

**PSCI/INTR 260 Democratic Erosion  
Spring 2026**

**Professor Gretchen Helmke**

Department of Political Science University of Rochester

Tuesdays and Thursdays 2 pm- 3:15 pm

Bausch & Lomb 269

Office Hours: Harkness 331, 11am – 12 pm on Wednesdays, or by appointment

Email: [Gretchen.helmke@rochester.edu](mailto:Gretchen.helmke@rochester.edu)

**Course Description**

Politics in the new millennium challenges the idea that any democracy is ever fully safe. Yet we are only beginning to grasp the multitude of ways in which liberal democracies fall apart. This upper-level undergraduate seminar is aimed at evaluating threats to democracy from a global comparative perspective. The class is not intended as a partisan critique; rather, it aims to teach students how to analyze the challenges of democratic erosion. Different viewpoints on democracy and what constitutes democratic erosion are strongly encouraged. The course is an upper-level seminar. Students are required to actively participate throughout the semester. In addition to reading and discussing scholarship on democracy, the course will offer opportunities to thinking creatively both about how to identify the ways in which democracies might be failing and how to make democracies work better. Assignments range from leading a class discussion on the weekly readings to group projects on identifying threats to democracy and proposing experimental interventions to improve the quality and stability of democracy.

**Key Course Objectives**

By the end of the course, you should be able to:

- Define what a liberal democracy is and what constitutes democratic erosion
- Describe how experts define and measure democratic erosion
- Describe leading theories of how and why democratic erosion occurs
- Discuss leading historical and contemporary examples of democratic erosion
- Discuss potential solutions to democratic erosion
- Discuss the role that universities can play in helping to sustain democracy

**Course Requirements**

**Attendance and Participation (20%):** Your active participation in the seminar is required. This means attending each seminar having read and outlined the readings before class and positively contributing to the discussion in class. In addition to your regular participation in class, each student will be required to present a weekly reading to initiate the class discussion. You should prepare a 10-minute PowerPoint presentation that briefly summarizes the readings, discusses what you find convincing or unconvincing about the reading, and raises questions or topics for class discussion. The presentation must be sent to Prof. Helmke the night before the presentation is given. All student presentations will be uploaded to the course dropbox. A sign-up sheet for discussion leaders is available here:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1OpCBLcM8oSp1W9NlpDvjyx0VuvTqYZjcVDDFKqISAZE/edit?usp=sharing>

- **Two Group Assignments (15% each; 30% total):**
  - For the first group assignment, students will be asked to work in groups of 2-3 people (randomly assigned) to prepare short presentations (8-10 minutes) identifying current or recent threats to democracy either in the United States or in another country. To identify such threats, students will follow *The Authoritarian Playbook* by Protect Democracy (linked below). Additional instructions about the assignment will be provided at the beginning of the semester. Due Week 5 & 6 (Feb 19<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup>).
  - For the second group assignment, students will be asked to work in groups of 2-3 people (randomly assigned) to prepare short presentations (8-10 minutes) identifying an intervention to strengthen democracy. To identify such interventions, students will follow *The Strengthening Democracy Challenge* (linked below). Additional instructions about the assignment will be provided mid-semester. Due Week 14 (April 21<sup>st</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>).
- **Midterm Exam #1 (25% for non-W students; 15% for W students)**  
The midterm exam will consist of identification terms, short answers, and an essay question. Students will be given a study guide the week before the midterm exam, which will take place during class on March 3<sup>rd</sup>.
- **Midterm Exam #2 (25% for non-W students; 15% for W students)**  
The midterm exam will consist of identification terms, short answers, and an essay question. Students will be given a study guide the week before the midterm exam, which will take place during class on April 30<sup>th</sup>.
- **Case Study for W requirement (20%)**  
Students will have the option to write either a 13-15 page case study of a country that has recently experienced democratic erosion, or write a 13-15 page case study about how to improve one or more aspects of American democracy. Additional instructions about the case study will be provided at the beginning of the semester and descriptions can be found in the dropbox, including guidance on how to use and not abuse AI. **A draft of the W paper is due March 23<sup>rd</sup>. The final draft should be proofread and emailed to me by midnight on April 27<sup>th</sup>. For each day that the paper is late, half a grade will be deducted.**

### **Academic Honesty Policy and Excused Absences**

All assignments and activities associated with this course must be performed in accordance with the University of Rochester's [Academic Honesty Policy](#). Note that if you need to miss any class due to illness, please notify me via email prior to the class. If you miss more than one class during the semester, a doctor's note will be required.

