



Democratic Erosion

Course Number: 4316 | CRN: 62983

University of Georgia
Department: International Affairs
Semester: Fall 2026
Class time and location: M/W, Park Hall
145, 2:55-4:15pm

Instructor: Prof. Megan Turnbull
Office: Candler Hall 311
Office hours: Th, 11am-1pm
Email: megan.turnbull@uga.edu

COURSE DESCRIPTION¹

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

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

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

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Engage critically with the theoretical foundations of democracy, democratic consolidation, and democratic erosion.
- Identify, analyze, and evaluate symptoms of democratic erosion, focusing on the weakening of horizontal and vertical accountability.

¹ Course Description in CAPA: The causes and consequences of democratic erosion in comparative and historical perspective.



- Examine the precursors of democratic erosion, including factors such as economic inequality, ethno-religious conflict, populism, and polarization, among others.
- Assess strategies for resisting democratic erosion, focusing on the role of institutions and civil society in safeguarding democracy.
- Develop and refine research, writing, communication, and teamwork skills through in-class and take-home assignments.

READINGS

All readings will be accessible through eLearning Commons (eLC). In the course schedule below, readings that are marked with an * are recommended; all other readings are required. Please read all the required readings assigned for the day before coming to class. As important current events unfold throughout the term, I may post short newspaper articles and other readings on eLC and notify students about them by email or announcements on eLC. Reading these articles is also a requirement. I will post all lecture slides and other course material on eLC.

Please keep in mind that there are several additional, recommended readings in the weekly folders on eLC. While you are encouraged to read these if your time and interest allow, please be sure to read the required readings listed in the course schedule below before coming to class.

ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment	Description	% of Final Grade	Due Date
Participation	Attendance (10%) and regular, quality contributions to class discussions (10%)	20	-
Blog posts and peer review	Two blog posts on current events (10% each) and peer review of a classmate's post (5%)	25	Peer review: Oct. 17 Blog 1: October 31 Blog 2: December 5
eLC discussions	Two cross-university discussion on selected topics	10 (complete both to receive 5 points of extra credit on your final grade)	Discussion 1: Oct. 25-Nov. 7 Discussion 2: Nov. 8-22
Midterm exam	75 minutes, closed book, in person, mix of multiple choice, short answer, and essay questions	25	October 19



Group presentation	15 minutes, depending on # of groups; comparison of two countries undergoing democratic erosion	25	November 11/16/18/30
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ATTENDANCE & PARTICIPATION

Attendance is required and will be taken every class; you are allotted one unexcused absence during the semester but any unexcused absences after that will hurt your participation grade (please see the late policy section below for more on excused absences).

Your participation grade is much more than attendance, however; it includes regular (i.e. every class), high quality contributions to our discussions. High quality comments and questions typically possess one or more of the following properties:

- Offers a different and unique, but relevant, perspective;
- Contributes to moving the discussion and analysis forward;
- Builds on other comments;
- Transcends the “I feel” syndrome. That is, it includes some evidence, argumentation, or recognition of inherent tradeoffs. In other words, the comment/question demonstrates some reflective thinking.

While your participation grade is determined by the instructor and is somewhat subjective, it is not random or arbitrary. And, clearly, more frequent quality comments are better than less frequent quality comments. Importantly, everyone’s regular participation helps to not only make the class fun and enjoyable, but it also contributes to everyone’s learning.

Please note that if you are regularly late to class, asleep during class, or disengaged and focused on your laptop or phone, you will lose points from your participation grade. If you have any questions or concerns about your participation, please get in touch with me to discuss.

ASSIGNMENTS

More information (i.e. guidelines, rubric, key dates) about the blog posts, Signal discussion, midterm exam, and group presentation will be provided separately. Some of these assignments (blog posts and Signal discussions) will require coordinating with classes at other universities, and key dates will be provided later in the semester.

OFFICE HOURS



As noted at the top of this syllabus, I will generally hold office hours every Thursday, 11am-1pm, in my office, Room 311 in Candler Hall. Please feel free to come by and introduce yourself, discuss your interests and any questions you might have about the course, or discuss assignments and expectations.

To help everyone better manage their time, please sign up for office hours here:

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/15dorpUzN7orUDCnCxoKyL-GnYLtsTk1HRx9N_pjugyg/edit?usp=sharing

If you are unable to make office hours on Thursdays but would like to meet, please get in touch with me and we will find another time.

