

How Democracies Die: Populism and Extremism in Contemporary Politics

PSC 1000 | Fall 2022

Tuesday/Thursday | 2:20 p.m. – 3:35 p.m. | Tompkins Hall 307

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Course Description

Is democracy dying? This question would have been unthinkable even a decade ago—yet, it has become urgently relevant amid the electoral success of populist leaders, the increasing prevalence of extremist ideologies, and the mounting threat of political violence. In this Dean’s Seminar, we will explore the meaning of “democracy” and assess how populist and extremist currents in contemporary politics have called into question the long-term stability of democratic governance around the world. Our analysis of democratic pathologies will focus on both diagnosing problems and developing solutions. We will adopt a global perspective to consider the various challenges facing democracy, assessing old and new democracies in both the Global North and Global South.

This course is divided into four parts. In Part I, we will study how scholars define and measure democracy, as well as recent trends in democratic backsliding globally. In Part II, we will explore the relationship between populism and democracy, including what “populism” means, how it manifests on both the right and the left, and how it can simultaneously be a source of democratic threat and renewal. In Part III, we will turn our attention to extremism and its unambiguously anti-democratic profile, incorporating topics such as racism, disinformation, political violence, and fascism. In Part IV, we will apply the theories and concepts from the first three parts of the course to a series of case studies spanning the globe: the United States, Hungary, India, Turkey, Venezuela, and Russia.

As a Dean’s Seminar, our seminar-style class sessions will encourage active engagement in discussion and debate on the challenges and solutions to democratic governance in the twenty-first century. This course fulfills the criteria for the GPAC Tier One “Critical Thinking” designation and GPAC Tier Two “Global Perspective” designation.

Learning Objectives

As a result of completing this course, students will be able to:

1. Analyze how scholars define and measure democracy, populism, and extremism;
2. Evaluate scholarly arguments about democratic decline and critique their evidentiary bases;
3. Identify threats to democracy globally and propose solutions to these challenges;
4. Formulate arguments about current events based on scholarly theories and concepts; and
5. Write analytically for both scholarly and general audiences.

In fulfillment of the criteria for the GPAC “Critical Thinking” designation, this course will provide students the opportunity to:

1. Analyze and evaluate complex information;
2. Analyze scholarly literature, in particular its theoretical orientation and sources of support; and
3. Formulate an argument based on an analysis of that scholarly literature.

Furthermore, in fulfillment of the criteria for the GPAC “Global Perspective” designation, this course will provide students the opportunity to:

1. Analyze an issue in terms of its global implications; and
2. Frame questions, gather evidence, analyze evidence, and draw conclusions about an issue in terms of its global implications.

Course Materials

There is no textbook for this course. All course materials are available on Blackboard.

Assignments

There are three assignments for this course:

- ❖ Participation (20%)
- ❖ Current Event Presentations and Memos (30%)
- ❖ Democracy Reform Project (50%)

Participation (20%)

It is important to come to class prepared to actively participate in class discussions. Participation can take many forms, including asking questions, answering questions, and engaging in group discussions and activities. Participation will be assessed by both the frequency and the quality of students’ contributions. If students have a concern about their ability to participate during in-class discussions, they must contact the instructor with their concerns during the first week of the semester.

Current Event Presentations and Memos (30%)

Our goal in this course is to study scholarly arguments about democratic decline, populism, and extremism—so as to better understand the current threats to democracy in our own world. To that end, each student will be responsible for two current event presentations during the semester (15% each). The presentations should explain the topic or issue at stake in the current event and link it to material covered in the course. Students must also submit a 500-word memo (Times New Roman font, 12-point, double-spaced, one-inch margins) summarizing the current event and providing a short reflection linking it to topics and themes covered in class and the readings. The memo should be submitted on Blackboard before class on the day of the presentation. Students will sign up for the date of their presentations during the first week of the semester.

Democracy Reform Project (50%)

While our course explores the threats to democracy in the contemporary world, we do so with the aim of devising solutions that will improve and renew democratic governance.

To that end, students will engage in a semester-long Democracy Reform Project, in which they will: (Task 1) identify a specific problem confronting contemporary democracy, (Task 2) review the approaches to this problem offered by scholars and policymakers, (Task 3) propose their own solution to this problem, and (Task 4) defend their solution against potential critiques and counterproposals.

The assignment will be completed in three parts, which together total 50% of the final grade:

- ❖ Proposal (10%)
- ❖ First Draft (15%)
- ❖ Final Draft (25%)

In the Proposal, students should provide a 500-word overview of their project. They should clearly articulate the problem under study (Task 1) and briefly summarize how scholars and policymakers have addressed the problem (Task 2). The Proposal is due on September 22.

