

PS169: DEMOCRATIC EROSION AND HOW TO STOP IT

Summer 2022, Session C

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Course Description

The January 6th attack on the U.S. capitol was a forceful reminder that democracy cannot be taken for granted. Even outside the U.S., observers see evidence that the world recently entered a “third wave of autocratization”, characterized by ever higher numbers of citizens experiencing democratic erosion. What is novel about current challenges to democracy is that they frequently originate from democratically elected leaders who employ legal means to undermine checks and balances. Against this backdrop, this course is designed to help you answer some of today’s most pressing questions: In what ways is democracy currently under attack? Why are some democracies stable whereas others revert to authoritarianism? Under which conditions can democratically elected leaders undermine democracy? Which strategies can ordinary citizens and pro-democratic opposition parties employ to effectively oppose leaders attempting to subvert democracy?

Learning Outcomes

In the first half of the course, you will learn about what democratic erosion is, how prevalent it has been recently, and why it occurs in some regimes but not others. In the second half, we will study what citizens like us can do to help stabilize democracy, why pro-democratic opposition parties are crucial to preventing leaders from monopolizing power, and how democratic institutions (may) need to be reformed.

In addition to studying cutting-edge research on democratic erosion (and how to prevent it), we will learn how to conduct independent research on the topic. For this purpose, I will assign every student to a country that experienced substantial reductions in democratic quality after 1945. In your midterm essay, you will identify pertinent sources speaking to (a) how exactly democracy eroded in your case, (b) which actor(s) were responsible, and (c) how the theories we covered may or may not explain why democratic erosion occurred in your case. In your final essay, you will discuss (a) patterns of support for and/ or opposition to democratic erosion among ordinary citizens, (b) which pro-democratic opposition parties existed and what strategies they employed, and (c) whether and why democratic erosion was or wasn’t successfully stopped. To facilitate this exercise, I will explain how you can find pertinent sources and how to effectively structure your essay.

Expectations and Grading

This class is targeted at a broad range of students in the social sciences. While having taken a previous class on American Politics or Comparative Politics might be an advantage, I expect this class to be rewarding to everyone with an interest in current conversations about the quality of democracy.

The requirements for this class are as follows:

- *Attendance:* Attendance is mandatory. If you can’t make it, please let me know in advance.
- *Reading Assignments:* It is imperative that you complete the readings before our meetings. You can access them via our class website. You are not required to study the recommended readings.
- *In-Class Participation - 20%*

- *Midterm Essay - 40%. Due August 21, 2022.*
- *Final Essay - 40%. Due September 11, 2022.*

This course will not be graded on a curve – if you all excel in this class, you can all get an A. Scores will be converted to letter grades using the typical cutoff points.

Tentative Schedule

Week 1: The State of Democratic Erosion

We begin by distinguishing types of regimes: democracies, autocracies and those in between. We then discuss how these concepts are measured in practice. After conceptualizing democratic erosion, we distinguish pathways in which democracies become less democratic. The Bermeo reading explores how the ways in which democracies have come under attack have changed in recent decades as executive aggrandizement has overtaken coups as the dominant form of reductions in democratic quality. The Varieties of Democracy report explains how severe democratic erosion was across the globe in 2020 and how the Covid-19 pandemic affected it. Haggard and Kaufman conceptualize and measure democratic erosion and highlight polarization as a key enabling condition.

