Democratic Erosion (PSCI-498-303)

Guy Grossman

Fall 2023
Date updated: 09/07/2023

Class Location: Perelman Center for Political Science and Economics #425
Class Hours: Tuesdays 10:15-1:15p
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Office Hours: Mondays and Wednesdays 3:30–4:00
Office Hours Sign-Up: calendly.com/ggros

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. Since 2017, faculty at about two dozen universities will teach from roughly the same syllabus as part of the Democratic Erosion Consortium. Students at all participating universities share 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 erosion (backsliding) around the world. 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 erosion, and to present your views in both verbal and written forms.

Course Requirements

1. Class attendance and participation: 10%

2. Contribution to cross university blog (blogpost): 20%

3. Reflection on political event (10%)

4. Midterm: 25%

5. Country expansive case study: 25%

6. Presentation: 10%

1. Class attendance and participation (10%)

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.

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 should include links to relevant resources in your posts. You may include images as well, but please ensure that any images you use are not copyrighted. You can find a repository of open access images at Unsplash, Shutterstock, Getty Images, or a variety of other repositories. **The first blogpost must be completed by October 10 and the second blogpost by November 7, 2023**

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: **10/10**.

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: **11/7**.

3. Reflection on political event (10%)

Sometimes during the semester, you will attend a political event of your choice in Pennsylvania or elsewhere (e.g., while visiting your home town, while traveling, etc.). The type of event you attend is up to you: it could be a protest, a political rally, a town hall meeting with local or state representatives, a meeting of a local party cell, etc. You will then write a 800-1,200-word reflecting on your experience, again drawing on the readings where relevant. **The deadline for submitting your reflection is November 21.**

4. Midterm (25%)

The midterm will be an in-class exam with no connection to Wi-Fi.

5. Country case study (25%)

You are expected to write a 12-15-pages long case study on a specific country, **due before midnight on December 15, 2023**. Please mote that your case study will be converted to data and added to the *Democratic Erosion Event Dataset* (DEED). Members of the Democratic Erosion consortium use DEED to produce analyses for our partners in the policy community, including the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the US State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL), and the US Agency for International Development (USAID). The format of the case studies has been standardized across universities to facilitate coding and cross-country comparisons.

6. Presentation (10%)

In the last class meeting (December 5th, 2023) 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) that you may wish to consult from time to time.

Logistics

Office Hours

Please sign up to office hours using calendly.com/ggros. Outside of office hours, I will be busy doing other parts of my job (directing PDRI-DevLab, writing scientific papers, applying for grants, supervising graduate students, serving on faculty committees, writing tenure assessment letters etc.). Office hours are the time I have set aside to focus on you personally. Even if you don't have specific questions, the interactions generated during a good office hour discussion could help clear up any confusion you might have on a topic.

Communication

I will communicate with the class via both Canvas and email. In general, I prefer that course related communication takes place using Canvas. Please be certain that your UPenn email address is an email address you check on a frequent basis.

To ensure my ability to respond to all student emails in a timely fashion, please be sure to check the course syllabus and Canvas thoroughly for answers to any questions. I respond to emails during normal university work hours, and students can typically expect a response to an email enquiry within 2-3 working days. I do not typically respond to emails in the evenings, on weekends or on statutory holidays. I do not respond to unprofessional or rude emails.

Grade policy

Your course grade is determined according to the following scale:

A+ (4.0): 97-100	C (2.0): 68-69
A (4.0): 91-96	C- (1.7): 66-67
A- (3.7): 86-90	D+ (1.3): 64-65
B+ (3.3): 82-85	D (1.0): 62-63
B (3.0): 77-81	D- (0.7): 60-61
B- (2.7): 73-76	F (0): below 60
C+ (2.3): 70-72	

- The grade you earn is the grade you will receive in this course. Grades are not negotiable and I do not award points on the basis of your intention to do well. The only thing that matters in determining your grade is your performance in the course.

