

## **Government 3122/American Studies 3122**

### **Democracy: Development & Backsliding Fall 2024**

The United States has been widely associated with democratic ideals, and yet American democracy evolved slowly and haltingly, even in recent decades, retaining hallmarks of an “unfinished work.” Perhaps more surprisingly, democracy has not always moved in the direction of progress: sometimes it has been subject to “backsliding,” with key democratic features deteriorating or facing termination by public officials. Under what conditions is backsliding more likely to occur generally, when did it occur in the American past, and are we in danger of it today? This course engages these questions. In the process, we will ask what democracy means, how we can measure its attributes, and how we can assess whether they are resilient or deteriorating. Ultimately, we will consider what can be done to safeguard democracy.

We focus on four key threats to democracy: political polarization; conflict over membership and status, particularly around race and gender; economic inequality; and the growth of executive power. We will consider the status of free and fair elections, the rule of law, the legitimacy of the opposition, and the integrity of rights, including voting rights, civil rights, and civil liberties, studying how these features have developed historically and what happened in periods when they were under threat. We will also evaluate the contemporary political context by applying the same analytical tools.

Pedagogically, the course aims for students to be able to grapple intellectually with the core topics and readings, while improving their abilities to express themselves verbally, conduct research, and write analytically. Short to medium-length lectures will be interlaced with discussions. We will engage in deliberations over questions that confronted Americans at earlier points in the nation’s history, attempting to understand why people in those times disagreed over controversial questions, and considering the implications for our role as citizens today. Students will conduct research and write papers on their findings and present them to class.

### **Course Requirements**

#### Attendance

Attendance is fundamental. Students may miss up to three of the large class meetings for any reason (no need to inform us), but each subsequent absence will result in a reduction to the final course grade of one-third of a letter grade.

#### Participation

Active, informed, and thoughtful participation in this class is essential. Students are expected to come to each session well prepared and ready to engage actively in discussion about the assigned reading, including to discuss readings when I call on them.

#### Conversation Starters on Readings

Each student, once during the semester, will be responsible for offering brief commentary on an assigned reading, in order to spark discussion. Come prepared to say, in just 3-4 minutes, what you thought was most interesting, thought-provoking, and/or questionable about the reading and raise a couple of questions for discussion. (Do *not* summarize the reading.)

### Deliberations

We will hold three deliberations, during discussion sections, based on actual historical moments of decision in the history of American democracy. In order to prepare for each, students will be required to read an assortment of primary documents from the time. Students will be assigned to defend pro or con positions. Each student will act as a participant in two of these events, and will be among those who ask questions and judge the outcome in a third. The aim is not to score points as one would in high school or college debate teams or presidential debates, but rather to actively deliberate over an issue, as historical figures at the time did. See the final page of this syllabus for more details.

### Research Paper and Presentations

Every student will be required to conduct research on a topic pertaining to American democracy, and to write a research paper of 10-15 pages on their findings. A few topics will be provided for students to choose between, and students may also propose their own topic, as long as this is done in writing by September 18 and I approve it. (Topics may be historical or contemporary, but each should involve evaluation of whether a key institutional, policy, or political development expanded or detracted from democracy, and it should incorporate analytical tools from the course in conducting that evaluation.) Students must also submit an outline and bibliography and an annotated bibliography on assigned dates as crucial steps in the research and writing process. Our last several class meetings will be devoted, in whole or in part, to students' formal presentations on their research findings.

### Mid-Semester Exam and Final Analytical Essay

There will be one mid-semester in-class exam that includes short answer questions on key course topics (e.g. backsliding, polarization, etc.). There will also be a final analytical essay (7-9 pages) that requires students to draw on course readings and make an argument in response to a specific question. I will give you the essay questions well before the paper is due.

## **Grading**

Participation in Weekly Discussion Sections: 15%

Participation in Deliberations: 5%

Participation in Lecture Meetings (discussion, presentation, etc.): 5%

Research Paper and Presentation: 30%

Midterm Exam: 20%

Final Analytical Essay: 25% each

## **Course Procedures**

Academic Integrity: Plagiarism will not be tolerated. You are responsible for making sure that the written work you give me does not contain plagiarism. All submitted work must comply with

Cornell's policy on academic integrity, which is available here: <https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blogs.cornell.edu/dist/e/5276/files/2020/08/essential-guide-academic-integrity.pdf> Additional information about plagiarism can be found here: [Academic Integrity at Cornell | Office of the Provost](#). Students agree that by taking this course all required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to Turnitin.com for the detection of plagiarism. Use of Turnitin.com service is subject to the Usage Policy posted on the Turnitin.com site.

