

Democratic Backsliding

Felix Dwinger

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Time: tba
Venue: tba

Course Description

What is democratic backsliding? Why do democracies backslide? What roles play elites, citizens, civil society, and political parties in this regard? In this undergraduate seminar, we gain a thorough understanding of one of the most concerning trends of our times. The general idea is to learn about the key actors and sequences of democratic backsliding but also factors that promote democracy's resilience.

The course has three main goals. Its *substantive goal* is to familiarize students with prominent theoretical arguments and empirical evidence pertaining to central questions about democratic backsliding. Its *paedagogical goal* is to foster analytical skills in students. Analytical skills are essential for successful careers inside and outside academia. Its *professionalization goal* is to introduce students to the academic processes of writing reviews, presenting research, and writing papers.

Prerequisites

No prerequisites. We recommend that students have taken, or take in parallel, an introductory courses on *Comparative Politics* and *Quantitative Methods*.

Course Requirements

1. **Class Discussion & Participation (20%).** You will be expected to have completed all required readings before class to the point where you can be called on to critique or defend any reading. You are also expected to be engaged in class discussions.
2. **Response Notes ($3 \times 10\% = 30\%$).** You are required to write three reading response notes (max. 2 pages) over the course of the term. Response papers should be uploaded to a shared dropbox folder two days before our class meetings. Response notes should engage the debates presented in one of the readings for the week. They are considered thought pieces and will be used to help structure class discussions. Response notes should summarize in an opening paragraph the core arguments and findings of the discussed paper(s); highlight 1-2 major contributions of the piece; critique key aspects of the theoretical argument or empirical results. Ideally, a good response note also identifies possible extensions for future work and how the week's papers complement and relate to each other. Response notes mimic journal reviews and are thus important for professionalization.
3. **Presentation (20%).** You are required to hold one presentation within the scope of a given session's topic. Presentation slots are distributed at our first session. At said session, you will also receive some input on what makes a good presentation.
4. **Term Paper (30%).** You are to write a term paper (max. 5000 words incl. references). Term papers typically contain
 - (a) a clear and concise research question;
 - (b) a theoretical argument;
 - (c) an empirical test of that argument; and
 - (d) a brief discussion of the findings.

You are recommended to approach your instructor with ideas for your term paper at your earliest convenience. The empirical part does not have to be "quantitative". But it must constitute a genuine test of your argument.

Logistics

Office Hours

Please sign up to office hours. Office hours are the time I have set aside to focus on you. Even if you don't have specific questions, a good office hour discussion could help clear up any confusion you might have on a topic.

Communication

To ensure my ability to respond to all student emails in a timely fashion, please be sure to check the course syllabus and platform thoroughly for answers to any questions. Students can typically expect a response to an email inquiry within two workdays. I do not typically respond to emails in the evenings, on weekends, or on holidays. I do not respond to unprofessional or rude emails.

Etiquette

Our class is based on mutual respect. Please be considerate of your fellow students and instructor. Any communications and interactions with your instructor and classmates should be courteous and professional.

Children

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

Students with Special Needs

Students with special needs are encouraged to discuss special accommodations that may be needed for successful participation in this course. Moreover, the [Bureau UT Handicap](#) accommodates students with special needs and supports them throughout student life.

Religious Accommodation

Please notify me at our first session or one month in advance of a given date if you require any accommodation regarding conflicts of religious obligations with attendance, submitting assignments, or completing scheduled tests and examinations.

Academic Misconduct

Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. "Cheating" and "plagiarism" will result in severe disciplinary action on the part of the instructor. Either offense will be grounds for receiving a failing grade on the assignment and possibly the entire course, depending on the severity of the offense.

Use of Generative AI Tools

Academic integrity is our core principle. It is critical that all students uphold it—whether using AI-based tools or otherwise. A responsible use of AI-based tools in completing coursework or assessments must thus be done in accordance with these conditions:

1. You must clearly identify the use of AI-based tools in your work. Any work that uses AI-based tools must be clearly marked as such, including the specific tool(s) used. For example, if you use ChatGPT-5, you must cite: ChatGPT-5. [YYYY, Month DD of query]. "Text of your query." Generated using OpenAI: chat.openai.com.
2. You must be transparent in how you use any AI-based tool, including what work is your original contribution. An AI detector, such as [GPTZero](#), 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 our 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 entire 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 to best use these tools in a responsible manner.

Course Schedule

I. Coming to Terms

Week 01, 04/08 - 04/12: Democracy versus Autocracy

Learning objectives:

- You are familiar with prominent classifications of regime types.
- You can critically assess the advantages and disadvantages of these classifications.