In the First Draft, students should address all four tasks mentioned above in an 8–10 page paper. The paper should follow standard formatting guidelines: typed, double-spaced, one-inch margins, Times New Roman 12-point font. The First Draft is due on November 3.

In the Final Draft, students should revise their first draft based on the instructor's comments and the feedback received during the peer-review workshop on November 17. The Final Draft is due on December 14.

GW Compass

Adjusting to college life can be a challenge, particularly since there are so many “unknowns” that confront first-year students. To ease this transition, this Dean’s Seminar will feature regular class discussions on topical issues about settling in as an undergraduate student at George Washington University. These “GW Compass” sessions will offer direction and practical information to first-year students, as well as provide a comfortable space to ask questions and engage in honest discussion.

The themes for GW Compass are:

- ❖ Navigating the Syllabus and Blackboard
- ❖ Navigating Office Hours and Communicating with Professors
- ❖ Navigating the Library and Academic Resources
- ❖ Navigating the Writing Center
- ❖ Navigating Campus Health Resources
- ❖ Navigating Competing Priorities
- ❖ Navigating Class Registration
- ❖ Navigating Study Strategies and Finals

Students should feel free to contact the instructor if there are additional topics they would like to address during the semester.

Course Policies

Covid-19 Precautions

Students are required to follow all health and safety guidelines set forth by the university and the District of Columbia. The university’s policies can be found in the [Onward GW Plan](#) and updates can be found on the university’s [coronavirus website](#). Specifically, students are required to wear a mask **at all times** during in-person class sessions and to **stay home** if they are experiencing Covid symptoms or have tested positive. In accordance with the university’s [classroom policy](#), students are not permitted to bring or consume food or drink in the classroom. Failure to comply with these policies will be sanctioned, including removal from class and reporting to the relevant university authority.

Absences

Students should plan to attend and participate in all class sessions. Students will be given two free absences, after which their grade will be adversely affected. In the case of an absence, students should ensure they keep up with the class readings and consult another student for class notes. In accordance with the university’s policy on religious holidays: (1) students should notify faculty at least three weeks in advance of their intention to be absent from class on their day(s) of religious observance; (2) the

faculty should extend to these students the courtesy of absence without penalty on such occasions, including permission to make up examinations; (3) faculty who intend to observe a religious holiday should arrange at the beginning of the semester to reschedule missed classes or make other provisions for course-related activities. Additional details on this policy are available [here](#).

Academic Integrity

Students are expected to be familiar with the [Code of Academic Integrity](#) and the [Code of Student Conduct](#). Academic dishonesty or other violations of the codes will be reported to the university and will be penalized. Academic dishonesty is defined as cheating of any kind, including misrepresenting one's own work, taking credit for the work of others without crediting them and without appropriate authorization, and the fabrication of information.

Blackboard

All course materials are posted on Blackboard. Students should regularly check Blackboard and their GW email address for class updates. All assignments must be submitted on Blackboard.

Classroom Conduct

All students are responsible for contributing to a professional, scholarly, and welcoming classroom environment. Rudeness, intolerance, or discrimination of any kind will not be tolerated.

Extensions and Late Assignments

Please consult the instructor about an extension before the deadline if you need extra time to complete an assignment. Requests for an extension following the deadline will not be granted. Late assignments will be penalized one-third of a letter grade each day they are late.

Safety and Security

In an emergency, call GWPD at 202-994-6111 or 911. For situation-specific actions, review the [Emergency Response Handbook](#). To stay informed on campus safety and security, see [here](#).

Technology in the Classroom

In order to facilitate active engagement, students are asked to not use technology in the classroom. This includes laptops, tablets, phones, or other electronic devices. Students with DSS accommodation will be exempted from this policy.

Use of Electronic Class Material

Students are encouraged to use electronic course materials, including recorded class sessions, for private personal use in connection with their academic program of study. Electronic course materials and recorded class sessions should not be shared or used for non-course related purposes unless express permission has been granted by the instructor. Students who impermissibly share any electronic course materials are subject to discipline under the Student Code of Conduct. Please contact the instructor if you have questions regarding what constitutes permissible or impermissible use of electronic course materials and/or recorded class sessions.

Workload

In accordance with university policy, students are expected to spend a minimum of 100 minutes on independent coursework for every 50 minutes of direct instruction per week. This course meets for 2.5 hours of direct instruction per week, meaning students are expected to spend 5 hours of independent learning per week. This totals a minimum of 7.5 hours of learning per week.

Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services

GW's Colonial Health Center offers counseling and psychological services, supporting mental health and personal development by collaborating directly with students to overcome challenges and difficulties that may interfere with academic, emotional, and personal success. For additional information, call 202-994-5300 or see [here](#).

Disability Support Services (DSS)

Any student who may need an accommodation based on the potential impact of a disability should contact Disability Support Services in Rome Hall, 801 22nd Street NW, Suite 102 to establish eligibility and to coordinate reasonable accommodations. For additional information, call 202-994-8250 or see [here](#).

Gelman Library

The [Gelman Library](#) offers a vast array of digital and print resources to support student learning. These include a [Political Science Guide](#) and [Citation Styles Guide](#).

Writing Center

The [Writing Center](#) offers free writing support to students through one-on-one consultations. Appointments can be made [here](#).

Course Schedule

PART I – DEMOCRACY

August 30, 2022 – Introduction

Key Issues: What do we stand to gain by studying contemporary democracy? How might studying democracy and the challenges it faces help us understand other political, economic, and social issues?

Readings:

- ❖ Syllabus

GW Compass: Navigating the Syllabus and Blackboard

September 1, 2022 – Is Democracy Dying?

Key Issues: What is the current state of democracy around the world? What trends have emerged in regime type globally over the past several decades?

Readings:

- ❖ Repucci, Sarah, and Amy Slipowitz. 2022. “Freedom in the World 2022: The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule.” *Freedom House*. **Read pp. 1–9.**
 - ❖ Bermeo, Nancy. 2016. “On Democratic Backsliding.” *Journal of Democracy* 27 (1): 5–19.
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September 6, 2022 — What Is Democracy?

Key Issues: Why do scholars distinguish between different types of democracy? What are the most prominent subtypes identified by scholars? What does democracy mean in different parts of world?

Readings:

- ❖ Coppedge, Michael, and John Gerring. 2011. "Conceptualizing and Measuring Democracy: A New Approach." *Perspectives on Politics* 9 (2): 247–267. **Read only "Conceptions" section on pp. 253–255.**
 - ❖ Shi, Tianjian, and Jie Lu. 2010. "The Meanings of Democracy: The Shadow of Confucianism." *Journal of Democracy* 21 (4): 123–130.
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September 8, 2022 — Can We Measure Democracy?

Key Issues: How do scholars measure democracy? What are the strengths and weaknesses of categorical and continuous measurement strategies? How do popular measures of democracy perform, including Polity, Freedom House, Economist Intelligence Unit, and V-Dem?

Readings:

- ❖ Coppedge, Michael, and John Gerring. 2011. "Conceptualizing and Measuring Democracy: A New Approach." *Perspectives on Politics* 9 (2): 247–267. **Read only pp. 247–252, stop at "A New Approach."**
- ❖ Lindberg, Staffan I., Michael Coppedge, John Gerring, Jan Teorell, et al. 2014. "V-Dem: A New Way to Measure Democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 25 (3): 159–169.

GW Compass: Navigating Office Hours and Blackboard

September 13, 2022 – Democratic Discontent

Key Issues: Is citizens' support for democracy actually decreasing? If so, why are individuals less satisfied with democracy? What does democratic discontent imply about the stability of democracy?

Readings:

- ❖ Connaughton, Aidan, Nicholas Kent, and Shannon Schumacher. 2020. "How People Around the World See Democracy in 8 Charts." *Pew Research Center*. February 27, 2020.
- ❖ Foa, Roberto Stefan, and Yascha Mounk. 2017. "The Signs of Deconsolidation." *Journal of Democracy* 28 (1): 5–15.
- ❖ Alexander, Amy C., and Christian Welzel. 2017. "The Myth of Deconsolidation: Rising Liberalism and Populist Reaction." *Journal of Democracy* (Web Exchange): 1–15.

PART II – POPULISM

September 15, 2022 – Populism

Key Issues: What is populism? Why do scholars seem to disagree so much on defining this concept?

Readings:

- ❖ Urbinati, Nadia. 2019. “Political Theory of Populism.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 22: 1–17.

September 20, 2022 – Populism and Majoritarianism

Key Issues: Do populists’ support of majoritarianism enhance or hinder democracy? Do direct democracy initiatives, such as referenda, address the populist critique of contemporary democracy?

Readings:

- ❖ Urbinati, Nadia. 2017. “Populism and the Principle of Majority.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, eds. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy. New York: Oxford University Press.
- ❖ Johnson, Tyler, Kathleen Tipler, and Tyler Camarillo. 2019. “Monumental Decisions: How Direct Democracy Shapes Attitudes in the Conflict over Confederate Memorials.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 52 (4): 620–624.

