POLS 5640:
Comparative Politics of the Middle East

Fall 2025
Syllabus
Subject to change at the instructor's discretion

Course Description

After the Cold War, democracy spread fast, so much so that scholars spoke of a "third wave." Yet since the mid-2000s, many of those same gains have slipped. Why do some democracies weaken while others hold firm? This course tackles that puzzle.

We start by asking what "democratic erosion" looks like on the ground: the warning signs, the actors who drive it, and the institutions that either slow it or speed it up. We will sift through global case studies and broad themes to see how leaders, parties, courts, the media, and ordinary citizens shape the fate of free government. Along the way, we will weigh big claims about the health of democracy in the United States and elsewhere—testing them against data rather than headlines—and discuss practical ways societies can push back against backsliding.

This is a slash course (open to both advanced undergraduates and graduate students). Graduate students are expected to complete supplementary readings, contribute to class discussions, and submit a research-design proposal.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, you will be able to:

- Conceptualize Democratic Deconsolidation: Formulate precise, research-grade definitions of democratic erosion and differentiate them from cyclical or benign regime change, situating the concept within larger debates on regime typologies and hybrid regimes.
- Map and Critique Global Trends: Synthesize cross-national datasets and secondary literatures to trace temporal and spatial patterns of backsliding, evaluating the validity and reliability of the indicators used to measure them.
- Identify Causal Mechanisms: Adjudicate between rival theoretical explanations, institutional, socioeconomic, cultural-ideational, and informational, by designing research designs that leverage comparative, experimental, and mixed-methods evidence.
- Craft Publishable Research Designs: Produce a well-specified research proposal, including theory, testable hypotheses, data strategy, and methodological plan, that could serve as the foundation for a conference presentation or dissertation chapter.

Reading Materials
All readings are available via Canvas to provide insights from a variety of sources as well as to save you money.

Course Requirements and Grading
Students must read the materials *before* class and be prepared to contribute to discussions. The grading scale is as follows: A = 93-100%, A- = 90-92%, B+ = 87-89%, B = 83-86%, B- = 80-82%, C+ = 77-79%, C = 73-76%, C- = 70-72%, D = 60-69%, and F = below 60. Late submissions will be penalized by one-third of a letter grade (i.e., B+ to B) for every 24 hours past the deadline. Students will be evaluated based on the following criteria:

1. Weekly Critical Summary (15%)

2. Exam (50%)

3. Research Proposal (35%)

Course Policies

Class Preparation: Students must complete all readings *before* class. Lectures may not reiterate all material in the readings.

Current Events: We will begin some classes with a discussion of current events regarding democratic erosion around the world. Students are expected to read the news regularly and participate.

Grade Disputes: To dispute a grade, students must submit a written explanation within one week of receiving the assignment. Reassessments do not guarantee a higher grade.

Electronics Policy: The use of phones is prohibited. Laptops and tablets are allowed for notetaking but do not let them district others (and yourself).

Canvas: Students are responsible for checking Canvas for class materials and assignments.

Keeping in Touch: Email is the best way to reach me; allow 48 hours for a response. Please communicate with me. If you are experiencing any difficulties affecting your performance, do let me know.

Course Content Warning: This course engages with a range of sensitive and potentially distressing topics related to politics of the Middle East and North Africa. Though essential

for a comprehensive understanding of the region, certain topics may evoke strong emotions. I encourage you to approach these topics with an open mind.

Higher education aims to challenge students and expose them to new and sometimes uncomfortable ideas. Discomfort can be an integral part of this learning process, but your mental and emotional health is also important. If you have concerns or need assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me or utilize the university's support services (see "Supports for Students" below).

Although you are responsible for completing all class requirements and assignments, accommodations are available to support your well-being and academic success.

Respect for Diversity: **It is my intent that students from all diverse backgrounds and perspectives be well-served by this course, and their learning needs be addressed both in and out of class.** In our structured and unstructured discussions and dialogues, we will have many opportunities to explore some challenging issues and increase our understandings of diverse perspectives. The success of this class relies on the participation, support, and mutual understanding, even when we encounter disagreements.

I encourage you to speak up and share your views, with the understanding that this is a learning environment where respectful engagement and regard for dignity are essential. Our conversations may sometimes be difficult, and we may make mistakes in how we speak and listen. We will need patience, courage, imagination, and other qualities to effectively engage with our texts and films as well as our own ideas and experiences. Above all, respect for others is crucial.