Required readings:

- Bermeo 2016: On Democratic Backsliding
- [V-Dem 2021: Autocratization Turns Viral \(only pp. 5-28\)](#)
- Haggard and Kaufman 2021: Backsliding (Chapter 1)

Recommended readings:

- [Freedom House 2021: Democracy Under Siege](#)
- [Treisman 2018: Is Democracy Really in Danger?](#)
- [Schedler 1998: What is Democratic Consolidation?](#)
- [Frantz et al. 2021: How Personalist Politics is Changing Democracies](#)

Week 2: Why Some Regimes Become Less Democratic I: Institutions and Socio-Economic Context

After having conceptualized and operationalized democratic erosion, we now turn to explaining why some democracies are stable whereas others become less democratic or even revert to authoritarianism. Waldner and Lust provide a state-of-the-art overview of theories of democratic erosion. Levitsky and Ziblatt use the American case to argue that democracies become unstable when norms of forbearance and mutual tolerance are violated. The Oscar-nominated documentary "Edge of Democracy" gives insights into how democratic erosion in Brazil was facilitated by economic stagnation and high levels of corruption.

Required readings:

- [Waldner and Lust 2018: Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms With Democratic Backsliding](#)
- [Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018: How Democracies Die \(Introduction, pp. 1-10\)](#)
- Watch "[The Edge of Democracy](#)" on Netflix (requires subscription) **OR** listen to one Council on Foreign Relations podcasts on backsliding in [Latin America](#), [India](#), or [Europe](#).

Recommended readings:

- Linz 1990: The Perils of Presidentialism
- Przeworski et al. 2000: Democracy and development: Political institutions and well-being in the world, 1950-1990
- Norris and Inglehart 2019: Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism
- Boese et al. 2021: How democracies prevail: democratic resilience as a two-stage process
- Linz and Stepan 1989: The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes (Chapters 2 and 3)
- Helmke et al. 2021: Democracy by Deterrence

Week 3: Why Some Regimes Become Less Democratic II: The Causes and Consequences of Polarization

Most observers agree that polarization facilitates democratic erosion. But what do we mean by polarization? How can affective and ideologic polarization be fueled through the rhetoric of populist politicians? The Mudde article explains the concept of populism and how populist rhetoric affects public opinion. Graham and Svolik discuss why voters are more likely to tolerate democratic violations from their own party when polarization is high. Foa elaborates on the contexts in which public support for populist politicians eroding democracy should be strongest.

Required readings:

- Mudde 2017: The Ideational Approach to the Study of Populism
- Graham and Svolik 2020: Democracy in America? Partisanship, polarization, and the robustness of support for democracy in the United States
- Foa 2021: Why Strongmen Win in Weak States

Recommended readings:

- Bartels 2020: Ethnic antagonism erodes Republicans' commitment to democracy

Week 4: Stopping Democratic Erosion at the Micro-Level: Reducing Affective Polarization

If polarization is harmful to democratic stability, what can we do to reduce it? Some authors argue that micro-level interventions can reduce affective polarization. Among the most widely discussed are perspective-taking strategies (Broockman and Kalla 2016), intergroup contact (Mousa 2020) and the correction of partisan stereotypes (Ahler and Sood 2018). Finkel et al. provide an overview of what we know about polarization in the United States and how to overcome it.

Required readings:

- Finkel et al. 2020: Political Sectarianism in America
- Ahler and Sood 2018: The parties in our heads: Misperceptions about party composition and their consequences
- Broockman and Kalla 2016: Durably reducing transphobia: A field experiment on door-to-door canvassing
- Mousa 2020: Building social cohesion between Christians and Muslims through soccer in post-ISIS Iraq

Week 5: Stopping Democratic Erosion at the Meso-Level: Opposition Strategies Towards Executive Aggrandizement

We shift our attention from ordinary citizens to the strategies and resources of pro-democratic opposition parties. How and under which conditions can the pro-democratic opposition keep an aggrandizing president in check (Laebens and Luehrmann 2021)? Why is it difficult for opposition parties to collaborate to stop autocratic leaders (Gandhi and Ong 2019)? Which opposition strategies are supported by ordinary citizens (Albertus and Grossman 2021)?

Required readings:

- Laebens and Luehrmann 2021: What halts democratic erosion? The changing role of accountability
- Gandhi and Ong 2019: Committed or conditional democrats? Opposition dynamics in electoral autocracies
- Albertus and Grossman 2021: The Americas: When Do Voters Support Power Grabs?