Required reading materials:

- Boix, Charles, Michael Miller, & Sebastian Rosato. 2013. "A Complete Data Set of Political Regimes, 1800–2007." *Comparative Political Studies* 46(12): 1523-1554.
- Cheibub, José Antonio, Jennifer Gandhi, & James Raymond Vreeland. 2010. "Democracy and Dictatorship Revisited." *Public Choice* 143(1/2): 67-101.

- Coppedge, Michael et al. 2011. "Conceptualizing and Measuring Democracy: A New Approach." *Perspectives on Politics* 9(2): 247-267.
 - Schedler, Andreas. 2009. "Electoral Authoritarianism." In: Todd Landman & Neil Robinson. *The SAGE Handbook of Comparative Politics*. London: SAGE, 381-393.
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Week 04, 04/15 - 04/19: What Is Democratic Backsliding?

Learning objectives:

- You can distinguish the concept of democratic backsliding from similar concepts.
- You can explain why the phenomenon of democratic backsliding defies conventional wisdom about modern societies.

Required reading materials:

- Grillo, Edoardo et al. 2024. "Theories of Democratic Backsliding." *Annual Review of Political Science* 27(1): 381-400.
 - Bermeo, Nancy. 2016. "On Democratic Backsliding." *Journal of Democracy* 27(1): 5-19.
 - Svobik, Milan W. 2014. "Which Democracies Will Last? Coups, Incumbent Takeovers, and the Dynamic of Democratic Consolidation." *British Journal of Political Science* 45(4): 715-738.
 - Waldner, David & Ellen Lust. 2019. "Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding" *Annual Review of Political Science* 21: 93-113.
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Week 03, 04/22 - 04/26: Is Democracy under Threat?

Learning objectives:

- You are familiar with different approaches to measure democratic backsliding.
- You can critically discuss and compare the individual advantages & weaknesses of these approaches.

Required reading materials:

- Baron, Hannah et al. 2024. "An Events-Based Approach to Understanding Democratic Erosion." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 57(2): 208-215.

- Knutsen, Carl Henrik et al. 2024. "Conceptual and Measurement Issues in Assessing Democratic Backsliding." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 57(2): 162-177.
 - Little, Andrew T. & Anne Meng. 2024. "Measuring Democratic Backsliding." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 57(2): 149-161.
 - Little, Andrew T. & Anne Meng. 2024. "What We Do and Do Not Know about Democratic Backsliding." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 57(2): 224-229.
 - Roberts, Kenneth M. et al. 2025. "Global Challenges to Democracy: Backsliding, Resiliency, and Democratic Theory." In: Bunce, Valerie J. et al. Eds. *Global Challenges to Democracy: Comparative Perspectives on Backsliding, Autocracy, and Resilience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 7-32.
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II. Historical Case of Democratic Backsliding

Week 04, 04/29 - 05/03: Weimar Republic

Learning objectives:

- You are familiar with the case of democratic backsliding in the Weimar Republic.
- You can identify the key actors, their incentives & constraints, and their strategic choices that led to democratic backsliding in the Weimar Republic.

Required reading materials:

- Hett, Benjamin Carter. 2019. *The Death of Democracy: Hitler's Rise to Power and the Downfall of the Weimar Republic*. New York: Holt Paperback.
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III. Contemporary Cases of Democratic Backsliding

Week 05, 05/06 - 05/10: Hungary

Learning objectives:

- You are familiar with the case of democratic backsliding in Hungary.
- You can identify the key actors, their incentives & constraints, and their strategic choices that led to democratic backsliding in Hungary.

Required reading materials:

- Lendvai, Paul. 2017. *Orbán: Europe's New Strongman*. London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd.
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Week 06, 05/13 - 05/17: Poland

Learning objectives:

- You are familiar with the case of democratic backsliding in Poland.
- You can identify the key actors, their incentives & constraints, and their strategic choices that led to democratic backsliding and resurrection in Poland.

Required reading materials:

- Bill, Stanley & Ben Stanley. 2025. *Good Change: The Rise and Fall of Poland's Illiberal Revolution*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.
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Week 07, 05/20 - 05/24: Turkey

Learning objectives:

- You are familiar with the case of democratic backsliding in Turkey.
- You can identify the key actors, their incentives & constraints, and their strategic choices that led to democratic backsliding in Turkey.

Required reading materials:

- Arat, Yesim & Şevket Pamuk. 2019. *Turkey: Between Democracy and Authoritarianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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Week 08, 05/27 - 05/31: Venezuela

Learning objectives:

- You are familiar with the case of democratic backsliding in Venezuela.
- You can identify the key actors, their incentives & constraints, and their strategic choices that led to democratic backsliding in Venezuela.

Required reading materials:

- Corrales, Javier & Michael Penfold-Becerra. 2015. *Dragon in the Tropics: The Legacy of Hugo Chávez*. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution.
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IV. Synthesis

Week 09, 06/03 - 06/07: Elites

Learning objectives:

- You can explain how elite behavior can facilitate democratic backsliding.
- You are familiar with typical sequences of democratic backsliding and the roles elites play in them.