University Policies

The Americans with Disabilities Act: **Your experience in this class is very important to me. If you have a disability that affects your academic performance, please let me know as soon as possible.** The University of Utah seeks to provide equal access to its programs, services, and activities for people with disabilities. If you will need accommodations in this class, reasonable prior notice needs to be given to the Center for Disability & Access, 162 Olpin Union Building, (801) 581-5020. CDS will work with you and the instructor to make arrangements for accommodations. All written information in this course can be made available in an alternative format with prior notification to the Center for Disability & Access. *Please note that given the nature of this course, attendance is required and adjustments will only be permitted as required by Policy 6-100(III)(O).* If you need to seek an ADA accommodation to request an exception to this attendance policy due to a disability, please contact the Center for Disability and Access (CDA). CDA will work with us to determine what, if any, ADA accommodations are reasonable and appropriate. In compliance with ADA requirements, some students may need to record course content. Any recordings of course

content are for personal use only, should not be shared, and should not be made publicly available. In addition, recordings should be destroyed at the conclusion of the course.

University Safety Statement: The University of Utah values the safety of all campus community members. To report suspicious activity or to request a courtesy escort, call campus police at 801-585-COPS (801-585-2677). You will receive important emergency alerts and safety messages regarding campus safety via text message. For more information regarding safety and to view available training resources, including helpful videos, visit https://safeu.utah.edu

Addressing Sexual Misconduct: Title IX makes it clear that violence and harassment based on sex and gender (including sexual orientation and gender identity/expression) is a civil rights offense subject to the same kinds of accountability and the same kinds of support applied to offenses against other protected categories such as race, national origin, color, religion, age, status as a person with a disability, veteran's status or genetic information. If you or someone you know has been harassed or assaulted, you are encouraged to report it to the Title IX Coordinator in the Office of Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action, 383 South University Street, 801-581-8365, or the Office of the Dean of Students, 270 Union Building, 801-581-7066. For support and confidential consultation, contact the Center for Student Wellness, 426 SSB, 801-581-7776. To report to the police, contact the Department of Public Safety, 801-585-2677(COPS).

Lauren's Promise: Lauren's Promise is a vow that anyone – faculty, staff, students, parents, and community members – can take to indicate to others that they represent a safe haven for sharing incidents of sexual assault, domestic violence, or stalking. Anyone who makes Lauren's Promise vows to: 1.) listen to and believe those individuals who are being threatened or experiencing sexual assault, dating violence or stalking; 2.) represent a safe haven for sharing incidents of sexual assault, domestic violence, or stalking; and 3.) change campus culture that responds poorly to dating violence and stalking. By making Lauren's Promise, individuals are helping to change campus cultures that respond poorly to dating violence and stalking throughout the nation.

Academic Misconduct Statement: It is expected that students adhere to University of Utah policies regarding academic honesty, including but not limited to refraining from cheating, plagiarizing, misrepresenting one's work, and/or inappropriately collaborating. This includes the use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools without citation, documentation, or authorization. Students are expected to adhere to the prescribed professional and ethical standards of the profession/discipline for which they are preparing. Any student who engages in academic dishonesty or who violates the professional and ethical standards for their profession/discipline may be subject to academic sanctions as per the University of Utah's Student Code: https://regulations.utah.edu/academics/6-410.php

Drop/Withdrawal Policies: Students may drop a course within the first two weeks of a given semester without any penalties. Students may officially withdraw (W) from a class or all classes after the drop deadline through the midpoint of a course. A "W" grade is recorded on the transcript and appropriate tuition/fees are assessed. The grade "W" is not used in calculating the student's GPA. For deadlines to withdraw from full-term, first, and second session classes, see the U's Academic Calendar.

Supports for Students: Your success at the University of Utah is important to all of us here! If you feel like you need extra support in academics, overcoming personal difficulties, or finding community, the U is here for you. Please refer to the Student Support Services page for the U for updated information.

Basic Needs Student Support Statement: **To learn effectively, students' wellness and safety must first be supported. Together, we can work to meet these basic needs.** Success at The University of Utah includes learning about and using available resources. The Basic Needs Collective (BNC) is a coordinated resource referral hub. They educate about and connect students to campus and community resources to help them meet their basic needs. As a central location for resource referrals related to food, housing, health insurance, managing finances, legal services, mental health, etc., any student experiencing difficulty with basic needs is encouraged to contact them. Drop into their office located in the Union basement or schedule with them online for an in-person or virtual visit through their webpage: https://basicneeds.utah.edu/. If you're having trouble with any aspects of wellness, please contact the Center for Campus Wellness (wellness@sa.utah.edu or 801-581-7776). Students dealing with heightened feelings of sadness or hopelessness, thoughts of harm or suicide, or increased anxiety may schedule an appointment at the University Counseling Center (counselingcenter@sa.utah.edu or 801-581-6826).

