

PSC/IR 263: Democracy and Authoritarianism in the United States

University of Rochester
Spring 2022
MW 12:30am–1:45pm
Classroom: TBD

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Course overview. By conventional definitions, the United States was the world’s first modern democracy because of its early adoption of competitive elections, strong legislative constraints on the executive, and relatively large franchise. Yet in other ways the United States has been notably undemocratic, in particular when compared to contemporary democracies: persistent countermajoritarian institutions, partisan manipulation of vague rules, and disputes over the basic right to vote. This course examines democratic and authoritarian elements of U.S. political institutions both over time and across institutions. The first part examines the foundations of U.S. democracy, including legislative constraints, mutual forbearance and agreeing to lose, and franchise expansion. Second, we discuss elements of racial bias: territorial expansion and adding states, electoral authoritarianism in the Solid South, polarization, and contemporary voting rights. Third, we examine biased institutions: constitutional hardball, gerrymandering and malapportionment, and the Electoral College. We conclude by discussing unique aspects of the Trump presidency.

Schedule of courses

January 13, 18, 20. Introduction and mixed foundations of American democracy

Reading questions: What factors contributed to the establishment of representative government and legislative constraints on the executive at the founding? What features of early U.S. politics were notably undemocratic?

- Taylor, Steven L., Matthew S. Shugart, Arend Lijphart, and Bernard Grofman. 2014. *A Different Democracy: American Government in a Thirty-One-Country Perspective*. Ch. 3.
- Dahl, Robert A. 2003. *How Democratic is the American Constitution?* Chs. 2 and 3.
- Lee, Alexander and Jack Paine. 2021. *Colonial Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship*. Ch. 1 “Representation in the American Settlement Colonies.”

I. Democratization

January 25 and 27. Mutual forbearance

Reading questions: What is mutual forbearance and why is it necessary for democratic stability? How has this worked in the United States?

- Aldrich, John H. 2011. *Why Parties? A Second Look*. Ch. 1.
- Mittal, Sonia, and Barry R. Weingast. 2011. "Self-Enforcing Constitutions: With an Application to Democratic Stability in America's First Century." *Journal of Law, Economics, & Organization*.
- Levitsky, Steven and Daniel Ziblatt. 2017. *How Democracies Die*. Ch. 6.

February 1 and 3. Early franchise expansion

Reading questions: What factors explain why previously excluded groups gain the right to vote? How did these differ across demographic groups?

- Keyssar, Alexander. 2000. *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*. Chs. 1 and 2.
- Teele, Dawn. 2018. *Forging the Franchise: The Political Origins of the Women's Vote*. Ch. 4.
- Valelly, Richard M. 2004. *The Two Reconstructions: The Struggle for Black Enfranchisement*. Ch. 2.

II. Racial bias

February 8 and 10. Territorial expansion and adding states

Reading questions: How has the process of adding states facilitated or hindered American democracy? What racial biases have been inherent in the statehood process?

- Frymer, Paul. *Building an American Empire: The Era of Territorial and Political Expansion*. Ch. 1.
- Weingast, Barry. 1998. "Political Stability and the Civil War: Institutions, Commitment, and American Democracy." Ch. 4 in *Analytic Narratives*.
- Stewart, Charles and Barry R. Weingast. 1992. "Stacking the Senate, Changing the Nation: Republican Rotten Boroughs, Statehood Politics, and American Political Development." *Studies in American Political Development*.
- Stewart, Mark Joseph. 2019. "The Constitution Isn't the Obstacle to D.C. Statehood; Republicans Are." *Slate*. Available at <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2019/09/dc-statehood-hearing-constitution-republicans.html>.

February 15 and 17. No class

I'm traveling to a conference in Nsukka, Nigeria.

February 22 and 24. Electoral authoritarianism in the Solid South

Reading questions: How did Southern states establish authoritarian rule in the late 19th century? What factors contributed to the authoritarian turn? How did they maintain authoritarian rule without violating the federal constitution?

- Mickey, Rob. 2015. *Paths Out of Dixie: The Democratization of Authoritarian Enclaves*

in America's Deep South, 1944–1972. Chapter 2 and pgs. 76–80 (on Georgia).

- Kousser, J. Morgan. 1974. *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880–1910*. Chapters 2 and 6.
- Paine, Jack. 2019. “Democratic Contradictions in European Settler Colonies.” *World Politics*.

