

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRACY

Professor: **Steven M. Van Hauwaert**

Session: **July 2026**

Language of instruction: **English**

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

Format: **On campus**



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, organization 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 the 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.



Organization of the course

1. Introduction
2. Definitions and theories of democracy and democratic consolidation
3. Definitions and theories of democratic erosion
4. Information, disinformation and misinformation
5. Populism
6. Globalisation, immigration and resentment
7. Terrorism
8. Clientelism and corruption
9. Ideological and affective polarisation
10. Inequality
11. Simulation game



Bibliography

This is a tentative list of readings:

1. Introduction

- Feldstein, S. (2020, May 7). What Democracy Will Fall Next?. Foreign Policy.
- Repucci, S., & Slipowitz, A. (2021). Freedom in the world 2021: Democracy Under Siege. Freedom House.
- Alizada, N., Cole, R., Gastaldi, L., Grahn, S., Hellmeier, S., Kolvani, P., Lachapelle, J., Lührmann, A., Maerz, S. F., Pillai, S., & Lindberg, S. I. (2021). Autocratization Turns Viral. Democracy Report 2021. Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem).
- Roser, M. (2013). Democracy. Our world in data.

2. Definitions and theories of democracy and democratic consolidation

- Schumpeter, J. (1947). Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy (Chapter 22). Harper & Brothers.
- Dahl, R. (1972). Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition (Chapter 1). Yale University Press.
- Lipset, S. M. (1959). Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy. American Political Science Review, 53(1), 69-105.
- Downs, A. (1957). An economic theory of political action in a democracy. The Journal of Political Economy, 65(2), 135-150.
- Soroka, S. N., & Wlezien, C. (2010). Degrees of Democracy: Politics, Public Opinion and Policy (Chapters 2 and 9). Cambridge University Press.

3. Definitions and theories of democratic erosion

- Levitsky, S., & Way, L. A. (2002). Elections without democracy: The rise of competitive authoritarianism. Journal of Democracy, 13(2), 51-65.
- Bermeo, N. (2016). On Democratic Backsliding. Journal of Democracy, 27(1), 5-19.
- Levitsky, S., & Ziblatt, D. (2018). How Democracies Die (Chapter 1). Crown.

Schedler, A. (1998). What is democratic consolidation?. *Journal of Democracy*, 9(2), 91-107.

Lührmann, A., & Lindberg S. I. (2019). A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it?. *Democratization*, 26(7), 1095-1113.

Lust, E., & Waldner, D. (2015). *Unwelcome Change: Understanding, Evaluating, and Extending Theories of Democratic Backsliding* (pp. 1-14). Washington, DC: USAID.

4. Information, disinformation and misinformation

Wardle, C. (2017). *INFORMATION DISORDER: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making*. Council of Europe report, DGI(2017)09.

Chambers, S. (2020). Truth, Deliberative Democracy, and the Virtues of Accuracy: Is Fake News Destroying the Public Sphere?. *Political Studies*, First-view.

van Kessel, S., Sajuria, J., & Van Hauwaert, S. M. (2021). Informed, uninformed or misinformed? A cross-national analysis of populist party supporters across European democracies. *West European Politics*. 44(3), 585-610.

Kuklinski, J. H., Quirk, P. J., Jerit, J., Schwieder, D., & Rich, R. F. (2000). Mis-information and the currency of democratic citizenship. *Journal of Politics*, 62(3), 790-816.

Vraga, E. K., & Bode, L. (2020). Defining misinformation and understanding its bounded nature: using expertise and evidence for describing misinformation. *Political Communication*, 37(1), 136-144.

5. Populism

Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2012). The ambivalence of populism: threat and corrective for democracy. *Democratization*, 19(2), 184-208.

Mudde, C., & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Chapter 5). Oxford University Press.

