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GOVT/LAST 382
Wesleyan University
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Erosion of Democracy

In the late 1990s even newly-established democracies looked secure. Since then, autocratization has taken place in many countries including Venezuela (1998-2025; Chávez, Maduro), Russia (2000-2025; Putin), Bolivia (2005-2019; Morales), Turkey (2006-2025; Erdogan), Ecuador (2006-2017; Correa), Nicaragua (2006-2025; Ortega), Hungary (2009-2025; Orbán), the Czech Republic (2013-2022; Babiš), India (2014-2025; Modi), Tanzania (2015-2021; Magufuli), Poland (2015-2023; Kaczynski), the Philippines (2016-2022; Duterte), the USA (2016-2020; Trump), Benin (2017-2025; Talon), Brazil (2019-2022; Bolsonaro), and El Salvador (2019-2025, Bukele).

Autocratization involves the reduction of the democratic qualities of any type of political regime. An already autocratic regime can and often does become even more autocratic. This seminar will focus more narrowly on the erosion of democracy, which occurs whenever a political regime that started out as a democracy autocratizes, not suddenly and dramatically, but stealthily and incrementally. Democratic erosion can diminish the quality of a liberal democracy to that of a lower-quality electoral democracy. Democratic breakdown occurs when a democracy (liberal or electoral) becomes a competitive autocracy or plunges even further to a full autocracy.

The erosion of democracy often involves four stages. In a first, *societal polarization*, class or identity cleavages contribute to an "us vs. them" situation that weakens elite norms of tolerance and self-restraint, discredits democracy, and raises the attractiveness of illiberal electoral appeals. In a second stage, *political polarization*, an illiberal populist takes advantage of societal polarization to inflame the "people" against the elite. If this appeal is successful, illiberal populist parties gain vote share. In a third stage, the *election of an autocrat*, an illiberal populist is elected to head the executive branch of government and allied personnel are elected to the legislature. In a fourth stage, *democratic dismantling*, the illiberal populist leader, inoking his (almost always his) electoral mandate, uses state agencies to restrict political rights and civil liberties, repress the mass media and civil society organizations, capture the legislature and the judiciary, gain or retain the support or quiescence of the army and police, and tilt the electoral playing field.

What has caused the recent proliferation of democratic erosion? Here it is important to distinguish (1) a regime's underlying vulnerability to the onset of democratic erosion, (2) catalysts of such onset, and (3) factors that lead from onset to democratic breakdown (Waldner and Lust 2019; Boese et al. 2021). Candidate factors to explain a democracy's *underlying vulnerability* to erosion include its regional "neighborhood" (democratic or autocratic), its institutional setup (presidentialism has come in for criticism), its constitution (especially the ease of amending or replacing it), and its degree of societal and political polarization. Candidate factors to explain the catalysts of *specific instances* of democratic erosion include financial

meltdowns, refugee surges, disease outbreaks, and contested elections. Such "shocks" exacerbate polarization and give illiberal populists an opportunity to win support, often by denouncing the incompetence of traditional politicians. Candidate factors to explain whether democratic erosion will lead to democratic breakdown include how long the country has been democratic, how long erosion has persisted, and whether people committed to democracy can mobilize successfully to defend it.

Assignments: Weekly Short Papers and Term Paper

In the first week we'll be reading some works in common. Thereafter, each student should choose a country that has recently experienced democratic erosion and upload to the course Moodle each week a roughly 500-word essay in .docx format. The essay should connect the reading assigned for the week's session to at least one previously unconsulted academic book or article on their chosen country. These essays should be uploaded to the course Moodle by 5 PM Tuesday, the day before the seminar meets. At the end of the semester each student will make a presentation, then submit a term paper, that ties together and expands on the weekly essays. This final presentation and paper should assess the characteristics, causes, and reasons or prospects for reversal of an autocratization process in the student's chosen country.