March 1 and 3. Polarization

Reading questions: Why is high polarization dangerous for democracy? To what extent can contemporary levels of high polarization be attributed to earlier patterns of racial bias?

- Hacker, Jacob S. and Paul Pierson. 2020. *Let Them Eat Tweets: How the Right Rules in an Age of Extreme Inequality*. Chs. 1, 2, 4.
- Mason, Liliana. 2018. *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. Ch. 1.
- Graham, Matthew H. and Milan W. Svobik. 2020. “Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States.” *American Political Science Review*.

March 8 and 10. No class

Enjoy spring break!

March 15 and 17. Contemporary voting rights

Reading questions: Why was the Voting Rights Act of 1965 so important for Black voting rights? What are the major challenges to the right to vote today?

- Valelly, Richard M. 2004. *The Two Reconstructions: The Struggle for Black Enfranchisement*. Chs. 9 and 10.
- Komisarich, Mayya and Ariel White. 2021. “Throwing Away the Umbrella: Minority Voting after the Supreme Court’s Shelby Decision.”
- Grumbach, Jacob M. 2021. “Laboratories of Democratic Backsliding.”

III. Biased institutions

March 22 and 24. Congress I. Constitutional hardball

Reading questions: What is constitutional hardball? Why have hardball tactics become more prevalent in contemporary American politics?

- Fishkin, Joseph and David E. Pozen. 2018. “Asymmetric Constitutional Hardball.” *Columbia Law Review*.
- Helmke, Gretchen, Mary Kroeger, and Jack Paine. 2021. “Democracy by Deterrence: Norms, Constitutions, and Electoral Tilting.” *American Journal of Political Science*.
- Lee, Frances E. 2016. *Insecure Majorities: Congress and the Perpetual Campaign*. Chs. 2 and 3.

March 29 and 31. Congress II. Gerrymandering and malapportionment

Reading questions: How do gerrymandering and malapportionment skew the relationship between votes and legislative seats? Why do these factors help contemporary Republicans over Democrats?

- Bronner, Laura and Nathaniel Rakich. 2021. “Advantage, GOP: Why Democrats have to win large majorities in order to govern while Republicans don’t need majorities at all”

FiveThirtyEight. Available at <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/advantage-gop/>.

- Ladd, Jonathan M. 2019. “The Senate is a much bigger problem than the Electoral College.” *Vox*. Available at <https://www.vox.com/mischiefs-of-faction/2019/4/9/18300749/senate-problem-electoral-college>.
- Rodden, Jonathan A. 2019. *Why Cities Lose: The Deep Roots of the Urban-Rural Political Divide*. Introduction and Chs. 5 and 6.
- Helmke, Gretchen and Jack Paine. 2021. “Countermajoritarian Institutions and Self-Subverting Democracy.”

April 5, 7, 12. Electoral college I. Design and flaws

Reading questions: What are the main distortionary effects and design flaws of the Electoral College? Why was the Electoral College created and why does it still exist?

- Edwards, George C. 2011. *Why the Electoral College is Bad for America*. Chs. 1–5.
- Keyssar, Alexander. 2020. *Why Do We Still Have the Electoral College?* Introduction and Conclusion.

April 14 and 19. Electoral college II. Meltdowns

Reading questions: What specific flaws in the Electoral College have contributed to near meltdowns in the past? Why are these still concerns at present?

- Foley, Edward B. 2016. *Ballot Battles: The History of Disputed Elections in the United States*. Chs. 5 and 11.
- Levitsky, Steven and Daniel Ziblatt. 2021. “The Biggest Threat to Democracy Is the GOP Stealing the Next Election.” *The Atlantic*.

IV. The Trump presidency

April 21 and 26

Reading questions: What factors contributed to a populist authoritarian becoming President? How did Trump challenge American democracy? When was voter fraud problematic in the United States?

- Latest Bright Line report. Available at <http://brightlinewatch.org/>.
- Hacker, Jacob S. and Paul Pierson. 2020. *Let Them Eat Tweets: How the Right Rules in an Age of Extreme Inequality*. Ch. 5.
- Howell, William G. and Terry M. Moe. 2020. *Presidents, Populism, and the Crisis of Democracy*. Introduction and Ch. 2.
- Stokes, Susan C., Thad Dunning, Marcelo Nazareno, and Valeria Brusco. 2013. *Brokers, Voters, and Clientelism: The Puzzle of Distributive Politics*. Ch. 8 (skip Section 8.2).