### **Course Schedule and Readings**

The following books are available for purchase from Amazon and/or should also be available online at URochester Library:

- *How Democracies Die* (2018) by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt.
- *The Backsliders: Why Leaders Undermine Their Own Democracies* by Susan Stokes (2025)

- *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop: The Case for Multiparty Democracy in America* (2020) by Lee Drutman.
- *Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy* (2017) by Daniel Ziblatt
- *Radical American Partisanship* (2022) by Nathan Kalmoe and Liliana Mason
- *Field Experiments: Design, Analysis, and Interpretation* (2012) by Alan Gerber and Donald Green
- *What Universities Owe Democracy*. 2021 Ronald Daniels, et al.

Journal articles are also available online at URochester library through each journal. All other readings are in the dropbox at:

[https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/wv533u5mrazvo3shtcolp/AKjSTV\\_z1WexKumNeRdsDMo?rlkey=ntp30em5jlllbq3tkgkkt0jo9&st=50nkigwr&dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/wv533u5mrazvo3shtcolp/AKjSTV_z1WexKumNeRdsDMo?rlkey=ntp30em5jlllbq3tkgkkt0jo9&st=50nkigwr&dl=0)

### **Deadlines and Important Dates**

- February 19<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup>: Group Assignment #1
- March 3<sup>rd</sup>: In-class Midterm Exam #1
- March 23<sup>rd</sup>: Draft of W paper
- April 27<sup>th</sup>: Final W paper
- April 21<sup>st</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>: Group Assignment #2
- April 30<sup>th</sup>: In-class Midterm Exam #2

### **Week 1: Introduction: Challenges of Democratic Erosion**

#### **Tuesday, January 20<sup>th</sup>**

Class overview and sign-up for weekly presentations

#### **Thursday, January 22<sup>nd</sup>**

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

### **Week 2: Identifying and Measuring Democratic Erosion**

#### **Tuesday, January 27<sup>th</sup>**

Varieties of Democracy, *V-Dem Annual Democracy Report*. 2025. "Twenty-Five Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?" (available on-line at [https://www.v-dem.net/documents/61/v-dem-dr\\_2025\\_lowres\\_v2.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/documents/61/v-dem-dr_2025_lowres_v2.pdf))

#### **Thursday, January 29<sup>th</sup>**

Little, Andrew T., and Anne Meng. "Measuring democratic backsliding." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 57.2 (2024): 149-161.

### **Week 3: Identifying and Measuring Democratic Erosion, Continued**

#### **Tuesday, Feb 3<sup>rd</sup>**

Carey, J. M., Helmke, G., Nyhan, B., Sanders, M., & Stokes, S. 2019. "Searching for bright lines in the trump presidency." *Perspectives on Politics*, 17(3), 699-718.

“Violence, Redistricting, and Democratic Norms in Trump’s America. Bright Line Watch, September 2025 Report  
<https://brightlinewatch.org/violence-redistricting-and-democratic-norms-in-trumps-america/>

**Thursday, Feb 5<sup>th</sup>**

Protect Democracy. 2022. *The Authoritarian Playbook*. (Available on-line here:  
<https://protectdemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/The-Authoritarian-Playbook-Updated.pdf>)

**Week 4: Theories of Democratic Erosion**

**Tuesday, Feb 10<sup>st</sup>**

Levitsky, Steven and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown.  
Introduction, Chapters 1, 4, and 5.