Course Requirements

No books are required for this course. All required readings are on the course Moodle; it's up to each student to find country-specific sources (although the instructor can furnish suggestions). The course requirements are 11 weekly essays, an in-class presentation on May 7, a term paper due May 14 , and class participation where the grade will be based on (1) attendance (+) and lateness (-), (2) timely completion of the weekly essay, (3) evidence from class participation and essays of having completed and thought through the assigned reading, and (4) the quality of the country-specific sources located and applied to the weekly papers and seminar interventions.

Summary of Due Dates and Final Grade Weightings

11 weekly essays	Each Tuesday (5% each)	55%
In-class presentation	May 7	5%
Research Paper	May 14 (Wed.)	25%
Class participation		15%

Honor Code

Any instance of cheating or plagiarism will suffice for a grade of "F" for the entire course. I've set the Moodle to allow you to see your "similarity score" (plagiarism detector) after you upload your written work. If you agree that any passages flagged by turnitin.com were plagiarized, please delete the paper and submit a new one that does not trigger the plagiarism detector.

Artificial Intelligence

Among the purposes of a college education are to help you improve your writing and to enable you to distinguish good sources from poor sources of information, opinion, and argument. If you rely on artificial intelligence (AI) tools like Chat GPT to help write your research design or term paper, or

like Elicit to help find sources, this won't happen. Please conclude your research design and term paper with a statement indicating whether you used AI. If you did use AI, describe how you used it. If you didn't use AI, write "I didn't use AI at any point in this assignment."

Last year students who wrote that they had used AI for "creative insight," to "organize" written work, for "help with citations," etc., often triggered the turnitin.com AI detector, which is invoked when you upload your written work. For some reason the instructor but not the student can see the uploaded docment's AI score, with problematic passages flagged. I will let you know if this happens.

Accessibility Services

Wesleyan University is committed to ensuring that all qualified students with disabilities are afforded an equal opportunity to participate in, and benefit from, its programs and services. To receive accommodation, a student must have a disability as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act. If you have a disability, or think that you might have a disability, please contact Accessibility Services to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations. Accessibility Services is located in North College 021. You can also contact Accessibility Services by email (accessibility@wesleyan.edu) or phone (860-685-2332).

Religious/Spiritual Observance Resources:

If you anticipate that your religious/spiritual observance may conflict with academic obligations such as attending class, taking examinations, or submitting assignments, start by working directly with your professor to make reasonable arrangements. Should you require additional support or guidance, please contact any of the chaplains in the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life at https://www.wesleyan.edu/orsl/index.html. For a list of a religious holidays celebrated by members of the Wesleyan community, go to Wesleyan's Multifaith calendar which can be found at: https://www.wesleyan.edu/orsl/multifaith-calendar.html.

Title IX Resources

Please see https://www.wesleyan.edu/weswell/resources/facultyandstaff.html

Summary of Seminar Schedule

Wed Jan 29   Introduction

Wed Feb 5   Conceptualizing Democracy

Wed Feb 12   Measuring Democracy

Wed Feb 19   Elections and Autocratization

Wed Feb 26   Liberalism and Autocratization

Wed Mar 5   Processes and Sequences of Autocratization

Wed Mar 26   Causes of Autocratization: Attitudes, Institutions, and Agency

Wed Apr 2   Polarization and Autocratization

Wed Apr 9   Populism and Autocratization

Wed Apr 16   Personalism, the Rule of Law, and Autocratization

Wed Apr 23   Misinformation, Disinformation, and Autocratization

Wed Apr 30   Resistance to Autocratization

Wed May 7   Student Presentations

Wed May 14   Research paper should be uploaded to the course Moodle by 5 PM

Wed Jan 29   **Introduction**

No assigned readings

Wed Feb 5   **Conceptualizing Democracy**

Dahl, Robert (1998). *On Democracy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 35-43, 83-99.

Skaaning, Svend-Erik (2021). "Democracy: Contested Concept with a Common Core." Chapter 1 in Gordon Crawford and Abdul-Gafaru Abdulai, eds., *Research Handbook on Democracy and Development*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 27-43.

