.northwestern.edu/counseling/
https://www.northwestern.edu/religious-life/
https://www.northwestern.edu/care/

CLASS RECORDINGS

This class or portions of this class will be recorded by the instructor for educational purposes, such as providing students who must quarantine due to Covid-19 concerns with access to lecture materials. If needed, the professor will provide additional information about how members of the class can access the recordings. Portions of the course that contain images, questions or commentary/discussion by students will be edited out of any recordings that are saved beyond the current term.

Prohibition of Recording Classes by Students

Unauthorized student recording of classroom or other academic activities (including advising sessions or office hours) is prohibited. Unauthorized recording is unethical and may also be a violation of University policy and state law. Students requesting the use of assistive technology as an accommodation should contact AccessibleNU. Unauthorized use of classroom recordings – including distributing or posting them – is also prohibited. Under the University’s Copyright Policy, faculty own the copyright to instructional materials – including those resources created specifically for the purposes of instruction, such as syllabi, lectures and lecture notes, and presentations. Students cannot copy, reproduce, display, or distribute these materials. Students who engage in unauthorized recording, unauthorized use of a recording, or unauthorized
distribution of instructional materials will be referred to the appropriate University office for follow-up.

**COURSE MATERIALS**

There is one required book for the course:


Other materials will be made available in electronic form via Canvas. In addition, the following resources may be of interest:

- V-Dem Democracy Reports ([https://www.v-dem.net/democracy_reports.html](https://www.v-dem.net/democracy_reports.html))
- Bright Line Watch reports on public and expert opinions about the status of democracy in the United States ([http://brightlinewatch.org/our-work/](http://brightlinewatch.org/our-work/))
COURSE OVERVIEW

Week 1: Introduction
Thursday, January 6

Week 2: Defining Democracy
Thursday, January 13

Key Themes

- How should democracy be defined?
- What is the difference between electoral and liberal democracy?
- What makes democracy normatively desirable? What makes it normatively undesirable?

Assigned Readings

- Caleb Craine, “The Case Against Democracy,” The New Yorker (October 31, 2016)

Supplementary Readings

- Robert Dahl, Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition (Yale University Press, 1972)
- Samuel Huntington, The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century (University of Oklahoma Press, 1993)
- Jason Brennan, Against Democracy (Princeton University Press, 2016)
Week 3: Democratic Backsliding and Breakdown

Thursday, January 20

Key Themes

- To what extent is the world experiencing a wave of democratic backsliding?
- What is the difference between democratic backsliding and democratic breakdown?
- What types of democratic backsliding or breakdown are most common in recent years? How do these patterns compare to earlier waves of democratic regression?
- Are the world’s longstanding democracies experiencing a democratic “deconsolidation”?

Assigned Readings

- Intro and Chapters 1, 4, and 5 in Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, How Democracies Die (New York, Crown 2018)

Supplementary Readings

Recent reports on the state of global democracy:


On democratic breakdown:

- Juan Linz, The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Crisis, Breakdown & Reequilibration (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978)
On democratic backsliding:


On democratic deconsolidation:

  - Pippa Norris, “Is Western Democracy Backsliding? Diagnosing the Risks”
  - Erik Voeten, “Are people really turning away from democracy?”
  - Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, “The End of the Consolidation Paradigm: A Response to Our Critics”
Week 4: Political Polarization
Thursday, January 27

Key Themes:

- How might political polarization undermine democracy?
- How polarized is the United States, and how does this compare to polarization in other parts of the world?
- What are the different types of political polarization that social scientists have identified?

Assigned Readings

- Chapters 1 and 2 in Ezra Klein, *Why We’re Polarized* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020)

Supplementary Readings

Polarization in comparative perspective:

Polarization in the United States:  
See also readings for Week 8

**Week 5: Economic Inequality**  
*Thursday, February 3*

**Key Themes**

- How might economic inequality undermine democracy?
- How much has economic inequality increased in the United States, and how does this compare to other parts of the world?
- What types of economic and political shifts are contributing to inequality?
- Why isn’t there more redistribution of wealth in democracies?