ASSESSMENT AND GRADING

Recent studies show that self-assessment and self-grading enhance student learning and creativity. For each assignment (except for attendance/participation and the midterm exam), students will assess and grade themselves using the provided rubric, and either the teaching assistant or the instructor will provide written feedback and a grade as well. In the event of a significant difference between the student's self-grade and the instructor's (5 points or more out of 100), the student and the instructor or teaching assistant will meet with the goal of agreeing on a final grade, using the rubric as a guide. If an agreement cannot be reached, then the final assignment grade will be the average of the student's and the grade from the teaching assistant or the instructor.

We will use the following scale to assign grades at the end of the semester:

A: 93-100 A-: 90-92 B+: 87-89 B: 83-86 B-: 80-82 C+: 77-79

C: 73-76 C-: 70-72 D+: 67-69 D: 60-66 F: <60

LATE POLICY AND MAKE-UP PROCEDURES

All assignments should be submitted by their deadline. For each day an assignment is late, 10% will be deducted from the grade; assignments will **not be accepted** after three days past the due date.

This policy will be strictly enforced. We are a large class, and it is important for students to submit their work on time so that the instructor can return assignments in a timely fashion.

Exceptions for absences and late assignments will be made in the event of a serious illness, medical or family emergencies, military service, or approved institute activities (such as field trips or athletic events) **and with appropriate, written documentation** (i.e. a doctor's note or a dean's



note).² If you find yourself in such a situation, please email me to discuss and figure out a reasonable timeframe for you to submit late work. If you need to miss class or submit an assignment late because of an illness and urgent visit to the doctor, that will of course count as an excused absence (with a doctor's note). However, please try to avoid scheduling non-urgent doctor's appointments (or other meetings) during class time as these will generally not be excused. Generally, attending class and participating is a priority, and when possible, other meetings should be scheduled around class time.

If you do need to miss class and have appropriate documentation, please note that an excused absence means that you will have the opportunity to make up for your absence and still receive full points toward your participation grade. I will generally ask students to write a summary and reflection on the assigned reading for the day, but I am happy to discuss other options.

Having a heavy course load, an internship, or multiple deadlines in one week, etc., are not acceptable reasons for submitting an assignment late or missing class. Students are strongly encouraged to note important deadlines on their calendar, and to manage their own time so that they can meet those deadlines.

Finally, it is your responsibility to double check that you have uploaded the correct file/document when submitting your assignments on eLC. Any files uploaded after the deadline will be counted as late and the late policy will be applied accordingly.

CLASS RECORDINGS

In the absence of written authorization from the UGA Disability Resource Center, students may not make a visual or audio recording of any aspect of this course or share any other material, including but not limited to readings, assignments, handouts, class activities, and emails. The syllabus is considered a public document, is available on SPIA's website, and may be shared publicly.

There may be instances where the lecture portion of this course is recorded under Section 504 and Title II of the ADA ACT. Students who have a recording accommodation with the UGA Disability Resource Center agree in writing that they:

- a) Will use the records only for personal academic use during the specific course;
- b) Understand that faculty members have copyright interest in their class lectures and that they agree not to infringe on this right in any way;

² For doctor's appointments, please be sure to send a doctor's note; please do not send a screenshot of an appointment reminder for an upcoming visit as these will not be accepted.



- c) Understand that the faculty member and students in the class have privacy rights and agree not to violate those rights by using recordings for any reason other than their own personal study;
- d) Will not release, digitally upload, broadcast, transcribe, or otherwise share all or any part of the recordings. They also agree that they will not profit financially and will not allow others to benefit personally or financially from lecture recordings or other course materials;
- e) Will erase/delete all recordings at the end of the semester; and
- f) Understand that violation of these terms may subject them to discipline under the Student Code of Conduct or subject them to liability under copyright laws.

If you have questions or concerns about recordings under Section 504 and Title II of the ADA ACT, please contact the Director of the Disability Resource Center at eeuw@uga.edu.

Students will lose a full letter grade on their final grade for each instance that they share course material outside of class or violate any of the above terms.

UNIVERSITY HONOR CODE AND ACADEMIC HONESTY POLICY

As a University of Georgia student, you have agreed to abide by the University's academic honesty policy, "A Culture of Honesty," and the Student Honor Code. Specifically, the UGA Student Honor Code reads: "I will be academically honest in all of my academic work and will not tolerate academic dishonesty from others." A Culture of Honesty, the University's policy, and procedures for handling cases of suspected dishonesty, can be found at honesty.uga.edu

Lack of knowledge of the academic honesty policy is not a reasonable explanation for a violation. Questions related to course assignments and the academic honesty policy should be directed to the instructor.