Lührmann, Anna, Kyle Marquardt, and Valeriya Mechkova (2020). "Constraining Governments: New Indices of Vertical, Horizontal, and Diagonal Accountability." *American Political Science Review* 114 No. 3, 811-820.

Wed Feb 12   **Measuring Democracy**

Boese, Vanessa A. (2019) "How (Not) to Measure Democracy." *International Area Studies Review* 22 No. 2, 95-127.

Lührmann, Anna, Marcus Tannenberg, and Staffan I. Lindberg (2018). "Regimes of the World (RoW): Opening New Avenues for the Comparative Study of Political Regimes." *Politics and Governance* 6 No. 1, 60-77.

Wed Feb 19   **Elections and Autocratization**

Hellmeier, Sebastian, and Elena Leuschner (2024). "Elections and Autocratization." Chapter 12 (166-180) in Aurel Croissant and Luca Tomini, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Autocratization*. New York: Routledge.

Wed Feb 26   **Liberalism and Autocratization**

Zakaria, Fareed (1997). "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy." *Foreign Affairs* 76 No. 6, 22-43.

Plattner, Marc F. (1998). "Liberalism and Democracy: Can't Have One Without the Other." *Foreign Affairs* 77 No. 2, 22-43.

Wed Mar 5   **Processes and Sequences of Autocratization**

Haggard, Stephan, and Robert R. Kaufman (2021). *Backsliding: Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

An Appendix to this short book has 17 country narratives. If you are working on one of the 17 countries, you may count its narrative as this week's country-specific article.

[recommended] Norris, Pippa (2021). "Voters Against Democracy: The Roots of Autocratic Resurgence." *Foreign Affairs* 100 No. 3 (May/June), 175-178. Short review of Haggard and Kaufman (2021), with a response by Haggard and Kaufman and a response to the response by Norris.

Wed Mar 26   **Causes of Autocratization: Attitudes, Institutions, and Agency**

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

Norris, Pippa, and Ronald Inglehart (2019). *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 10, 331-367.

Wed Apr 2   **Polarization and Autocratization**

Svolik, Milan W. (2019). "Polarization versus Democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 30 No. 3, 20-32.

McCoy, Jennifer. (2023). "Hyper-Polarization and the Security of Democracy." In Nicholas A. Seltzer and Steven Lloyd Wilson, eds., *Handbook on Democracy and Security*. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar. Chapter 10, 165-187.

Wed Apr 9   **Populism and Autocratization**

Mudde, Cas, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press. Chapter 5, "Populism and Democracy," 79-96.

Weyland, Kurt (2024). "The Populist Threat to Democracy." Chapter 1 (1-24) in Weyland, *Democracy's Resilience to Populism's Threat: Countering Global Alarmism*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Wed Apr 16   **Personalism, the Rule of Law, and Autocratization**

        Hanson, Stephen E., and Jeffrey S. Kopstein (2024). *The Assault on the State: How the Global Attack on Modern Government Endangers Our Future.* New York: Polity, 44-65, 137-161.

        Frantz, Erica, et al. (2021). "How Personalist Politics is Changing Democracies." *Journal of Democracy* 32 No. 3 (July), 94-108.

Wed Apr 23   **Misinformation**, **Disinformation, and Autocratization**

        Maerz, Seraphine (2024). "The Internet and Autocratization." Chapter 15 (209-221) in Aurel Croissant and Luca Tomini, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Autocratization*. New York: Routledge.

        Van der Linden, Sander (2023). *Foolproof: Why Misinformation Infects our Minds and How to Build Immunity.* New York: W. W. Norton, 1-9, 169-194.

Wed Apr 30   **Resistance to Autocratization**

        Boese, Vanessa, et al. (2021). "How Democracies Prevail: Democratic Resilience as a Two-stage Process." *Democratization* 28 No. 5, 885-907.

        Weyland, Kurt (2020). "Populism's Threat to Democracy: Comparative Lessons for the United States." *Perspectives on Politics* 18 (2), 389-406.

Wed May 7   **Student Presentations**

Wed May 14   **Research Paper Due**

        Please upload your research paper in .docx format to Moodle by 5 PM.