September 22, 2022 – Populism and Liberalism

Key Issues: What is the populist critique of liberalism? Is this consistent with most understandings of democracy in the contemporary era? What would an “illiberal democracy” look like?

Readings:

- ❖ Albertazzi, Daniele, and Sean Mueller. 2013. “Populism and Liberal Democracy: Populists in Government in Austria, Italy, Poland, and Switzerland.” *Government & Opposition* 48 (3): 343–371. ****Read only pp. 343–349.****
- ❖ WATCH: Council on Foreign Relations. 2018. “The Rise of Illiberal Democracies.” *Council on Foreign Relations*. April 23, 2018.

Assignment: Democracy Reform Project Proposal Due

GW Compass: Navigating the Library and Academic Resources

September 27, 2022 – Populist Radical Right

Key Issues: What are the key features of the populist radical right (PRR)? To what extent does the PRR pose a threat to democracy? What aspects of democracy are most challenged by the PRR?

Readings:

- ❖ Mudde, Cas. 2019. *The Far Right Today*. Medford, MA: Polity. ****Read pp. 1–23.****
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September 29, 2022 – Nationalism

Key Issues: Is nationalism a friend or foe of democracy? To what extent is the nation a suitable expression of the demos (i.e. “the people”)?

Readings:

- ❖ Croucher, Sheila L. 2004. “Nation-Shaping in a Postmodern World.” In *Globalization and Belonging: The Politics of Identity in a Changing World*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield. ****Read pp. 83–94.****
 - ❖ Fukuyama, Francis. 2018. “Why National Identity Matters.” *Journal of Democracy* 29 (4): 5–15.
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October 4, 2022 – Populism and Democracy Revisited

Key Issues: Is populism a force for the renewal or destruction of democracy?

Readings:

- ❖ Mudde, Cas, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. 2017. “Populism and Democracy.” In *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.

GW Compass: Navigating the Writing Center

PART III – EXTREMISM

October 6, 2022 – Extremism

Key Issues: What is political extremism? Why do citizens participate in extremist politics?

Readings:

- ❖ LISTEN: Cassam, Quassim. 2022. “Extremism.” Podcast. March 13.
 - ❖ Enders, Adam M., et al. 2022. “Who Supports QAnon? A Case Study in Political Extremism.” *Journal of Politics* 84 (3): 1844–1849.
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October 11, 2022 – Research Conferences (No Class)

October 13, 2022 – Racism

Key Issues: What specific attributes of democracy are most threatened by racism? How is racism “systemic”? How do similar patterns arise for other identity-based forms of discrimination?

Readings:

- ❖ Quarcoo, Ashley. 2020. “Global Democracy Supporters Must Confront Systemic Racism.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. July 15, 2020.
- ❖ Porter, Eduardo. 2022. “Break Down the Barriers.” *Foreign Policy*. January 7, 2022.

October 18, 2022 – Disinformation

Key Issues: How have technological advancements transformed democratic politics? Can democracy survive in a “post-truth” era?

Readings:

- ❖ Bisen, Arjun. 2019. “Disinformation Is Drowning Democracy.” *Foreign Policy*. April 24, 2019.
 - ❖ McDermott, Rose. 2019. “Psychological Underpinnings of Post-Truth in Political Beliefs.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 52 (2): 218–222.
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October 20, 2022 – Political Hardball

Key Issues: What is “political hardball”? How can democratic institutions be used to undermine democracy itself?

Readings:

- ❖ Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. “The Guardrails of Democracy.” In *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown.
- ❖ LISTEN: Walter, Amy. 2019. “Playing Dirty or Just Plain Playing—The Game of Political Hardball.” *Politics with Amy Walter*. Podcast.

October 25 – Fall Break (No Class)

October 27, 2022 – Polarization

Key Issues: What is polarization? Is polarization necessarily bad for democracy? When and how might polarization threaten democratic governance?

Readings:

- ❖ LISTEN: Azari, Julia, Lee Drutman, and Noam Gidron. 2021. “What Is Affective Polarization?” *Politics in Question*. Podcast.
 - ❖ Kurtzleben, Danielle, and Lilliana Mason. 2021. “What If We Don’t Need to ‘Fix’ Polarization?” *NPR*. March 26, 2021.
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November 1, 2022 – Political Violence

Key Issues: What types of political violence arise in democracies? How does political violence contradict the core tenets of democracy?