Other Student Resources

- Learning Center: https://learningcenter.utah.edu/
- Writing Center: https://writingcenter.utah.edu/writing-resources/index.php
- Student Code: http://regulations.utah.edu/academics/6-400.php
- Accommodation Policy (see Section Q): http://regulations.utah.edu/academics/6-100.php

Topics and Readings

Week 1: Introduction (August 21)

- Bermeo, Nancy. 2016. "On Democratic Backsliding." *Journal of Democracy* 27(1): pp. 5-19.
- Cheeseman, Nic. 2017. "How Zambia's long-stable democracy ended up in a political crisis in 2017." *Quartz*. July 7.

Week 2: Definitions and theories of democracy and democratization

- Schmitter, Philippe C., and Terry Lynn Karl. 1991. "What Democracy Is...and Is Not." *Journal of Democracy* 2 (3): 75-88.
- Nord, Marina, et al. 2024. "Democracy Report 2024: Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot." Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin. 1959. "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy." *American Political Science Review* 53(1): pp. 69-105.
- Acemoglu, Daron and James Robinson. 2006. Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy. New York: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 2.
- Grossman, Guy, Dorothy Kronick, Matthew Levendusky, and Marc Meredith. (2022). "The majoritarian threat to liberal democracy." Journal of Experimental Political Science 9(1): 36-45.
- Przeworski, Adam, and Fernando Limongi. 1997. "Modernization: Theories and Facts." World Politics, 49 (2): 155-183.

Week 3: Definitions and theories of democratic erosion

- Levitsky, Steven and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. How Democracies Die. New York: Crown. Chapter 1.
- Waldner, David, and Ellen Lust. 2018. "Unwelcoming Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding." Annual Review of Political Science 21 (2): 93-113.
- Lehoucq, Fabrice. 2008. "Bolivia's Constitutional Breakdown." Journal of Democracy 19(4): pp. 110-124.
- Anria, Santiago. 2016. "Delegative Democracy Revisited: More Inclusion, Less Liberalism in Bolivia." Journal of Democracy 27(3): pp. 99-108.
- Baron, Hannah, Robert A. Blair, Jessica Gottlieb, and Laura Paler. 2024. "An Events-Based Approach to Understanding Democratic Erosion." PS: Political Science & Politics 57 (2): 208-215.
- Krekó, Péter, and Zsolt Enyedi. 2018. "Explaining Eastern Europe: Orbán's Laboratory of Illiberalism." Journal of Democracy 29 (3): 39-5. OR
- Thaler, Kai M. 2017. "Nicaragua: A Return to Caudillismo." Journal of Democracy 28 (2), 157-169.

Week 3.5: The challenge of democratic erosion

- Little, Andrew T. and Anne Meng. 2023. "Measuring Democratic Backsliding." PS: Political Science & Politics.
- Grumbach, Jacob M. (2023). "Laboratories of Democratic Backsliding." American Political Science Review 117(3): 967-984.

- When Strong Institutions Undermine Strong Democracies Gretchen Helmke and Jack Paine January 2020

Week 4: Horizontal and vertical accountability

- Varol, Ozan. 2015. “Stealth Authoritarianism.” Iowa Law Review 100(4): pp. 1673-1742. Parts I, II and III.
- Huq, Aziz and Tom Ginsburg. 2017. “How to Lose a Constitutional Democracy.” UCLA Law Review 65(78): pp. 80-169. Parts 1 and 4; skim part 3.
- Bahry, D., & Kim, Y. H. (2021). Executive Turnover and the Investigation of Former Leaders in New Democracies. Political Research Quarterly, 74(1), 199–211.
- Bentele, Keith G., and Erin E. O’Brien. 2013. "Jim Crow 2.0? Why States Consider and Adopt Restrictive Voter Access Policies." Perspectives on Politics 11 (4): 1088-1116.
- Weitz-Shapiro, Rebecca, and Matthew S. Winters. 2017. "Can Citizens Discern? Information Credibility, Political Sophistication, and the Punishment of Corruption in Brazil." The Journal of Politics 79 (1): 60-74.
- Albertus, Michael, and Guy Grossman. 2021. "The Americas: When Do Voters Support Power Grabs?" Journal of Democracy 32(2): 116-131.

