

POL 250-02: DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN THE U.S.

Washington & Jefferson College
Spring 2023
Mondays, Wednesdays, & Fridays 1:00 – 2:10 PM
Old Main 207

Instructor: Joel B. Kersting, Ph.D. (Preferred pronouns: he/him/his)

Email: jkersting@washjeff.edu

Phone: 724-503-1001 x 6182

Office: Old Main 209A

Office Hours: Tuesdays & Thursdays 11:00 AM – 12:00 PM; or by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

On January 6th, 2021, a violent insurrection occurred at the United States Capitol which threatened to halt the certification of a presidential election by Congress. This event was the culmination of years, and decades even, of chipping away at the norms and safeguards surrounding American democracy. This process of chipping away at democracy has been labeled by political scientists as democratic backsliding; and this phenomenon will be the subject of this course.

In this course, we will explore several problems which are contributing to the erosion of American democracy: heightened partisan polarization; the growth of populism; threats to free and fair elections; and the rise of political violence. The causes and effects of these problems will be the focus of readings and lectures; and possible solutions to these problems which may halt democratic backsliding will be the focus of a semester-long research project.

Beyond the substantive knowledge of American politics and democratic backsliding provided in this course, you will be provided with ample opportunity to engage with scholarly research, both by reading and discussing academic research; and by conducting your own research projects.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After taking this course, students will be able to:

1. Describe theories of democracy and democratic backsliding.
2. Explain how and why the United States is experiencing democratic backsliding.
3. Identify possible solutions to democratic backsliding in America through an extensive research project.
4. Read and analyze political science research.
5. Participate in rigorous academic discussions.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Quiz: There will be one quiz in this course on theories of democracy and democratic backsliding. This quiz will consist of a combination of objective questions and short answers. If you happen to be absent from class on the day of the quiz and provided it is an excusable absence (See Attendance policy below), we can schedule a makeup exam. If you anticipate being absent for the quiz, please let me know as soon as possible. (10%)

Book Review: Throughout the course we will be reading several books about democratic backsliding in America. You will choose one of those books to write a review on of no more than 1500 words. This review will both summarize the central findings of the book as they relate to democratic backsliding; and provide a critique of the book and its findings. More information about this assignment will be distributed at the beginning of the semester. (15%)

Research Paper Project: The majority of your grade in this course will be based on a semester-long research project which culminates in an 8-10 page paper and an in-class presentation. This project will focus on identifying what you consider the most pressing problem currently facing American democracy; and develop a solution or reform you will argue is best suited to fixing that problem. There will be three smaller assignments throughout the semester designed to demonstrate your progress on this project. More information about these assignments and the broader research project will be distributed at the beginning of the semester. The due dates for each component of this project are as follows:

1. Research Proposal: February 24 (2.5%)
2. Annotated Bibliography: March 27 (2.5%)
3. Outline: April 21 (5%)
4. Final Draft: May 8 (30%)
5. Presentations: May 8 & May 12 (15%)

Attendance: You are expected to be present for every class meeting. My expectations for your intellectual growth in this course are high. When you are not present, you are unable to partake in that growth. **Everyone receives three free excused absences.** You do not need to notify me of these absences in advance. Do not abuse these excused absences. Students unable to attend class because of illness should contact Student Health Services. **If you feel ill, please do not come to class.** Students unable to attend class because of a family or other emergency should contact the Office of Student Life. If there is a reason for an ongoing absence in this class, please discuss this with me as soon as possible. (5%)

Participation: You will be expected to fully participate in class discussion. Actively engaging with the course material through discussion with fellow students is crucial to your understanding of the material. As a rule of thumb, you should be speaking, on average, at least once per class to receive a B for participation. Speaking more than this will ensure a higher grade. Conversely, if you habitually fail to contribute to class discussion, you can expect your participation grade to decrease. While participation grades will be primarily based on contributing to in-person class discussions, there will also be the opportunity to gain participation credit through occasional small non-verbal assignments. If participation is found to be lacking from most of the class which I suspect to be a result of not completing the assigned readings, I reserve the right to hold unannounced pop quizzes (15%).

Grade Determination:

Component	Worth
Quiz	10%
Book Review	15%
Research Proposal	2.5%
Annotated Bibliography	2.5%
Research Paper Outline	5%
Research Paper Final Draft	30%
Research Paper Presentation	15%
Attendance	5%
Participation	15%

At the end of the course, your grade will be assigned based on the following scale: 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 (0-59).

COURSE POLICIES

Late Assignment Policy: You are expected to submit all assignments by the due dates listed on the syllabus. Late assignments can be submitted after the due date with a grade penalty. The final grade for the assignment will be lowered by a third of a letter grade for every 24 hours the assignment is late. Assignments submitted more than a week after the due date will not be accepted for credit.

Extensions on assignments can be granted providing two criteria are met: (1) there is a legitimate excuse for the assignment not being submitted on time (e.g. documented illness or personal emergency); and (2) you request the extension before the assignment is due.