Recommended readings:

- Gamboa 2017: Opposition at the Margins: Strategies against the Erosion of Democracy in Colombia and Venezuela
- Cleary and Oeztuerk 2020: When does backsliding lead to breakdown? Uncertainty and opposition strategies in democracies at risk
- Arriola et al. 2021: Democratic subversion: Elite cooptation and opposition fragmentation
- Capoccia 2005: Defending democracy: Reactions to extremism in interwar Europe
- Somer et al. 2021: Pernicious polarization, autocratization and opposition strategies

Week 6: Stopping Democratic Erosion at the Macro-Level: Stabilizing Democracies Through Institutional Change and Collective Action

In our final week, we turn to arguments that democratic institutions need to be revised for democracy to be stable. Landemore emphasizes the shortcomings of representative democracy to call for more direct involvement of ordinary citizens in policy making. Both Levitsky and Ziblatt as well as Freedom House discuss how representative democracy in the U.S. needs to be reformed, and how ordinary citizens can facilitate such reform through collective action.

Required readings:

- Landemore 2020: Open Society (Chapter 1)
- Levitsky and Ziblatt 2020
- Freedom House 2021: From Crisis to Reform

Class Policies

- Academic dishonesty: I am required to submit all instances of suspected plagiarism to the Dean of Students. When in doubt, please make sure to review UCLA's academic integrity resources (e.g., [resource 1](#), [resource 2](#)).
- Communication between us: It might take up to 24 hours for me to answer your email. If your email contains multiple questions about class content, it would be more productive for both of us if you could attend my office hours instead.
- Grade appeals: If you are dissatisfied with a grade you received on the midterm or final, you have the right to appeal the grade. This requires you to submit a one page explanation of why you believe a better grade would have been warranted. This explanation has to be sent to me via email within 72 hours of you receiving the grade. Note that I will take a second look at your work which may increase, decrease or not change your grade.
- Late submissions: If you hand in your midterm or final late without my approval, you will lose 10 percentage points for every 24 hour period that started after the deadline passed. If you submit your work more than three days late, your work will not be considered and automatically receive a failing grade. If you cannot submit on time due to an emergency, please contact me before the deadline so that we can find a solution.
- Absences: If you cannot attend our meetings due to emergencies, religious holidays, or major unavoidable conflicts, please get in touch with me as early as possible. Within reason I can excuse well-justified absences.

Campus Resources

- [The Academic Advancement Program \(AAP\)](#): The program provides an array of academic services that encourage and promote academic achievement and excellence by offering support to students from groups historically underserved in higher education. If you are eligible for UCLA's Academic Advancement Program (AAP), sign up and use their services, including tutoring services and writing support.
- [Writing Center](#): Excellent resource to assist with writing assignments. Students can make appointments at the writing center to have someone work with them one on one to develop a thesis, learn how to organize ideas, or get assistance on effective proofreading strategies.
- [Center for Accessible Education](#): Students who have or think they may have a disability should go to the Center for Accessible Education (CAE). If you require additional time for taking an exam due to a disability, you are required to submit the appropriate documentation from CAE and let your instructor know. CAE offers many services for students with disabilities, including determining students' eligibility for specific accommodations and services.
- [Counseling and Psychological Services](#): Being a student is stressful and may take a toll on your mental health. Fortunately, CAPS provides counseling that seeks to help students experiencing depression, anxiety, stress, or issues with adjustment to college life. (310) 825-0768
- [The Office of the Ombudsman, Mediation and Dispute Resolution Resources](#): (310) 825-7627
- [Title IX Office / Sexual Harassment Prevention](#): (310) 206-3417
- [Campus Assault Resources and Education \(CARE\)](#): (310) 206-2465
- [College Academic Counseling](#): (310) 825-3382
- [Library Research Consultations for Undergraduates](#)