Week 5: Economic Inequality

- Acemoglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. 2006. Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapters 1 and 2.
- Toro, Francisco. “No, Venezuela doesn’t prove anything about socialism.” The Washington Post. August 21, 2018.
- Haggard, Stephan, and Robert R. Kaufman. 2012. "Inequality and Regime Change: Democratic Transitions and the Stability of Democratic Rule." American Political Science Review 106(3): 495-516.
- Bartels, Larry M. 2017. Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age. 2nd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Chapter 1.
- Solt, Frederick. 2008. "Economic Inequality and Democratic Political Engagement." American Journal of Political Science 52 (1): 48-60.
- Gilens, Martin. 2005. “Inequality and Democratic Responsiveness.” The Public Opinion Quarterly 69(5): pp. 778-796.
- Streeck, Wolfgang. 2014. Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism. London; New York: Verso. pp. 47-75.
- Kramer, Larry. 2018. “Beyond Neoliberalism.” Palo Alto, CA: Hewlett Foundation. pp. 3-22.

Week 6: Ethno-Religious Conflict

- Wilkinson, Steven I. 2004. Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 1.
- Dhattiwala, Raheel, and Michael Biggs. 2012. "The Political Logic of Ethnic Violence: The Anti-Muslim Pogrom in Gujarat, 2002." Politics and Society 40 (4): 483-516.
- Gerring, John, Michael Hoffman, and Dominic Zarecki. 2016. "The Diverse Effects of Diversity on Democracy." British Journal of Political Science 48: 238-314.
- Stepan, Alfred C. 2000. "Religion, Democracy, and the 'Twin Tolerations'." Journal of Democracy 11 (4): 37-57.

Week 7: TBD

Week 8: Populism and demagoguery

- Müller, Jan-Werner. 2016. What Is Populism? Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Berman, Sheri. 2021. "The Causes of Populism in the West." Annual Review of Political Science 24 (1), 71-88.
- Berman, Sheri. 2017. "The Pipe Dream of Undemocratic Liberalism." Journal of Democracy 28(3): 29-38.
- Kendall-Taylor, Andrea and Erica Frantz. "How Democracies Fall Apart: Why Populism is a Pathway to Autocracy." Foreign Affairs. December 5, 2016.
- Pita, Adrianna. 2016. "The Rise of the Right: Right-wing Populism in the US and Europe." The Brookings Institution. April 19, 2016.
- Mudde, Cas, and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser. 2017. Populism: A Very Short Introduction. New York: Oxford University Press. Chapter 1.
- Weyland, Kurt. 2024. "Why Democracy Survives Populism." Journal of Democracy 35 (1): 43-58.
- Dinas, Elias, et al. 2019. "Waking Up the Golden Dawn: Does Exposure to the Refugee Crisis Increase Support for Extreme-Right Parties?" Political Analysis 27: pp. 244-254.
- Bansak, Kirk, Jens Hainmueller and Dominik Hangartner. 2016. "How Economic, Humanitarian, and Religious Concerns Shape European Attitudes Toward Asylum Seekers." Science 354(6309): pp. 217-222.

Week 9: Polarization

- McCoy, Jennifer, Tahmina Rahman and Murat Somer. 2018. "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics and Pernicious

Consequences for Democratic Polities." American Behavioral Scientist 62(1): pp. 16-42.

- Iyengar, Shanto and Masha Krupenkin. 2018. "The Strengthening of Partisan Affect." Political Psychology 39(S1): pp. 201-218.
- Mason, Lilliana. 2018. Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chapters 1 and 3.
- LeBas, Adrienne. 2018. "Can Polarization Be Positive? Conflict and Institutional Development in Africa." American Behavioral Scientist 62(1): pp. 59-74.
- Ortellado, Pablo and Márcio Moretto Ribeiro. "Mapping Brazil's political polarization online." The Conversation. August 3, 2018.
- Orhan, Yunus Emre. 2022. "The Relationship between Affective Polarization and Democratic Backsliding: Comparative Evidence." Democratization 29 (4): 714–35.
- Hochschild, Arlie R. 2018. Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right. The New Press. Chapters 1, 9, & 15.
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Week 10: Fake news, misinformation, & disinformation