Classroom Culture: For this course to be fully successful, I expect two things from each student. First, I expect active engagement in classroom discussion. While much time will be devoted to class lectures on the material, there will always be time devoted each class for group discussion on the topics we have discussed that day. Relatedly, I expect you to have completed the readings and to be prepared to discuss the relative strengths and weaknesses of the arguments presented in the texts. Our discussions will draw from those theoretical debates. Participation accounts for 15% of your total grade, so it is in your best interest to come prepared for class. A firm grasp of the literature will serve you well in preparation for exams in this class and in crafting a firm foundation for further classes in political science.

While preparing to discuss the course material, I suggest you read (or at least scan) a newspaper once a day. Since this is a class on politics, it is especially important to keep up on current events since they are often direct results of the political system we will be examining. W&J has an online subscription to the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Wall Street Journal. Information for accessing these newspapers can be found in the following links: [NYT](#), [WaPo](#), and [WSJ](#).

We will occasionally discuss issues that are controversial or polarizing. This is an intrinsic part of the political process, and, as such, it will certainly be a part of our discussions. While it is by no means wrong to hold an

opinion on controversial issues, I expect and require civility in discussions. Hateful comments will not be tolerated and will be grounds for dismissal from the class session.

A key part of academic discussion is treating your classmates and the instructor with respect. Respect not only pertains to what you are contributing to class discussion, but also how you listen to what your classmates and the instructor are saying. I expect you to be an active listener during class discussions.

Technology: In my experience as an instructor, I have found that while some students may benefit from using technology in the classroom, there are also many students who abuse the privilege of technology use. **Laptop and tablet use for class purposes is permitted in this course, but this is a privilege. If I habitually observe students abusing this privilege, I reserve the right to prohibit all technology use.** Relatedly, cell phone use is prohibited in this course. If I observe you using your phone during a class, you will receive no participation credit for that day.

Contacting the Instructor: The best way to get in contact with me is through email (jkersting@washjeff.edu). I do my best to reply to all student emails within 24 hours and typically my replies will be much sooner than that. That being said: do not email me at midnight and expect a timely answer.

If your questions or concerns are substantial in nature, it is best to meet with me in person rather than engage in a lengthy email exchange. I have regular office hours listed above, but if those times do not work for you, please feel free to schedule an appointment with me.

Disability Support Services: Washington & Jefferson College is committed to providing academic accommodations for students with disabilities. This includes individuals with physical disabilities, learning disabilities, and mental health disorders that meet the definition of a disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Students who plan to request accommodations should contact the Director for Academic Success as early as possible, although requests may be made at any time. To determine whether you qualify for accommodations, or if you have questions about services and procedures, please call 724-223-6008 or send an email to dss@washjeff.edu.

Academic Honesty: Washington & Jefferson College is a community dedicated to the intellectual and personal development of its students. Such development may be achieved in many ways, including creating original works of writing, art, and music; conducting research; engaging in discussions; taking examinations; and participation in co-curricular activities. Central to such developmental activities is that whatever a student represents as being the fruit of his or her own intellectual labor is indeed his or her own. Otherwise, the student will not only have acted dishonestly, but will also have wasted the developmental opportunities afforded by the College. W&J upholds academic honesty in the College community by pursuing cases of academic misconduct. When such academic misconduct is discovered, the College will ensure through the imposition of appropriate penalties that the student does not gain unfair advantage through his or her dishonesty and will help the student address the concerns that led to the offense. If the nature of the intellectual dishonesty is determined to be conscious, calculated and/or intentional, or if academic misconduct recurs, the student may be judged to be incapable of benefiting to a satisfactory degree from the developmental opportunities afforded by the College, and may then be permanently dismissed so that the College's resources may be directed to deserving students.

TEXTBOOK AND READINGS

There are four required texts for this course which are available for purchase in the W&J Bookstore and online:

1. *How Democracies Die* (2019) by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. (ISBN: 978-1524762940)
2. *Presidents, Populism, and the Crisis of Democracy* (2020) by William G. Howell and Terry M. Moe. (ISBN: 978-0226763170)
3. *Election Meltdown: Dirty Tricks, Distrust, and the Threat to American Democracy* (2020) by Richard L. Hasen (ISBN: 978-0300248197)
4. *Radical American Partisanship: Mapping Violent Hostility, Its Causes, and the Consequences for Democracy* (2022) by Nathan P. Kalmoe and Lilliana Mason (ISBN: 978-0226820286)

All other course readings will be posted online for your use. Readings are to be completed BEFORE the class meeting for which they are listed.