Screens: Ample research shows that students learn more effectively by taking hand-written notes than by using screens, and screens can be distracting to students seated near those using them. (See a fun [video discussion](#) of one such study.) I request that students keep all laptops and phones stored during class. For students who have SDS accommodations that require taking notes on laptops, they should speak with me about it; I will request that they sit in particular part of the room where the screens will be less likely to distract other students.

#### A Word About Class Interaction and Deliberation

We live in a challenging time in history, and one in which talking about American politics can spur strong emotions and hostility – as it has on many occasions in the past. We will likely disagree on many topics, and open discussion of such disagreements can be valuable, as long as we refrain from personal attacks. It is imperative that we treat each other with kindness and respect, keeping in mind that we are a learning community. Now more than ever in the recent past, good will, curiosity, and generosity of spirit are essential to successful deliberation.

#### Due Dates

Papers are due on the dates in the syllabus, and late papers will be subject to penalties.

#### **Books and Other Readings**

The following books have been ordered at the campus bookstore:

\*Mettler, Suzanne, and Robert C. Lieberman. 2020. *Four Threats: The Recurring Crises of American Democracy*. New York: St. Martin's.

Whittington, Keith E. 2018. *Speak Freely: Why Universities Must Defend Free Speech*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

[*Not ordered and optional, since readings are available electronically:*

\*Lieberman, Robert C., Suzanne Mettler, and Kenneth M. Roberts, editors. 2021. *Democratic Resilience: Can the United States Withstand Rising Polarization?* New York: Cambridge University Press.]

\*Note: Although I'm an author/editor of these books, I am not able to provide them to you for free, because the discount permitted me as an author is very small. I will, however, donate the amount of my royalties, several times over, to the non-profit organization [On Point for College](#), which aids low-income and first-generation students in preparing for, applying to, enrolling in, and completing college.

All other readings for the course are available on a Canvas site that I have established for the course, or at a website if link is provided on the syllabus.

Keep up with the news, e.g. by reading the *New York Times* and/or *Washington Post* daily.

## Course Outline

### **1, August 26, Introduction: Thinking about Democratic Development and Deterioration**

Examine two democracy indices:

Skim Democracy Index 2023 report from the *Economist*, pp. 1-8, 39-43. [on Canvas]

Glance at one from *Freedom House*: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2023/marking-50-years>. Glance over their United States country report as well: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-states/freedom-world/2023>

**[Discussion sections begin this week, on August 27, 29, and 30]**

### **2, August 28, What is Democracy?**

Dahl, Robert. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, 1. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971, Chap. 1.

Mettler, Suzanne and Robert C. Lieberman. 2020. *Four Threats*. Intro and Chapter 1.

[September 2: Labor Day, no classes.]

*[No section meetings Labor Day week, meaning September 3, 5, and 6]*

**Due, Sept. 3, 5 p.m.: Democracy Road Trip Assignment, upload in Canvas**

### **3, September 4, Is US Democracy in Danger of Backsliding?**

Levitsky, Steven and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*. Crown. Intro and Chap. 1.

Raul L. Madrid and Kurt Weyland, 2019. "Why US Democracy Will Survive Trump," in *When Democracy Trumps Populism*, ed. by Kurt Weyland and Raul L. Madrid.

Bermeo, Nancy. "On Democratic Backsliding." *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 27, Number 1, January 2016, pp. 5-19.

### **4, September 9, Democracy and Institutions Today: Should We Be Concerned?**

Thomas M. Keck, "Court Packing and Democratic Erosion." in *Democratic Resilience*, 141-169.

Lawrence R. Jacobs and Judd Choate, “Democratic Capacity: Election Administration as Bulwark and Target.” ANNALS 2022.

Donald Moynihan, “Delegitimization, Deconstruction, and Control: Undermining the Public Service,” in ANNALS 2022.

***September 10: Presidential Debate. 9 p.m. Eastern, ABC News. Watch!***

## **5, September 11, The American Founding I**

Declaration of Independence [skim]

US Constitution and Bill of Rights (first 10 amendments) [skim]

Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, Chap. 1, only pp. 27-39 required

W.E.B. Dubois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*, (1935)  
Chap. 1

*Topics distributed for research papers.*

***September 13, Fostering Global Democracy: Freedom & Responsibility.*** *Optional workshop on campus. Learn more and register [here](#).*

## **6, September 16, The American Founding II**

R. Laurence Moore & Isaac Kramnick, *Godless Citizens in a Godly Republic*, Chap. 1.

Letters Between Abigail and John Adams

Robert Dahl, *How Democratic is the American Constitution?* Chaps. 1-2.

## **7, September 18, Political Polarization in the 1790s**

Mettler and Lieberman, *Four Threats*, Chapter 2.

Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, “Pernicious Polarization and Democratic Resilience: Analyzing the United States in Comparative Perspective.” In *Democratic Resilience*, edited by Robert C. Lieberman, Suzanne Mettler, and Kenneth M. Roberts. Cambridge University Press. [hereafter, *Democratic Resilience*], 61-89.

**Due: Topic choices for research paper**

**Sections, September 19, 20, 24, Deliberation #1: The Alien and Sedition Acts**

## **8, September 23, Contemporary Political Polarization, I**

Frances E. Lee. 2021. "Cross-cutting Cleavages, Political Institutions, and Democratic Resilience in the United States." In *Democratic Resilience*, 95-117.

Lilliana Mason and Nathan P. Kalmoe. 2021. "The Social Roots, Risks, and Rewards of Mass Polarization." *Democratic Resilience*, 171-194.

*Visit to class by Research and Instruction Librarian Ms. Lynn Thitchener, to discuss research paper sources and strategies. (3:40 p.m.)*

## **9, September 25, Contemporary Political Polarization, II**

Daniel Schlozman and Sam Rosenfeld, "Late to the Party," *New York Review*, July 30, 2024.

Paul Pierson and Eric Schickler. 2019. "Polarization and the Durability of Madisonian Checks and Balances," in *Democratic Resilience*, 35-60.

Kenneth Roberts. 2019. "Parties, Populism, and Democratic Decay: A Comparative Perspective on Political Polarization in the United States," in *When Democracy Trumps Populism*, ed. by Kurt Weyland and Raul L. Madrid.

## **10, September 30, Conflict Over Who Belongs: The 1850s & 1860s...and Today**

Mettler and Lieberman, *Four Threats*, Chapter 3.

Declaration of Sentiments, Seneca Falls, 1848,

<https://www.nps.gov/wori/learn/historyculture/declaration-of-sentiments.htm>

Frederick Douglass, "Meaning of July 4th for the Slave,"

[https://masshumanities.org/files/programs/douglass/speech\\_complete.pdf](https://masshumanities.org/files/programs/douglass/speech_complete.pdf)

Cas Mudde, "The Far Right Threat: Putting the US in Comparative Perspective," *ANNALS* 2022.

*October 1, Vice-Presidential Debate, 9 p.m. Eastern, CBS News.*

## **11, October 2. Reconstruction, National Citizenship Rights, & Their Demise**

Eric Foner, *The Second Founding: How the Civil War and Reconstruction Remade the Constitution*, New York: Norton, 2019, Chap. 2 and part of Chap. 4.

Vesla Mae Weaver and Gwen Prowse, "Racial Authoritarianism in U.S. Democracy." *Science*. September 2020. VOL 369 ISSUE 6508 PP 1176-1178 DOI: 10.1126/science.abd7669

**Due: One-page outline or abstract and one page bibliography for research paper**

**Sections, Oct. 3, 4, and 8: Deliberation #2. The 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment.**

## **12, October 7, Contemporary Conflict Over Who Belongs**

Christopher Parker and Matt A. Barreto, "The Great White Hope: Threat and Racial Resistance in Trump's America." In *Democratic Resilience*, 195-225.

Kirsten Walters and Theda Skocpol, "Immigration Clashes, Party Polarization, and Republican Radicalization: Tracking Shifts in State and National Party Platforms Since 1980," *Studies in American Political Development* (2023), 1-17

## **13, October 9, Midterm (During Class Time)**

*[October 14, Fall Break: No Class]*

## **14, October 16, The 1890s; Adding Economic Inequality to the Threats**

Mettler and Lieberman, *Four Threats*, Chapter 4.

Sanders, Elizabeth, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877-1917*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999, Chaps. 1, 11, 12.

## **15, October 21, Contemporary Economic Inequality, I: The Top 1%, State Capture**

Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, “Winner-Take-All Politics,” in Grusky & Hill, 58-67.

Alexander Hertel-Fernandez. 2021. “Conservative Extra-Party Coalitions and Statehouse Democracy.” in *Democratic Resilience*, 320-340.

## **16, October 23, Contemporary Economic Inequality, II: The Rural-Urban Divide**

Katherine Cramer. 2012. “Putting Inequality in Its Place: Rural Consciousness and the Power of Perspective.” *American Political Science Review*. 106: 517-532.

Trevor Brown, Suzanne Mettler, and Samantha Puzzi. 2021. “When Rural and Urban Become ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’: How a Growing Divide is Shaping American Politics.” *The Forum*. 19(3): 365-393.

**Due: Annotated Bibliography for Research Paper.**

## **17, October 28, Democratization and Executive Aggrandizement: the 1930s**

Mettler and Lieberman, *Four Threats*, Chapter 5.

