

D. Democracy on the Brink

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Thursdays, 1:00 – 2:30 p.m. Norris University Center

Since the mid-2000s, democracy has been under siege. In countries such as Russia, Turkey, and Venezuela, democracy has collapsed entirely. In longstanding democracies including the United States, democratic institutions have faced historically unprecedented strain from populist movements. Looking to the future, democracies likely will encounter novel challenges resulting from phenomena such as artificial intelligence and climate change. This course will survey recent trends in democratic backsliding, drawing on both classic studies of why democracies collapse and emerging research about uniquely 21st century threats to democracy. We will also consider potential political strategies and reforms for promoting the resilience of democracies.

Oct. 1 Defining Democracy

An introduction to competing definitions of democracy, the distinction between electoral and liberal democracy, and debates over democracy's normative strengths and limits.

Oct. 8 Democratic Backsliding and Breakdown

An overview of contemporary democratic backsliding and breakdown, including how today's patterns compare to earlier episodes of democratic regression.

Oct. 15 Political Polarization

A discussion of how political polarization is measured, how the United States compares with other democracies, and why polarization can threaten democratic norms and accountability.

Oct. 22 Economic Inequality

An analysis of the relationship between economic inequality and democracy, with attention to rising inequality, unequal political influence, and the puzzle of limited redistribution.

Oct. 29 Populism

An examination of populism's defining features, its potential threats to democracy, and the economic and cultural roots of the recent populist wave.

Nov. 5 Illiberalism

A discussion of classical liberalism and contemporary illiberal challenges from both the Left and the Right, including disputes over free speech, pluralism, and tolerance.

Nov. 12 21st Century Challenges: Disinformation, AI, and Climate Change

An overview of how disinformation, artificial intelligence, and climate change may create new pressures on democracy and intensify polarization, inequality, and populism.

Nov. 19 The United States in Comparative Perspective

An assessment of democratic backsliding in the United States in historical and comparative perspective, drawing lessons from other countries and earlier American crises.

Nov. 26 THANKSGIVING – NO CLASS

Dec. 3 What Can Be Done?

A concluding discussion of political strategies, institutional reforms, and policy responses that may strengthen democratic resilience.