- Every effort will be made to grade fairly and impartially; however, mistakes sometimes occur. If you have a serious reservation about how you have been graded, write a comprehensive description of the mistake as you see it. Re-grade requests will only be accepted within a week after the return of the graded work.

- Late assignments will be penalized 1/10 of the grade every day, including the date the assignment is submitted. For example, if you submit your first blogpost on October 13 and receive a grade of 9/10, it will count as a 6/10 (subtracting 1 point for October 11, 12 and 13) when calculating your final grade.

Etiquette

Please be considerate of your fellow students: arrive to class on time, take notes of what has been discussed, and do not leave the session 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 encouraged 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.

Accommodating tiny children

Tiny children are great. If you are breastfeeding or simply can't find childcare, feel free to bring your baby to class. We'll make it work.

Religious Accommodation

The University accommodates students whose religious obligations conflict with attendance, submitting assignments, or completing scheduled tests and examinations. Please 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. 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.

Policy on the use of Generative AI tools

The beta release of ChatGPT in November 2022 is a historical milestone. It is quite likely that using Generative AI tools are going to become an important skill for careers in the not distant future. In the meantime though, it is going to take a while for society (academia included) to figure out when using these tools is and isn't acceptable. There are at least three reasons why:

1. Work created by AI tools may not be considered original work and instead, considered automated plagiarism. AI generated text is derived from previously created texts from sources that the models were trained on (but do not cite).

2. AI models have built-in biases — they are trained on limited underlying sources; they reproduce, rather than challenge, errors in the sources.

3. AI tools have limitations — they lack critical thinking to evaluate and reflect on criteria; they lack abductive reasoning to make judgments with incomplete information at hand.

Given these (important) caveats, some scholars in computational sciences debate if the hype over AI-based tools– especially as "automated plagiarism" tools– should be heeded at all. For the time being, I'm tentatively, pragmatically augmenting my academic integrity policy with a policy regarding a responsible use of AI-based tools in my class.

Academic integrity is a core principle at the University of Pennsylvania and it is critical that all students uphold this principle – whether using AI-based tools or otherwise. For my class, a responsible use of AI-based tools in completing coursework or assessments must be done in accordance with the following:

1. You must clearly identify the use of AI-based tools in your work. Any work that utilizes AI-based tools must be clearly marked as such, including the specific tool(s) used. For example, if you use ChatGPT-3, you must cite "ChatGPT-3. (YYYY, Month DD of query). "Text of your query." Generated using OpenAI. https://chat.openai.com"

2. You must be transparent in how you used the AI-based tool, including what work is your original contribution. An AI detector such as GPTZero (https://gptzero.me/) may be used to detect AI-driven work.

3. You must ensure your use of AI-based tools does not violate any copyright or intellectual property laws.

4. You must not use AI-based tools to cheat on assessments.

5. You must not use AI-based tools to plagiarize without citation.

Violations of this policy will be dealt with in accordance with UPenn's academic integrity policy. If you are found in violation of this policy, you may face penalties such as a reduction in grade, failure of the assignment or assessment, or even failure of the course. Finally, it's your responsibility to be aware of the academic integrity policy and take the necessary steps to ensure that your use of AI-based tools is in compliance with this policy. If you have questions, please speak with me first, as we navigate together how best to responsibly use these tools.

Where do I find the readings?

Class readings are available electronically through the class website on Canvas.

Books

We will read all or much of the following books:

- Müller, Jan-Werner. (2016). *What Is Populism?* University of Pennsylvania Press.

- Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. (2019). *How democracies die.* Crown.

Schedule

No class on August 29th (American Political Science Association Annual Conference)

Week 1: Introductions (Sep 5, 2023)

Objectives:

- Introductions (as like, getting to know each other)

- Set course expectations / go over the syllabus

Readings:

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

Week 2: The Challenge of Democratic Erosion (Sep 12, 2023)

Learning objectives:

- What is the evidence that we in an era of democratic backsliding?

- How widespread the problem is (if at all)?

Readings:

- V-Dem. (2023). *Democracy Report*.

- Protect Democracy. (2022). *The Authoritarian Playbook*.