**Assigned Readings**


**Supplementary Readings**

On inequality and democracy:

- Benjamin Page and Martin Gilens, *Democracy in America? What Has Gone Wrong and What We Can Do About It* (University of Chicago Press, 2020)

On the preferences and influence of the super-wealthy:

- Benjamin Page, Jason Seawright, and Matthew Lacombe, *Billionaires and Stealth Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 2018)

On inequality and political responsiveness:

- Mads Andreas Elkjær and Michael Klitgaard, “Economic Inequality and Political Responsiveness: A Systematic Review,” *Perspectives on Politics* (forthcoming)

On inequality and political participation:


On the power of the business sector, interest groups, and lobbyists

• Pepper D. Culpepper, *Quiet Politics and Business Power: Corporate Control in Europe and Japan* (Cambridge University Press, 2010)
Week 6: Populism
Thursday, February 10

Key Themes

- What is populism? How might populism undermine democracy?
- How are the threats to democracy from left-wing and right-wing populists similar? How are they different?
- What factors might explain the recent wave of populism?

Assigned Readings

- The Economist, “The Threat from the Illiberal Left” (September 4, 2021)

Supplementary Readings

Definitions, concepts, and trends:

- Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz, “How Democracies Fall Apart: Why Populism is a Pathway to Autocracy,” Foreign Affairs (December 5, 2016)
• Anna Grzymala-Busse, “Global Populisms and Their Impact,” *Slavic Review* 76,S1 (2017): S3-S8
• Iza Ding, Dan Slater, and Huseyin Zengin, “Populism and the Past: Restoring, Retaining, and Redeeming the Nation,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 56,2 (2021): 148-169
• David Art, “The Myth of Global Populism,” *Perspectives on Politics* (forthcoming)

On the economic roots of populism:

• Helen Milner, “Voting for Populism in Europe: Globalization, Technological Change, and the Extreme Right,” *Comparative Political Studies* (forthcoming)

On the cultural roots of populism:

• Elias Dinas, Konstantinos Matakos, Dimitrios Xefteris, and Dominik Hangartner, “Waking up the Golden Dawn: Does Exposure to the Refugee Crisis Increase Support for Extreme-Right Parties?” *Political analysis* 27,2 (2019): 244-54

Populist trends in specific countries and/or regions:

• Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, eds., *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* (Cambridge University Press, 2012)
• Steven Levitsky and James Loxton, “Populism and Competitive Authoritarianism in the Andes,” Democratization 20,1 (2013): 107-36
• Milada Anna Vachudova, “Ethnopopulism and Democratic Backsliding in Central Europe,” East European Politics 36,3 (2020): 318-40
• Michael Bernhard, “Democratic Backsliding in Poland and Hungary,” Slavic Review 80,3 (2021): 585-607

On intolerance and illiberalism:

• Thomas Edsall, “One Thing We Can Agree On Is That We’re Becoming a Different Country,” The New York Times (September 8, 2021)
• Pippa Norris, “Cancel Culture: Myth or Reality?” Political Studies (forthcoming)
• Michelle Goldberg, “#Cancel Colbert and the Return of the Anti-Liberal Left,” The Nation (April 2, 2014) and “Do Progressives Have a Free Speech Problem?” The New York Times (July 17, 2020)
• At bariweiss.substack.com: Bari Weiss, “The Miseducation of America’s Elites” (March 9, 2021) and David French, “The Threat from the Anti-Woke Right” (November 2, 2021)
Week 7: 21st Century Challenges – Disinformation, Robots, and Climate Change
Thursday, February 17

Key Themes

- How do disinformation, automation, and climate change potentially exacerbate the problems of polarization, inequality, and populism?
- How do polarization, inequality, and populism potentially exacerbate the problems related to disinformation, automation, and climate change?
- Beyond polarization, inequality, and populism, in what other ways might disinformation, automation, and climate change undermine democracy?
- How novel are these 21st century threats to democracy?

Assigned Readings


Optional

Supplementary Readings on the Internet and Social Media

On evolving views about the internet and social media’s relationship to democracy:


On the impacts of the internet and social media on disinformation and polarization:


Supplementary Readings on Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Background: What is artificial intelligence (AI)?