COURSE SCHEDULE

(Subject to change)

Meeting	Topic	Readings/ Assignments
Wed. Jan. 25	Course Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Syllabus
Fri. Jan. 27	What is democracy?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dahl: Excerpt from <i>Polyarchy</i> (1971)
Mon. Jan. 30	What is democratic backsliding?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bermeo: “On Democratic Backsliding” (2016)
Wed. Feb. 1	What is democratic backsliding?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Haggard and Kaufman: “The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding” (2021)
Fri. Feb. 3	Backsliding Around the World	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• V-Dem 2022 Executive Summary <p>Bring in an example of democratic backsliding in a different country from the last 5 years</p>
Mon. Feb. 6	Skills Day	
Wed. Feb. 8	Quiz / Film: <i>Four Hours at the Capitol</i>	
Fri. Feb. 10	Film: <i>Four Hours at the Capitol</i>	

Meeting	Topic	Readings/ Assignments
Mon. Feb. 13	What is gatekeeping?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Levitsky and Ziblatt: <i>HDD</i> Chapter 1
Wed. Feb. 15	Historical Gatekeeping in America	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Levitsky and Ziblatt: <i>HDD</i> Chapter 2 pp. 33-48
Fri. Feb. 17	How do you gatekeep in an open primary?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Levitsky and Ziblatt: <i>HDD</i> Chapter 2 pp. 48-52 Linskey: “Democrats spent tens of millions amplifying far-right candidates” (2022)
Mon. Feb. 20	Republicans and Gatekeeping in 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Levitsky and Ziblatt: <i>HDD</i> Chapter 3
Wed. Feb. 22	NO CLASS – Symposium on Democracy	
Fri. Feb. 24	The Norm of Mutual Toleration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Levitsky and Ziblatt: <i>HDD</i> Chapter 5 pp. 97-106 <p>Research Proposal due</p>
Mon. Feb. 27	The Norm of Forbearance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Levitsky and Ziblatt: <i>HDD</i> Chapter 5 pp. 106-117
Wed. Mar. 1	Political Norms in American History	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Levitsky and Ziblatt: <i>HDD</i> Chapter 6
Fri. Mar. 3	The Unraveling of American Political Norms 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Levitsky and Ziblatt: <i>HDD</i> Chapter 7 pp. 144-157
Mon. Mar. 6	The Unraveling of American Political Norms 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Levitsky and Ziblatt: <i>HDD</i> Chapter 7 pp. 157-175
Wed. Mar. 8	Skills Day	
Fri. Mar. 10	Inefficient Government, Populism, and Democracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Howell and Moe: <i>Presidents, Populism, and the Crisis of Democracy (PPCD)</i> Introduction
Mon. Mar. 13	What is populism?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Howell and Moe: <i>PPCD</i> Chapter 1 pp. 21-45
Wed. Mar. 15	Populism in America	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Howell and Moe: <i>PPCD</i> Chapter 1 pp. 45-61

Meeting	Topic	Readings/ Assignments
Fri. Mar. 17	TBA	
Mon. Mar. 20	NO CLASS – Spring Break	
Wed. Mar. 22	NO CLASS – Spring Break	
Fri. Mar. 24	NO CLASS – Spring Break	
Mon. Mar. 27	The Rise of Trump as a Populist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Howell and Moe: <i>PPCD</i> Chapter 2 pp. 63-81 Annotated Bibliography Due *Levitsky and Ziblatt Book Review Due*
Wed. Mar. 29	Trump as President and Populist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Howell and Moe: <i>PPCD</i> Chapter 2 pp. 82-98
Fri. Mar. 31	Ineffective Government 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Howell and Moe: <i>PPCD</i> Chapter 3 pp. 113-126
Mon. Apr. 3	Ineffective Government 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Howell and Moe: <i>PPCD</i> Chapter 3 pp. 127-140
Wed. Apr. 5	Skills Day	
Fri. Apr. 7	Elections and Democracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hasen: <i>Election Meltdown</i> Introduction
Mon. Apr. 10	The Myth of Voter Fraud	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hasen: <i>Election Meltdown</i> Chapter 1 pp. 15-32
Wed. Apr. 12	Restrictions on Voting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hasen: <i>Election Meltdown</i> Chapter 1 pp. 32-46
Fri. Apr. 14	Issues with Election Administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hasen: <i>Election Meltdown</i> Chapter 2 pp. 47-65
Mon. Apr. 17	Antidemocratic Rhetoric in Elections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hasen: <i>Election Meltdown</i> Chapter 4 *Howell and Moe Book Review Due*
Wed. Apr. 19	The 2020 Election and Beyond	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prokop: “The bill to prevent Trump from stealing the next election, explained” (2022) Bring in an example of democratic backsliding from the 2020 election cycle (excluding January 6th insurrection)

Meeting	Topic	Readings/ Assignments
Fri. Apr. 21	TBA	Research Paper Outline due
Mon. Apr. 24	The Problem of Political Violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kalmoe and Mason: <i>Radical American Partisanship</i> Chapter 1
Wed. Apr. 26	The Prevalence of Radical Partisanship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kalmoe and Mason: <i>Radical American Partisanship</i> Chapter 4
Fri. Apr. 28	Who are the Radical Partisans?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kalmoe and Mason: <i>Radical American Partisanship</i> Chapter 6
Mon. May 1	The Effect of Elite Messaging on Radical Partisanship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kalmoe and Mason: <i>Radical American Partisanship</i> Chapter 10 <p><i>*Hasen Book Review Due*</i></p>
Wed. May 3	A Final Assessment on Backsliding in America	
Fri. May 5	NO CLASS	Work on papers
Mon. May 8	Presentations	Final Paper Due
Fri. May 12	Presentations	Meeting Time: 9:00 AM – 12:00 PM