- Little, Andrew T. and Anne Meng. (2023) "Measuring Democratic Backsliding." *PS: Political Science & Politics*. (forthcoming).

- Grumbach, Jacob M. (2023). "Laboratories of Democratic Backsliding." *American Political Science Review* 117(3): 967-984.

Week 3: Definitions of democracy and theories of democratization (Sep 19, 2023)

Learning objectives:

- Understand prominent approaches to conceptualizing and defining democracy.

- Understand how institutional design can affect the equity of democratic rule.

- Understand how notions of democracies might affect democratic erosion

Readings:

- Dahl, Robert. (1972). *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, chapter 1.

- Przeworski, Adam. (1991). *Democracy and the Market*, chapter 1.

- Acemoglu, Daron and James Robinson. (2006). *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, chapter 2.

- Grossman, Guy, Dorothy Kronick, Matthew Levendusky, and Marc Meredith. (2022). "The majoritarian threat to liberal democracy." *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 9(1): 36-45.

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

Week 4: Definitions and theories of democratic erosion (Sep 26, 2023)

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.

Readings:

- Waldner, David, and Ellen Lust. (2018). "Unwelcome change: Coming to terms with democratic backsliding." *Annual Review of Political Science* 21: 93-113.

- Levitsky, Steven and Daniel Ziblatt. (2018). *How Democracies Die*. Introduction, Chapters 1, 4, and 5.

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

> **Blog Post Workshop**
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> 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.

Week 5: Using democratic institutions to undermine democracy (Oct 3, 2023)

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.

Readings:

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

- Huq, Aziz and Tom Ginsburg. (2017). "How to Lose a Constitutional Democracy." *UCLA Law Review* 65(78): 80-169. Parts 1 and 4; skim part 3.

- Pozen, David E. (2018). "Hardball and/as Anti-Hardball." *NYUJ Legislation & Public Policy* 21: 949-955.

- Gidron, Noam. (2023). "Why Israeli Democracy Is in Crisis." *Journal of Democracy* 34(3): 33-45.

Week 6: Democratic Norms (Oct 10, 2023)

Learning objectives:

- The importance of democratic norms in sustaining democratic rule.

- What is the effect of politicians' rhetoric on norms of tolerance?

Readings:

- Azari, Julia R., and Jennifer K. Smith. (2012). "Unwritten rules: Informal institutions in established democracies." *Perspectives on Politics* 10(1): 37-55.

- Hinterleitner, Markus, and Fritz Sager. (2022). "Political challengers and norm erosion in advanced democracies." *European Journal of Political Research.*

- Chua, John, Vicente Valentim, Elias Dinas, and Daniel Ziblatt. (2023). "How Mainstream Politicians Erode Norms: Evidence from two survey experiments." *Working paper*.

- Albertus, Michael, and Guy Grossman. (2021). "The Americas: When do voters support power grabs?." *Journal of Democracy* 32(2): 116-131.

> **Blogpost on the US Due**
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> Blogpost on the US due via Canvas before midnight on October 10.

Week 7: In-class Midterm (October 17, 2023)

Week 8: Populism and demagoguery (October 24, 2023)

Learning objectives:

- Define populism, and consider how it relates to democratic backsliding.

- Review the conditions that give rise to populism of both the left and right.

Readings:

- Müller, Jan-Werner. (2016). *What Is Populism?* chapters 1-3.

- Kendall-Taylor, Andrea and Erica Frantz. (2016). "How Democracies Fall Apart: Why Populism is a Pathway to Autocracy." *Foreign Affairs*.

- E.J. Dionne, Jr., Adrianna Pita, and Constanze Stelzenmüller. (2016). "The Rise of the Right: Right-wing Populism in the US and Europe." *The Brookings Institution* (podcast).

Week 9: Propaganda and restrictions on the press (October 31, 2023)

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:

- Gehlbach, Scott. (2010). "Reflections on Putin and the Media." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 26(1): 77-87.