- David Kelnar, “The Fourth Industrial Revolution: A Primer on Artificial Intelligence (AI),” *Medium* (December 2, 2016)
On the impacts of AI on disinformation and polarization:


On AI and macro-political shifts:

- Chapter 6 in Carles Boix, Democratic Capitalism at the Crossroads (Princeton University Press, 2019)
- Chapter 6 in Torben Iversen and David Soskice, Democracy and Prosperity: Reinventing Capitalism through a Turbulent Century (Princeton University Press, 2020)

On the impacts of AI and automation on employment:


On AI, authoritarianism, and digital totalitarianism:

Supplementary Readings on Climate Change

On the challenges climate change poses to democracy:

- Cameron Abadi, “Thinking Outside the Ballot Box,” *Foreign Policy* (Winter 2022)

On climate change and political instability and conflict:


On democratic vs. authoritarian performance in mitigating climate change:


On eco-authoritarianism:


On eco-fascism/eco-nationalism:
- Jason Wilson, “Eco-Fascism is Undergoing a Revival in the Fetid Culture of the Extreme Right,” *The Guardian* (March 19, 2019)

On populism, polarization, and climate change:

- Robert Huber, Esther Greussing, and Jakob-Moritz Eberl, “From Populism to Climate Skepticism: The Role of Institutional Trust and Attitudes Towards Science,” *Environmental Politics* (forthcoming)

On the inequality of political influence and climate change mitigation:

Week 8: The United States in Comparative Perspective
Thursday, February 24

Key Themes

- How much democratic backsliding has occurred in the United States? How big is the risk of democratic breakdown?
- How similar or different is the current crisis of democracy in the United States to previous crises this country has experienced?
- How similar or different is the current crisis of democracy in the United States to recent episodes of democratic backsliding or breakdown in other countries?
- What lessons can be learned from historical or cross-country comparisons?

Assigned Readings

- Chapters 2-3 and 6-8 in Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, How Democracies Die (New York: Crown 2018)
- John Feerhery, “A Republican Congress is Needed to Fight Left’s Slide to Autocracy,” The Hill (October 5, 2021)

Supplementary Readings

Lessons from a comparative and/or historical perspective:


Kurt Weyland, “Populism’s Threat to Democracy: Comparative Lessons for the United States,” *Perspectives on Politics* 18,2 (2020): 389-406 [is good but includes some set theoretic analysis toward the end that might not be great for undergrads]

A debate on Weyland’s “Populism’s Threat to Democracy”:


On the risk of democratic breakdown in the U.S.:

*Assessments by political scientists and legal scholars*


- Sarah Repucci, “From Crisis to Reform: A Call to Strengthen America’s Battered Democracy,” Freedom House Special Report (March 2021)


*Commentary and op-eds*
• Aaron Blake, “How Close Were We to an Actual Stolen Election – Stolen by Trump?” Washington Post (October 13, 2021)
• Barton Gellman, “Trump’s Next Coup Has Already Begun,” The Atlantic (December 6, 2021)
• Larry Diamond, “I’m a Democracy Expert. I Never Thought We’d Be So Close to a Breakdown,” The New York Times (November 1, 2021)
• Christopher Ingraham, “The United States is Backsliding into Autocracy Under Trump, Scholars Warn,” The Washington Post (September 18, 2020)
• Kelly Riddell, “Anti-Trump Left a Threat to American Democracy?” The Washington Times (December 19, 2016)
• Matthew Yglesias, “The Great Awokening,” Vox (April 1, 2019)

On political violence in the U.S.:

• Larry Diamond, Lee Drutman, Tod Lindberg, Nathan Kalmoe, Lilliana Mason, “Americans Increasingly Believe Violence is Justified If the Other Side Wins,” Politico (October 1, 2020)
• Sean Westwood, Justin Grimmer, Matthew Tyler, and Clayton Nall, “Current Research Overstates American Support for Political Violence,” Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (forthcoming)
• Barbara Walter, How Civil Wars Start – and How to Stop Them (New York, Crown: 2022)
• William Gale and Darrell West, “Is the US headed for Another Civil War?” Brookings Institution Report (September 16, 2021)

On the problems of minoritarian institutions in the U.S.:

• Pippa Norris, “Can Our Democracy Survive if Most Republicans Think the Government is Illegitimate?” The Washington Post (December 11, 2020)