Readings:

- ❖ Schwarzmantel, John. 2010. “Democracy and Violence: A Theoretical Overview.” *Democratization* 17 (2): 217–234. **Read pp. 217–222.**
- ❖ Kleinfeld, Rachel. 2021. “The Rise of Political Violence in the United States.” *Journal of Democracy* 32 (4): 160–176.

GW Compass: Navigating Class Registration

November 3, 2022 – Fascism

Key Issues: What is fascism? To what extent do contemporary populist and extremist movements resemble fascism? Is fascism a useful concept to understand the contemporary threat to democracy?

Readings:

- ❖ Waxman, Olivia B. 2019. “What to Know about the Origins of Fascism’s Brutal Ideology.” *TIME*. March 22, 2019.
- ❖ Matthews, Dylan. 2021. “The F Word.” *Vox*. January 14, 2021.

Assignment: Democracy Reform Project First Draft Due

PART IV – CASE STUDIES

November 8, 2022 – United States

Key Issues: What challenges face democracy in the United States? Where did this threat come from and what are the possible solutions?

Readings:

- ❖ Norris, Pippa. 2021. “It Happened in America: Democratic Backsliding Shouldn’t Have Come as a Surprise.” *Foreign Affairs*. January 7, 2021.
 - ❖ Prokop, Andrew. 2022. “American Democracy Is Under Threat. But What Is That Threat, Exactly?” *Vox*. January 25, 2022.
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November 10, 2022 – Hungary

Key Issues: Is democratic backsliding a serious problem within the European Union? How has Hungary tested the limits of the EU’s commitment to democracy?

Readings:

- ❖ Krekó, Peter, and Zsolt Enyedi. 2018. “Explaining Eastern Europe: Orbán’s Laboratory of Illiberalism.” *Journal of Democracy* 29 (3): 39–51.
 - ❖ Serhan, Yasmeen. 2020. “The EU Watches as Hungary Kills Democracy.” *The Atlantic*. April 2.
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November 15, 2022 – India

Key Issues: What issues plague Indian democracy? Is India on the path to democratic renewal or competitive authoritarianism?

Readings:

- ❖ Varshney, Ashutosh. 2019. “Modi Consolidates Power: Electoral Vibrancy, Mounting Liberal Deficits.” *Journal of Democracy* 30 (4): 63–77.

- ❖ Shankar, Soumya. 2019. “Millions of Voters are Missing in India.” *Foreign Policy*. April 9, 2019.
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November 17, 2022 – Peer-Review Workshop

November 22, 2022 – Research Day (No Class)

November 24, 2022 – Thanksgiving (No Class)

November 29, 2022 – Turkey

Key Issues: What kind of regime exists in Turkey? How did backsliding take the country beyond the sphere of democratic politics?

Readings:

- ❖ Kirişci, Kemal, and Amanda Sloat. 2019. “The Rise and Fall of Liberal Democracy in Turkey: Implications for the West.” *Brookings Institution*. February 2019.
 - ❖ Esen, Burk, and Sebnem Gumuscu. 2017. “Turkey: How the Coup Failed.” *Journal of Democracy* 28 (1): 59–73.
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December 1, 2022 – Venezuela

Key Issues: What is the state of democracy in Latin America? Why and how has democracy deteriorated in Venezuela?

Readings:

- ❖ Zovatto, Daniel. 2020. “The Rapidly Deteriorating Quality of Democracy in Latin America.” *Brookings Institution*. February 28, 2020.

- ❖ Aleem, Zeesham. 2017. “How Venezuela Went from a Rich Democracy to a Dictatorship on the Brink of Collapse.” *Vox*. September 19, 2017.

GW Compass: Navigating Study Strategies and Finals

December 6, 2022 – Russia

Key Issues: What types of regime exists in Russia? How did Putin undermine the democratic institutions of Russian government?

Readings:

- ❖ Fish, M. Steven. 2017. “The Kremlin Emboldened: What Is Putinism?” *Journal of Democracy* 28 (4): 61–75.
 - ❖ Lansky, Miriam, and Dylan Myles-Primakoff. 2018. “The Rise of Kleptocracy: Power and Plunder in Putin’s Russia.” *Journal of Democracy* 29 (1): 76–85.
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December 8, 2022 – Can Democracy Be Saved?

Key Issues: Despite its setbacks, is democracy permanently on the decline? Might this downturn lead to a new era democratic renewal?

Readings:

- ❖ Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. “Saving Democracy.” In *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown.
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December 14, 2022 – Democracy Reform Project Final Draft Due (No Class)
