

## CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRACY

Professor: **Steven VAN HAUWAERT**

Session: **July 2026**

Language of instruction: **English**

Number of hours of class: **36h**



### Objective of the Course

This class sets out to:

- Build on existing knowledge of democracy and democratic institutions.
- Identify the core components of democracy in a wide range of geo-political settings.
- Engage in debates about democratic functioning.
- Gain an extensive understanding of how and why democratic principles are challenged.
- Increase the awareness of the subsequent implications of democratic challenges.
- Understand how democracies can be further consolidated.
- Provide insights into important contemporary issues and debates.
- Practice the understanding of comparative methodologies.

This course aims to introduce students to some of the most relevant issues and debates surrounding democratic challenges across the world. Readings and activities have been carefully selected to deepen students' knowledge of specific cases. They are also designed to build more general critical thinking and analytical skills that students can use to form their own understanding of particular challenges to democracy, as well as present their views in both oral and written formats.

Very concretely, students will be able to:

- Define major concepts such as democracy, democratic erosion, and (competitive) authoritarianism.
- Identify, measure, and compare various challenges to democracy.
- Critique and compare arguments, such as those explaining democratisation and democratic erosion.
- Apply theories of democratic consolidation and erosion throughout the assignments.

More generally, students will be able to:

- Competently engage in an academic discussion on the principles of representative democracy.

- Enhance understanding of how democratic functioning can be impacted by a wide variety of challenges.
- Link specific challenges to representative democracy to societal change, social trends, or political cycles.
- Develop the critical and analytical skills of students, while further stimulating the development of cognitive and verbal skills.
- Challenge students to think differently.
- Independently develop a democratic challenge of choice, apply, and combine relevant arguments and literatures to its explanation and propose potential solutions.
- Work both independently and in group, demonstrating initiative, organisation, and time-management.



## Summary

This course directly engages with debates on and challenges to democratic development. At its foundation, this includes a discussion and definition of democracy, its contours and the different forms and interpretations of democracy. Building on this, the course then engages in a careful examination of how different phenomena pressure or challenge democratic principles. The course divides these pressure points into two broad categories and subsequently considers how internally and externally derived challenges affect democratic functioning. The discussion as a whole will focus on this impact throughout a variety of geo-political contexts.

This course provides an occasion for students to acquire in-depth knowledge of how different social, economic, and political phenomena put pressure on democratic functioning. In addition to introducing students to the core principles of liberal and representative democracy, students will acquire insights into a wide variety of large-scale issues and debates that characterise various regimes, like democracies and autocracies. More specifically, this course focuses on a number of pressure points within and challenges to today's democracies, ranging from various forms of crisis to terrorism, populism, and polarisation. The examination of these different challenges will be tightly structured and designed to help students gain a deeper and more substantial understanding of both empirical and normative questions, as well as comparative politics more generally. Students engage in a final simulation game where they will assume the roles of decision-makers in a country undergoing rapid democratic decay leading. They will have to strategise and take action in response to critical political events. Altogether, this will reinforce student learning on the factors that exacerbate or mitigate democratic erosion in a comparative perspective.



## Organisation of the course

1. Introduction
2. Definitions and theories of democracy and democratic consolidation
3. Definitions and theories of democratic erosion

4. Populism
5. Information, disinformation and misinformation
6. Clientelism and corruption
7. Globalisation, immigration and resentment
8. Nature, climate and natural disasters
9. Terrorism
10. Inequality
11. Ideological and affective polarisation
12. Simulation game



## Professor's Biography



Steven M. Van Hauwaert is currently an Associate Professor (Senior Lecturer) in Comparative Politics at the University of Surrey. He has previously held positions as a Humboldt Fellow at the Johannes Gutenberg Universitat Mainz, a Visiting Professor at the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE), an FSR Fellow at the Université Catholique de Louvain, an NU Fellow at Northwestern University, an Adjunct Lecturer (ATER) and Research Fellow at Sciences Po Paris, a Visiting Researcher and Lecturer at the University of Amsterdam and a Marie Curie Early-Stage Researcher at the University of Vienna. He is the principal investigator of the Global Public Opinions Project and a team leader for Team Populism. His academic contributions have appeared, or are forthcoming, in *Acta Politica*, *Comparative European Politics*, *Electoral Studies*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *European Journal of Political Research*, *European Political Science Review*, *European Societies*, *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, *Journal of European Integration*, *Politics*, *West European Politics*, and a number of edited volumes. He is also an associate editor for the open access journals *Political Research Exchange (PRX)* and the *Methods and Measurement* section of *Frontiers in Political Science*.