On the Republican Party:
Zack Beauchamp, “Call it Authoritarianism,” *Vox* (June 15, 2021)
Zack Beauchamp, “The Republican Party is an Authoritarian Outlier,” *Vox* (September 22, 2020)

On electoral support for Trump and Trumpism:

  - Summarized in Lilliana Mason, Julie Wronski, and John Kane, “Republicans and Democrats have split over whether to support multiethnic democracy, our research shows,” *The Washington Post: Monkey Cage* (January 3, 2022)
Christopher Sebastian Parker, “Status Threat: Moving the Right Further to the Right?” *Daedalus* 150,2 (2021): 56-75
Joseph Uscinski, Adam Enders, Michelle Seelig, Casey Klofstad, John Funchion, Caleb Everett, Stefan Wuchty, Kamal Premaratne, and Manohar Murthi, “American Politics
- Emily Ekins and Jonathan Haidt, “Donald Trump Supporters Think About Morality Differently Than Other Voters,” *Vox* (February 5, 2016)

On the effects of polarization in the U.S.:

*See also readings for Week 4*

- Eli Finkel, Christopher Bail, Mina Cikara, Peter Ditto, Shanto Iyengar, Samara Klar, Lilliana Mason *et al., “Political Sectarianism in America,” Science* 370, 6516 (2020)
- David Broockman, Joshua Kalla, and Sean Westwood, “Does Affective Polarization Undermine Democratic Norms or Accountability? Maybe Not,” UC Berkeley, Yale University, and Dartmouth College working paper (2021)
**Week 9: What Can be Done?**  
*Thursday, March 3*

**Key Themes**

- What political strategies have proved successful in countries that have reversed democratic backsliding?
- What types of policies or reforms can mitigate political polarization and economic inequality?
- What can be done to minimize the threats to democracy posed by disinformation, AI, and climate change?

**Assigned Readings**

- *Foreign Policy*, “10 Practical (and Sometimes Uncomfortable) Ideas to Fix Democracy” (Winter 2022)
- Helen Landemore, “Power to the People,” *Foreign Policy* (Winter 2022)

**Supplementary Readings**

Resource guides:

Analyses and case studies of democratic resilience:


Proposals for electoral, constitutional, and other institutional reforms:

- Chapters 6-7 and conclusion in Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Huq, *How to Save a Constitutional Democracy* (University of Chicago Press, 2018)
- Chapter 8 in Benjamin Page and Martin Gilens, *Democracy in America? What Has Gone Wrong and What We Can Do About It* (University of Chicago Press, 2020)
- Richard Hasen, “Here’s What Congress Can Do to Keep the Next Trump from Stealing an Election,” *The Washington Post* (September 29, 2021)

On the need for more democracy:

On how to reduce political polarization:


On how to equalize political influence:

- Chapters 7-10 in Benjamin Page and Martin Gilens, *Democracy in America? What Has Gone Wrong and What We Can Do About It* (University of Chicago Press, 2020)
- Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, “Making America Great Again: The Case for the Mixed Economy,” *Foreign Affairs* 95 (May/June 2016)

On how to address misinformation and disinformation:

- Stephan Lewandowsky, John Cook, Ullrich Ecker, Dolores Albarracin, Michelle Amazeen, Panayiota Kendou, Doug Lombardi et al., *The Debunking Handbook 2020* (George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication, 2020)
• Chapter 6 in Philip Howard, *Lie Machines: How to Save Democracy from Troll Armies, Deceitful Robots, Junk News Operations, and Political Operatives* (Yale University Press, 2020)

On how to address automation and the rise of AI:

• Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee, “Human Work in the Robotic Future: Policy for the Age of Automation,” *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2016)
• Chapters 5-8 in Darrell West, *The Future of Work: Robots, AI, and Automation* (Brookings Institution Press, 2018)

On how to mobilize within a democracy against climate change:

• Arjuna Dibley, “How to Talk to a Populist About Climate Change,” *Foreign Policy* (March 29, 2019)
• Charlie Mitchell, “Populism Is the Key to Climate Action,” *The New Republic* (October 5, 2020)
• Cameron Abadi, “Thinking Outside the Ballot Box,” *Foreign Policy* (Winter 2022)