**Thursday, February 12<sup>th</sup>**

Stokes, Susan. 2025. *The Backsliders: Why Leaders Undermine Their Own Democracies*. 2025.  
Princeton University Press. Chapters 1-4

**Week 5: Theories of Democratic Erosion and Student Group Presentations (A)**

**Tuesday, February 17<sup>th</sup>**

Stokes, Susan. 2025. *The Backsliders: Why Leaders Undermine Their Own Democracies*. 2025.  
Princeton University Press. Chapters 5-7

**Thursday, February 19<sup>th</sup>**

Group A Presentations on the Authoritarian Playbook

**Week 6: Student Group Presentations (B) and Guest Speaker**

**Tuesday, February 24<sup>th</sup>**

Group B Presentations on the Authoritarian Playbook

Hand out Midterm Study Guide

**Thursday, February 26<sup>th</sup>**

Guest Speaker, Sonia Mittal on Prosecuting January 6<sup>th</sup> and the Rule of Law in American Democracy

Mittal, Sonia. "Executive Branch Attacks on January 6 Prosecutors: A Notable Case of Democratic Backsliding." *Stan. L. Rev. Online* 78 (2025): 52. (Located in Dropbox)

BRIEF OF AMICI CURIAE UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS AND SCHOLARS IN SUPPORT OF DEFENDANT’S MOTION TO DISMISS INDICTMENT FOR VINDICTIVE AND SELECTIVE PROSECUTION (Located in Dropbox)

## **Week 7: Midterm**

**Tuesday, March 3<sup>rd</sup>**

In-Class Midterm

**Thursday, March 5<sup>th</sup>**

No Class

## **Week 8: Spring Break (3/10 & 3/12)**

## **Week 9: 1930s Germany, the Rise of Hitler, and Autocratic Legalism**

**Tuesday, March 17<sup>th</sup>**

*Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy* (2017) by Daniel Ziblatt. Chapters TBD

**Thursday, March 19<sup>th</sup>**

Kim Lane Scheppelle “Autocratic Legalism” *University of Chicago Law Review* 2018

## **Week 10: Venezuela, the Rise of Chavez and the Fall of Maduro**

**Tuesday, March 24<sup>st</sup>**

*Dragon in the Tropics: Hugo Chavez and the Political Economy of Revolution in Venezuela* (2011) by Javier Corrales and Michael Penfold. Chapters TBD

**Thursday, March 26<sup>th</sup>**

Jose Ramon Morales-Arilla, “How Venezuela Actually Becomes a Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy*. Available on-line here: <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/how-venezuela-actually-becomes-a-democracy/>

Juan Miguel Matheus. “Why the United States Shouldn’t Run Venezuela,” *Journal of Democracy*. Available on-line here: <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/why-the-united-states-shouldnt-run-venezuela/>

## **Week 11: The United States, Political Polarization, and Political Violence**

**Tuesday, March 31<sup>st</sup>**

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

**Thursday, April 2<sup>nd</sup>**

Kalmoe, Nathan P., and Lillian Mason. 2022. *Radical American Partisanship: Mapping Violent Hostility, Its Causes, and the Consequences for Democracy*. University of Chicago Press. Selections TBD.

Westwood, Sean J., Justin Grimmer, Matthew Tyler, and Clayton Nall. 2022. "Current Research Overstates American Support for Political Violence." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 119.

### **Week 12: The United States: Parties and Institutions**

#### **Tuesday, April 7<sup>th</sup>**

Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. *Tyranny of the minority: Why American democracy reached the breaking point*. Random House, 2024. Chapters TBD

#### **Thursday, April 9<sup>th</sup>**

Drutman, Lee. 2020. *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop: The Case for Multiparty Democracy in America*. Oxford University Press. Chapters TBD

### **Week 13: Experiments and Solutions**

#### **Tuesday, April 14<sup>th</sup>**

Gerber, Alan and Donald Green. *Field Experiments: Design, Analysis, and Interpretation*. 2012. Skim chapters 1-2; read chapter 6

#### **Thursday, April 16<sup>th</sup>**

Voelkel, Jan G., et al. "Megastudy testing 25 treatments to reduce antidemocratic attitudes and partisan animosity." *Science* 386.6719 (2024)

### **Week 14: Group Presentations**

#### **Tuesday April 21<sup>st</sup>**

Group A Assignment #2

#### **Thursday– April 23<sup>rd</sup>**

Group B Assignment #2

Hand out Midterm Study Guide

### **Week 15: The Role of the University, Review and Second Midterm**

#### **Tuesday April 28<sup>th</sup>**

Daniels, Ronald J., Grant Shreve, and Phillip Spector. *What universities owe democracy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021. Selections TBD

#### **Thursday, April 30<sup>th</sup>**

Second In-Class Midterm