- Grossman, Guy, Yotam Margalit, and Tamar Mitts. (2022). "How the ultrarich use media ownership as a political investment." *The Journal of Politics* 84(4): 1913-1931.

- Barrera, Oscar, Sergei Guriev, Emeric Henry, and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya. (2020). "Facts, alternative facts, and fact checking in times of post-truth politics." *Journal of Public Economics* 182 : 104123.

- Pomerantsev, Peter. (2019). "The Disinformation Age: A Revolution in Propaganda." *The Guardian*. July 27, 2019.

- DiResta, Renée. (2018). "What We Now Know About Russian Disinformation." *New York Times*. December 17, 2018.

Week 10: Clientelism, corruption, and money in politics (November 7, 2023)

Learning objectives:

- Is the prevalence of clientelism problematic for democracy, and if so – in what ways?

- The nuanced relationship between corruption and democratic backsliding.

Readings:

- Mares, Isabela and Lauren Young. (2016). "Buying, expropriating, and stealing votes." *Annual Review of Political Science* 19: 267-288.

- Stokes, Susan, Thad Dunning, Valeria Brusco and Marcelo Nazareno. (2013). *Voters, Brokers and Clientelism*, chapter 6.

- Carlin, Ryan E. and Mason Moseley. (2015). "Good Democrats, Bad Targets: Democratic Values and Clientelistic Vote Buying." *Journal of Politics* 77(1): 14-26.

- Vaishnav, Milan. (2017). *When Crime Pays: Money and Muscle in Indian Politics,* chapter 1.

- Makaya, Lindsey and Amy Smith. (2018). "Could corruption investigations undermine democracy in Latin America?" Vox. May 17, 2018.

> **Country Case Blog Post Due**
>
> Country Case Blog Post due via Canvas before midnight on November 7.

Week 11: Identity Politics and Polarization (November 14, 2023)

Learning objectives:

- What is polarization, and why and how it can lead to democratic erosion.

- Understand the history of growing polarization within the USA.

Readings:

- Barber, Michael & McCarty, Nolan. (2015). "Causes and Consequences of Polarization". *Political Negotiation: A Handbook.* Chapter 2.

- Svolik, Milan W. (2019). "Polarization Versus Democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 30(3): pp. 20- 32.

- Braley, Alia, Gabriel S. Lenz, Dhaval Adjodah, Hossein Rahnama, and Alex Pentland. (2023). "Why voters who value democracy participate in democratic backsliding." *Nature Human Behaviour* (in-print).

- 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): pp. 16-42.

Week 12: Scapegoating, exclusion and resentment (November 21, 2023)

Learning objectives:

- Understand how scapegoating and sense of exclusion is used 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,* chapters 9 and 15.

- Cramer, Katherine J. (20016). *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scot Walker,* chapter 1.

- Bansak, Kirk, Jens Hainmueller and Dominik Hangartner. (2016). "How Economic, Humanitarian, and Religious Concerns Shape European Attitudes Toward Asylum Seekers." *Science* 354(6309): 217-222.

- Wood, Thomas. (2017). "Racism motivated Trump voters more than authoritarianism." *The Washington Post*. April 17, 2017.

- Kuhn, David Paul. (2016). "Sorry, Liberals. Bigotry Didn't Elect Donald Trump." *The New York Times*. December 26, 2016.

> **Reflection on Political Event Due**
>
> Reflection on political event due via Canvas before midnight on November 21.

Week 13: Civil society, social movements, and resistance (November 28, 2023)

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 and Maria J. Stephan. (2012). *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict,* chapter 1.

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

- Ellen Ioanes. "Israel's protests over sweeping judicial reforms, explained." Vox, Jul 24, 2023.

- Clayton, Katherine. (2022). "The Public's Response to Democratic Backsliding." *Working Paper*.

Week 14: Student presentations (December 5, 2023)

Readings:

- Drutman, Lee. (2020). *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop: The Case for Multiparty Democracy in America,* chapter 9 and 10.

> **Case Study Papers Due**
>
> Case study papers due via Canvas before midnight on December 15.