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

6. Immigration, resentment, and the radical right

Kriesi, H., Grande, E., Dolezal, M., Helbling, M., Höglinger, D., Hutter, S. & Wüest, B. (Eds.). *Political Conflict in Western Europe* (chapters 1 & 11; pp. 3-35 & 275-301), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Inglehart, R., & Norris, P. (2016). *Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash*. HKS Faculty Research Working Paper Series RWP16-026.

7. Terrorism

Van Hauwaert, S. M., & Huber, R. A. (2020). In-group solidarity or out-group hostility in response to terrorism in France? Evidence from a regression discontinuity design. *European Journal of Political Research*, 59(4), 936-953.

Greenberg, J., Simon, L., Pyszczynski, T., Solomon, S. & Chatel, D. (1992). Terror management and tolerance: Does mortality salience always intensify negative reactions to others who threaten one's worldview?. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 63(2), 212-220.

Hogg, M. A., Meehan, C., & Farquharson, J. (2010). The solace of radicalism: Selfuncertainty and group identification in the face of threat. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 46(6), 1061-1066.

Schüller, S. (2015). The 9/11 conservative shift. *Economics Letters*, 135, 80-84.

Nail, P. R., McGregor, I., Drinkwater, A. E., Steele, G. M., & Thompson, A. W. (2009). Threat causes liberals to think like conservatives. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 45(4), 901-907.

8. Clientelism, corruption and money in politics

Mares, I., & Young, L. (2016). Buying, expropriating, and stealing votes. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 19, 267-288.

Flinders, M. & Anderson, A. (2021). MPs' expenses: the legacy of a scandal 10 years on. *British Politics*, online first.

Vannucci, A. (2016) The "clean hands" (mani pulite) inquiry on corruption and its effects on the Italian Political System. University of Pisa.

9. Polarisation

Svolik, M. W. (2019). Polarization versus democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, 30(3), 20-32.

Utych, S. M. (2020). Man bites blue dog: are moderates really more electable than ideologues?. *The Journal of Politics*, 82(1), 392-396.

McCoy, J., & Somer, M. (2021). Overcoming Polarization. *Journal of Democracy*, 32(1), 6-21.

Reiljan, A. (2020). Fear and loathing across party lines (also) in Europe: Affective polarisation in European party systems. *European Journal of Political Research*, 59(2), 376-396.

LeBas, A. (2018). Can Polarization Be Positive? Conflict and Institutional Development in Africa. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1), 59-74.

10. Inequality

Kelly, N. J., & Enns, P. K. (2010). Inequality and the dynamics of public opinion: The self-reinforcing link between economic inequality and mass preferences. *American Journal of Political Science*, 54(4), 855-870.

Gilens, M. (2005). Inequality and Democratic Responsiveness. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 69(5), 778-796.

Solt, F. (2008). Economic inequality and democratic political engagement. *American Journal of Political Science*, 52(1), 48-60.



Requirements for validation

This course includes three forms of assessment. Firstly, students will be evaluated for their active participation during the course. This is an important aspect of this course, which is designed as a seminar based not only on the remarks made by the professor, but also on the comments and discussion of students. Secondly, each student will write a short blog entry and provide peer review on a blog entry from another student. Where appropriate, these blog posts will be published in a highly visible outlet, like the Democratic Erosion blog. Fourth, students will be assessed based on participation in and a reflection of the simulation game.

The weight for each of these assessments is the following:

- 30% for active participation in the class
- 40% for the blog post and peer review
- 30% for the participation in the simulation game and a reflection paper



Professor's Biography

Steven M. Van Hauwaert is currently an Associate Professor in Comparative Politics at ESPOL (Université catholique de Lille) and a Fellow in Empirical Political Science at Radboud University. He is the principal investigator of the Global Public Opinions Project and a team leader for Team Populism. His academic contributions have appeared in a wide variety of international peer-reviewed journals across political science, economics and sociology. He is also the editor of the ECPR journal Political Research Exchange (PRX).