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS RESOURCES

UGA Well-being Resources promote student success by cultivating a culture that supports a more active, healthy, and engaged student community.

Anyone needing assistance is encouraged to contact Student Care & Outreach (SCO) in the Division of Student Affairs at 706-542-8479 or visit sco.uga.edu. Student Care & Outreach helps students navigate difficult circumstances by connecting them with the most appropriate resources or services. They also administer the Embark@UGA program which supports students experiencing, or who have experienced, homelessness, foster care, or housing insecurity.



UGA provides both clinical and non-clinical options to support student well-being and mental health, any time, any place. Whether on campus, or studying from home or abroad, UGA Well-being Resources are here to help.

- Well-being Resources: well-being.uga.edu
- Student Care and Outreach: sco.uga.edu
- University Health Center: healthcenter.uga.edu
- Counseling and Psychiatric Services: caps.uga.edu or CAPS 24/7 crisis support at 706-542-2273
- Health Promotion/ Fontaine Center: healthpromotion.uga.edu
- Accessibility & Testing: <https://accessibility.uga.edu/>

Additional information, including free digital well-being resources, can be accessed through the UGA app or by visiting <https://well-being.uga.edu>.

AI POLICY

To ensure you develop and master the foundational knowledge and skills in this course, the use of generative AI (GAI) tools is strictly prohibited. This includes all stages of your work process, even the preliminary ones. This prohibition extends to AI writing tools like Grammarly and Wordtune, as well as GAI tools like ChatGPT, Copilot, Writesonic, Rytr, and Rtutor, among others. If you are uncertain about using a particular tool to support your work, please consult with me before using it.

COURSE SCHEDULE

The course syllabus is a general plan for the course; deviations announced to the class by the instructor may be necessary.

Part 1. Theoretical Foundations of Democracy and Democratic Erosion

Week 1: Course overview

Monday, August 17: Introductions and syllabus review

Wednesday, August 19

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

Monday, August 24

Nord, Marina, et al. 2024. *Democracy Report 2024: Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot.* Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg.

Week 2: Definitions and Theories of Democracy and Democratic Consolidation



Wednesday, August 26

Dahl, Robert. 1972. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven: Yale University Press. Chapter 1.

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

Monday, August 31

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

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

Week 3: Definitions and Theories of Democratic Erosion

Wednesday, September 2

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

Levitsky, Steven and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown. Chapter 1.

Monday September 7: Labor Day, no class

Wednesday, September 9

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

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

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

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

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



Part 2. Symptoms of Democratic Erosion

Week 5: Weakening Horizontal Accountability

Monday, September 14

Note: We will spend the first ~30 minutes of class brainstorming debate topics with Dr. Bryan Paul that is part of a new initiative from [College Debates and Alliance Discourse](#).

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

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

Wednesday, September 16

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

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

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

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

Week 6: Weakening Vertical Accountability

Monday, September 21

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

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

Wednesday, September 23

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

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

Part 3. Precursors of Democratic Erosion

Week 7: Economic Inequality



Monday, September 28

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

Acemoglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. 2006. [Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy.](#) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapters 1 and 2.

Wednesday, September 30

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

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

Week 8: Ethno-Religious Conflict

Monday, October 5

Wilkinson, Steven I. 2004. [Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India.](#) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 1.

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

Wednesday, October 7

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

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

Weeks 9 and 10: Review Week and Midterm Exam

October 12 and 14: Midterm Review

Tuesday, October 19: Midterm Exam

Thursday, October 21: Class debate led by College Debates and Discourse Alliance

Week 11: Populism and polarization

Monday, October 26: We will meet over Zoom with Professor Dragolea's class

Müller, Jan-Werner. 2016. [What Is Populism?](#) Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. Introduction and Chapter 1.



Dolezal, Krystof. 2025. "Why Trouble is Brewing in the Czech Republic." *Journal of Democracy*, online exclusive. Available at: <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/why-trouble-is-brewing-in-the-czech-republic/>

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

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

Wednesday, October 28

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

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

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

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

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

Part 4. Resisting Democratic Erosion

Week 12: Institutional and Societal Resistance

Monday, November 2

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

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

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

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



Wednesday, November 4

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

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

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

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

November 9: Class time to work on group presentations

November 11, 16, 18, 30: Student Presentations