Required reading materials:

- Clayton, Katherine et al. 2021. "Elite Rhetoric Can Undermine Democratic Norms." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118(23), DOI: [10.1073/pnas.2024125118](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2024125118).
- Cirone, Alexandra. 2025. "Is Democracy Broken? Disinformation Wants You to Think That It Is." In: Bunce, Valerie J. et al. Eds. *Global Challenges to Democracy: Comparative Perspectives on Backsliding, Autocracy, and Resilience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 215-232.
- Przeworski, Adam. 2019. *Crises of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 172-191.
- Valentim, Vicente, Elias Dinas, & Daniel Ziblatt. 2025. "How Mainstream Politicians Erode Norms." *British Journal of Political Science* 55, DOI: [10.1017/S0007123425100586](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123425100586).

Week 10, 06/10 - 06/14: Spring Break

Week 11, 06/17 - 06/21: Citizens

Learning objectives:

- You are familiar with prominent arguments for when and why citizens fail to constitute a democratic check.
- You know when citizens can be expected to hold incumbents with undemocratic aspirations to account.

Required reading materials:

- Graham, Mathew & Milan W. Svobik. 2020. "Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States." *American Political Science Review* 114(2): 392-409.

- Neundorf, Anja et al. 2026. "Elections Without Constraints? The Appeal of Electoral Autocracy Across the World." *British Journal of Political Science* 56, DOI: [0.1017/S0007123425101129](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123425101129).
 - Wunsch, Natasha, Marc S. Jacob, & Laurenz Derksen. 2025. "The Demand Side of Democratic Backsliding: How Divergent Understandings of Democracy Shape Political Choice." *British Journal of Political Science* 55, DOI: [10.1017/S0007123424000711](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123424000711).
 - Yeung, Eddy S. F. 2025. "Dynamic Democratic Backsliding." *British Journal of Political Science* 55, DOI: [10.1017/S0007123425100847](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123425100847).
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Week 12, 06/24 - 06/28: Civil SocietyLearning objectives:

- You can critically assess the role of civil society for democratic stability.
- You can explain how & when civic education maintains democratic norms.

Required reading materials:

- Beissinger, Mark R. 2025. "Civil Society Resistance to Democratic Backsliding." In: Bunce, Valerie J. et al. Eds. *Global Challenges to Democracy: Comparative Perspectives on Backsliding, Autocracy, and Resilience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 196-214.
 - Berman, Sheri. 1997. "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic." *World Politics* 49(3): 401-429.
 - Eroğlu, Melek Hilal et al. 2025. "Choosing Democracy Over Party? How Civic Education Can Mitigate the Anti-Democratic Effects of Partisan Polarization." *British Journal of Political Science* 55, DOI: [10.1017/S000712342500016X](https://doi.org/10.1017/S000712342500016X).
 - Valentim, Vicente. 2024. *The Normalization of the Radical Right: A Norms Theory of Political Supply and Demand*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1-77.
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Week 13, 07/01 - 07/05: Opposition & Incumbent PartiesLearning objectives:

- You can critically assess the role of political parties for democratic stability.

- You are familiar with party strategies that facilitate, promote, or counter democratic backsliding.

Required reading materials:

- Auerbach, Kiran Rose & Jennifer Kartner. 2023. "How Do Political Parties Capture New Democracies? Hungary and North Macedonia in Comparison" *East European Politics and Societies* 37(2): 538-562.
 - Gamboa, Laura. 2022. *Resisting Backsliding: Opposition Strategies against the Erosion of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1-97.
 - Laebens, Melis G. & Aykut Öztürk. 2021. "Partisanship and Autocratization: Polarization, Power Asymmetry, and Partisan Social Identities in Turkey." *Comparative Political Studies* 54(2): 245-279.
 - Grzymala-Busse, Anna. 2019. "The Failure of Europe's Mainstream Parties." *Journal of Democracy* 30(4): 35-47.
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V. Discussions

Week 14, 07/08 - 07/12: USA under Trump

Recommended reading materials:

- Levitsky, Steven & Daniel Ziblatt. 2017. *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown.
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Week 15, 07/15 - 07/19: How to Save Democracy?

Recommended reading materials:

- Laebens, Melis G. & Anna Lührmann. 2021. "What Halts Democratic Erosion? The Changing Role of Accountability." *Democratization* 28(5): 908-928.
 - Levitsky, Steven & Daniel Ziblatt. 2017. *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown, 204-232.
 - Svobik, Milan W. et al. 2023. "In Europe, Democracy Erodes from the Right." *Journal of Democracy* 34(1): 5-20.
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