Mettler, Suzanne, “Social Citizens of Separate Sovereignties: Governance in the New Deal Welfare State.” In *The New Deal and the Triumph of Liberalism*, ed. by Sidney M. Milkis and Jerome M. Mileur, 2002.

William E. Leuchtenberg, “When Franklin Roosevelt Clashed with the Supreme Court...and Lost,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, May 2005. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/when-franklin-roosevelt-clashed-with-the-supreme-court-and-lost-78497994/>

**Sections, October 29, 31 Nov 1, Deliberation #3: Roosevelt’s Court-Packing Plan**

## **18, October 30, Democratization in the 1960s and 1970s, and Backlash**

Martin Luther King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”

Vesla M. Weaver, “Frontlash: Race and the Development of Punitive Crime Policy.” *Studies in American Political Development*. 21 Fall 2007: 230-265.

## **19, November 4, Executive Aggrandizement in the 1970s: Watergate**

Mettler and Lieberman, *Four Threats*, Chapter 6, 7.

***[NOV. 5: ELECTION DAY!!! Vote!]***

## **20, November 6, The State of Democracy Today**

Mettler and Lieberman, *Four Threats*, Chapter 8, 9.



Danny Hayes and Jennifer L. Lawless, *News Hole: The Demise of Local Journalism and Political Engagement* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), Chapters 1-2.

**21, November 11, Democracy, Citizenship, and Organizations, + Presentations**

Theda Skocpol, Caroline Tervo, and Kirsten Walters, “Citizen Organizing and Partisan Polarization from the Tea Party to the Anti-Trump Resistance,” *Democratic Resilience*, 369-400.

Matthew J. Lacombe, “Weaponized Group Identities and the Health of Democracy: Why the National Rifle Association is Good *at* Democracy but Bad *for* It,” *Democratic Resilience*, 246-265.

**22, November 13, Freedom of Speech on Campus I + Presentations**

Whittington, *Speak Freely*, Intro and Chaps. 1-2

**23, November 18, Freedom of Speech on Campus II + Presentations**

Whittington, *Speak Freely*, Chaps. 3-4, *skim only*

PE. Moskowitz, *The Case Against Free Speech*, Chap. 1.

**24, November 25, Presentations.**

**Due: Full Research paper, by Canvas**

**25, December 2, Presentations**

***Final Analytical Paper Topics Distributed***

**27, December 4, How Can Democracy Be Saved? + Presentations**

Lee Drutman, “Moderation, Realignment, or Transformation? Evaluating Three Approaches to America’s Crisis of Democracy.” ANNALS 2022.

**28, December 9, Evaluations, Presentations, Final lecture.**

**Due December 12: Final Analytical Papers, in Canvas.**

## **Guidelines for Deliberations, held in Discussion Sections**

(more instructions will be made available closer to each deliberation)

### **Sections, September 19, 20, 24, Deliberation #1: The Alien and Sedition Acts**

*Key Question: Are the Alien and Sedition Laws appropriate and necessary exercises of power under the US Constitution?*

Alien and Sedition Acts (1798), Kentucky Resolutions (1798), Federalist Defense of the Alien & Sedition Laws (1799) [skim]

For students playing key roles: skim additional materials, Library of Congress:

<https://guides.loc.gov/alien-and-sedition-acts/introduction>

### **Oct. 3, 4, and 8: Deliberation #2. The 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment.**

*Key Question: Does the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment create rights of national citizenship?*

All students should review Foner.

For students playing key roles: peruse additional materials, at the Library of Congress

(<https://guides.loc.gov/14th-amendment/introduction>) and on the Slaughterhouse Cases

(<https://www.oyez.org/cases/1850-1900/83us36>); Bradwell v. The State

(<https://www.oyez.org/cases/1850-1900/83us130>;

<https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/83/130>); Minor v. Happersett,

<https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/88/162>)

### **October 29, 31 Nov 1, Deliberation #3: Roosevelt's Court-Packing Plan**

Key Question: Is President Franklin D. Roosevelt's plan to enlarge the court appropriate and constitutional? [Note: All students should review the Leuchtenberg readings and skim the materials listed below, here on the syllabus. The extra readings on Canvas are only for individual students playing particular roles.]

Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Message to Congress on the Reorganization of the Judicial Branch,"

February 5, 1937, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/message-congress-the-reorganization-the-judicial-branch-the-government>

Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Radio Address on Court Packing," <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/march-9-1937-fireside-chat-9-court-packing>

H.L. Mencken, "A Constitution for the New Deal," The American Mercury, June 1937, <https://www.unz.com/print/AmMercury-1937jun-00129>; please just skim this piece by the well-known journalist/satirist