- Weitz-Shapiro, Rebecca and Matthew Winters. 2016. "Can Citizens Discern? Information Credibility, Political Sophistication, and the Punishment of Corruption in Brazil." Journal of Politics 79(1): pp. 60-74.
- Ferraz, Claudio and Fred Finan. 2011. "Exposing Corrupt Politicians." J-Pal Policy Brief.
- Svolik, Milan W. 2019. "Polarization Versus Democracy." Journal of Democracy 30(3): pp. 20- 32.
- Mercieca, Jennifer R. 2019. "Dangerous Demagogues and Weaponized Communication." Rhetoric Society Quarterly 49(3): pp. 264-279.
- Siegal, Alexandra A. and Joshua A. Tucker. 2018. "The Islamic State's Information Warfare: Measuring the Success of ISIS's Online Strategy." Journal of Language and Politics 17(2): pp. 258-280.
- Bandeira, Luiza, Donara Barojan, Roberta Braga, Jose Luis Peñarredonda and Maria Fernanda Pérez Argüello. 2019. Disinformation in Democracies: Strengthening Digital Resilience in Latin America. Washington, DC: The Atlantic Council. pp. 6-19.
- Pomerantsev, Peter. 2019. "The Disinformation Age: A Revolution in Propaganda." The Guardian. July 27, 2019.
- Persily, Nate and Alex Stamos. 2019. "Regulating Online Political Advertising by Foreign Nationals and Governments." Chapter 3 in Securing American Elections. Michael McFaul, ed. Stanford: Stanford Cyber Policy Center.

- DiResta, Renée. 2018. “What We Now Know About Russian Disinformation.” New York Times. December 17, 2018.
- Bellingcat Podcast. 2019. “MH17, Episode 2: A Pack of Lies.” Bellingcat Podcast. July 24, 2019.
- Lecheler, Sophie, and Jana L. Egelhofer. 2022. “Disinformation, Misinformation, and Fake News: Understanding the Supply Side.” In Knowledge Resistance in High-Choice Information Environments, edited by Jesper Strömbäck et al. London: Routledge. 69–87 Tucker, Joshua A., et al. 2018. "Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature."
- Nyhan, Brendan, and Jason Reifler. 2010. “When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions.” Political Behavior 32 (2), 303-330. 6
- Bandeira, Luiza et al. 2019. Disinformation in Democracies: Strengthening Digital Resilience in Latin America. Washington, DC: The Atlantic Council.

Week 11: Clientelism, corruption, and money in politics

- Mares, Isabela and Lauren Young. 2016. “Buying, expropriating, and stealing votes.” Annual Review of Political Science 19: pp. 267-288.
- Stokes, Susan, Thad Dunning, Valeria Brusco and Marcelo Nazareno. 2013. Voters, Brokers and Clientelism. New York: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 6.
- Carlin, Ryan E. and Mason Moseley. 2015. “Good Democrats, Bad Targets: Democratic Values and Clientelistic Vote Buying.” Journal of Politics 77(1): pp. 14-26.
- Pavão, Nara. 2018. “Corruption as the Only Option: The Limits to Electoral Accountability.” Journal of Politics 80(3): pp. 996-1010. .
- Vaishnav, Milan. 2017. When Crime Pays: Money and Muscle in Indian Politics. New Haven: Yale University Press. Chapter 1.
- Makaya, Lindsey and Amy Smith. “Could corruption investigations undermine democracy in Latin America.” Vox. May 17, 2018.
- Kitschelt, Herbert, and Steven I. Wilkinson, eds. 2007. Patrons, Clients and Policies: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 1.
- Winters, Jeffrey A., and Benjamin I. Page. 2009. “Oligarchy in the United States?” Perspectives on Politics 7 (4), 731-751.

Week 12: Civil society, social movements, and resistance

- Chenoweth, Erica and Maria J. Stephan. 2012. Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict. Reprint. New York: Columbia University Press. Chapter 1.
- Yarwood, Janette. 2016. “The struggle over terms limits in Africa: The power of protest.” Journal of Democracy 27(3): pp. 51-60.
- Gamboa, Laura. 2017. “Opposition at the Margins: Strategies Against the Erosion of Democracy in Colombia and Venezuela.” Comparative Politics 49(4): pp. 457–477.
- Berman, Sheri. 1997. “Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic.” World Politics 49(3): pp. 401–429.
- Bernhard, Michael, Allen Hicken, Cristopher Reenock, and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2020. "Parties, Civil Society, and the Deterrence of Democratic Defection." Studies in Comparative International Development 55: 1-26.
- Graham, Benjamin A., Michael K. Miller, and Kaare W. Strøm. 2017. "Safeguarding Democracy: Powersharing and Democratic Survival." American Political Science Review 111 (4), 686-704.
- Gherghina, Sergiu, and Petar Bankov. 2023. “Troublemakers and Game Changers: How Political Parties Stopped Democratic Backsliding in Bulgaria.” Democratization 30 (8): 1582-1603.