

IDH2930 How Democracies Die

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Office Hours: by appointment, Anderson Hall 311

Class Schedule & Location: Wednesday (10.40-11.30), Little Hall 117

Summary

This class examines the state of democracy in the world, with special focus on the United States, through the lenses of one book: *How Democracies Die*, by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. The book is written by two political scientists, specializing in the study of Latin America and Europe, but it is intended for broad audience. Using this book for guidance, throughout the semester we will explore the state of the American democracy, critically evaluating claims that the US democracy is in danger today. We will refer to the historical examples outlined in the book (primarily coming from Europe and Latin America) to show how other countries have confronted threats to their democracies, and to which consequences. Additionally, we will examine the institutional setting of the United States, in particular the presence and strength of formal and informal norms that sustain democracy.

This course is discussion-based, and all students are expected to critically examine how democracies function, which elements make a robust democracy, how those elements can be subverted, and what could be done to prevent democratic deterioration and/or death. In the course of this class, we will focus on examples from the US political history, historical cases from elsewhere, and current political events. We will use all these examples to understand how democracies function – and how they can cease to function well. Some of the topics discussed in this class will be potentially contentious. You should be willing to be challenged, confronted with the opposite positions, and prepared to elaborate and defend your arguments. This course is not about positioning oneself regarding current political debates, but understanding what is the state of the US democracy, and why some prominent scholars voice their concerns about the state of democracy (in the US and elsewhere) today.

Objectives

This course has two objectives. First, you will learn how democracies function today, which elements are considered essential for well-functioning democracy, and how to identify threats to democracy. You will be able to critically examine whether and to which degree democracy in the United States is currently in

danger. Second goal focuses on you as active and engaged citizens rather than only students. Keeping that in mind, you will learn more about the roles that citizens play (or should play) in protecting democracy. Discussions in the class will allow you to learn how to articulate your positions on different topics using the convincing arguments based on evidence drawn from the analysis of political institutions and historical examples rather than personal opinions.

Requirements

The class focuses on the concept of democracy, but without reading the huge and growing literature on the topic (some additional readings will be provided for the students interested to learn more, but they are not required for this class). I expect students to read assigned chapter in the book *How Democracies Die* **before** the weekly meeting, and to be prepared and willing to discuss the materials in class. I will not deliver lectures, though occasionally I will prepare additional slides clarifying some issues. To succeed in this class, you have to be engaged and critically discuss the assigned materials. Speaking in the class is not enough though: your interventions and comments should show that you have read and thought about the topic at hand, rather than just talking about the current events.

The course will have an online discussion board, which where each week I will ask a question inspired by the book. You are expected to comment on the weekly question (these questions will be broad, so there won't be a single answer to give to them). In class we will further discuss these questions, if needed.

This course will also ask you to engage in debate with other students, forming the teams and debating a particular issue pertaining to the class. These group exercises will be graded. More information (including topics for debate) will be provided in the course of semester.

Finally, at the end of semester, the students will produce final paper, which will identify one concrete aspect of the American democracy that is potentially under threat or weakening, followed by the analysis of the possible remedy to counteract threat to democracy in that specific aspect. In order to make sure that everyone starts thinking about the final paper early enough, all students will submit 1-page draft idea for the final paper, where they will identify the topic that they want to analyze, and their approach to the possible solution. This draft will also be graded.

Your work will be evaluated based on:

Attendance (10%) - Attending class is mandatory, and absences should be excused based on University policies.

Participation in class (20%) – The course will function as discussion-oriented seminar. Students should read the assigned materials before the class, and come to class willing to critically discuss the weekly topic.

Participation in the discussion board (20%) – The students will also participate in a discussion board. Every week I will post a question to be discussed using the discussion board. The board will serve to engage you with each other, since you are expected to comment on each other’s contributions, rather than repeating the common points.

Group exercise (10%) – Twice in the semester all students will be divided into two groups, and will be required to argue on a specific issue, which will be announced one week in advance. You are supposed to come up to the best possible arguments that will support your side (independently on what is your personal opinion about the issue). The participation in the class exercise will be graded (each exercise is worth 5% of the total grade).

Draft idea for the paper (5%) – You will submit one-page idea for the final paper, which will be graded, and to which you will receive feedback. The draft paper should help you to develop an original and interesting paper on the topic that is relevant to this class. Due date: **November 13th at noon.**

Final paper (35%) – Final paper will identify one aspect of the US democracy that is currently considered to be under threat, analyze the nature of that threat, and propose the ‘solution’ that should make American democracy stronger. The final paper should use the insights from the book to develop a proposal that would lead to more robust democracy. Due date: **December 7th at noon.**

Grading scale:

Grade	Score	Grade	Score	Grade	Score	Grade	Score
A	94-100	B	83-86	C	73-76	D	63-66
A-	90-93	B-	80-82	C-	70-72	D-	60-62
B+	87-89	C+	77-79	D+	67-69	E	0-59

Required Text

Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt (2018) *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown.

University Policies

Academic honesty

Violations of the Student Honor Code (including, but not limited to, copying and plagiarizing) will be reported to the Dean of Students Office for consideration of disciplinary action. For more information, see:

<http://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/process/student-conduct-honor-code/>.

Counseling and wellness

A variety of counseling, mental health and psychiatric services are available through the Counseling and Wellness Center, whose goal is to help students be maximally effective in their academic pursuits by reducing or eliminating emotional, psychological, and interpersonal problems that interfere with academic functioning. For more information, call 392-1575 or visit <http://www.counseling.ufl.edu/cwc>.

Students with disabilities

The University of Florida is committed to providing academic accommodations for students with disabilities. Students requesting accommodations should register with the Disability Resource Center (352-392-8565, www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/) as soon as possible by providing appropriate documentation. Once registered, students should present me with their accommodation letter.

Important Note

The instructor reserved the right to change any of the administrative information (syllabus, readings, exams, distribution of grades, and papers) throughout the course of the semester and will inform students of such changes with due time and consideration.

Course Schedule

Week	Date	Content
1	08/21	<u>Introduction</u> Introducing the class, discussing the syllabus, planning the semester. [no readings]
2	08/28	No class, absent for a conference.
3	09/04	<u>What is democracy, and why do we care?</u> We will discuss the meaning of democracy, the essential and non-essential elements of democracy, its importance, and available alternatives. [Levitsky and Ziblatt: Introduction, 1-10] [recommended: Schmitter, Philippe C. and Terry Lynn Karl (1991) What Democracy Is... and Is not. Journal of Democracy 2(3): 75-88.]
4	09/11	<u>Alliances in Politics</u> We discuss the importance of alliances between mainstream politicians and new political figures that ended up weakening democratic institutions, looking at some of the cases in Europe and Latin America.

		[Levitsky and Ziblatt: Fateful Alliances, 11-32]
5	09/18	<p><u>Gatekeeping and Alliances in the US</u></p> <p>We focus on the examination how the US system worked to prevent the rise of extreme political candidates. We will talk about alternatives, relative importance of party elites vs. voters.</p> <p>[Levitsky and Ziblatt: Gatekeeping in America, 33-52]</p>
6	09/25	<p><u>Republicans and the Rise of Trump</u></p> <p>This chapter gives an overview of the rise of Donald Trump and his political career, explaining why this is potentially troublesome development for the American democracy.</p> <p>[Levitsky and Ziblatt: The Great Republican Abdication, 53-71]</p>
7	10/02	<p><u>Group Debate I</u></p> <p>The class will be divided into two groups and everyone will participate in a debate on a specific topic, following the rules provided to everyone one week in advance.</p> <p>[no readings]</p>
8	10/09	<p><u>Subverting Democracy</u></p> <p>This chapter examines the formal presence and functioning of institutional checks and balances that act to constrain the behavior of potential authoritarian politicians.</p> <p>[Levitsky and Ziblatt: Subverting Democracy, 72-96]</p>
9	10/16	<p><u>Democratic Norms</u></p> <p>We discuss the role of norms in functioning of democracy: how they get articulated and embedded in political system, as well as how they persist over time.</p> <p>[Levitsky and Ziblatt: The Guardrails of Democracy, 97-117]</p>
10	10/23	<p><u>Democratic Norms in the US</u></p> <p>We focus on how democratic norms developed and function in the US, looking into the examples of how those norms can be undermined or strengthened.</p> <p>[Levitsky and Ziblatt: The Unwritten Rules of American Politics, 118-144]</p> <p>[recommended: Federalist Papers, #51]</p>
11	10/30	<p><u>Unraveling</u></p> <p>We focus on the rise of political partisanship in the American politics, examining its origins and discussing its effects.</p> <p>[Levitsky and Ziblatt: The Unraveling, 145-175]</p>
12	11/06	<u>Democracy in America Today</u>

		<p>This week's focus is President Trump, examining how his behavior (in and out of the office) reflects some issues that were discussed earlier on in the semester.</p> <p>[Levitsky and Ziblatt: Trump Against the Guardrails, 176-203]</p>
13	11/13	<p><u>Saving Democracy</u></p> <p>Using the insights from the last chapter we will go back to the initial debate about the meaning of democracy, how the political changes in the US offer a possibility to rethink which are the core democratic values in the country that are worth preserving.</p> <p>[Levitsky and Ziblatt: Saving Democracy, 204-231]</p>
14	11/20	<p><u>Group Debate II</u></p> <p>The class will be divided into two groups and everyone will participate in a debate on a specific topic, following the rules provided to everyone one week in advance.</p> <p>[book symposium in <i>Perspectives on Politics</i> (2018) on Levitsky and Ziblatt, 16(4): 1092-1104]</p>
15	11/27	Thanksgiving week, no class.
16	12/04	<p><u>People, institutions, both?</u></p> <p>Discussing proposals for robust democracy, and summarizing what we have learned during the semester.</p> <p>[no readings]</p>