

Course information 2026-27

PS3086 Democracy: transition, consolidation, and backsliding

General information

MODULE LEVEL: 6

CREDIT: 30

NOTIONAL STUDY TIME: 300 hours

MODE: Locally Taught and Independent Learner Route Only (not available for Online Taught students).

Summary

This course examines what defines a democratic regime, as well as the conditions, processes, and challenges associated with democratic transitions, consolidation, and backsliding.

Conditions

Please refer to the relevant programme structure in the EMFSS Programme Regulations to check:

- where this course can be placed on your degree structure; and
- details of prerequisites and corequisites for this course.

You should also refer to the Exclusions list in the EMFSS Programme Regulations to check if any exclusions apply for this course.

Aims and objectives

The study of democracy: transition, consolidation, and backsliding have three main objectives. The course consider:

- How democracy is defined, conceptualized, and measured
- The key arguments and evidence for why democracy is valued
- The main explanations for why regimes transition from autocracy to democracy
- The factors that contribute to the consolidation of democracy, as well as the causes of democratic backsliding and breakdown

Learning outcomes

At the end of this course, and having completed the Essential Reading and activities, students should be able to discuss critically a range of issues relating to democratisation. Students should be able to:

- discuss the varieties of democracies and the challenges of assessing the democratic status of countries
- explain whether democracies are better at producing public goods (i.e., health care, schooling, policing, reduced income inequality, etc.) and services compared to non-democratic regime
- explain the core components of democracy and explain how democracy actually work in the real world
- describe the different models of democracies and the advantages and disadvantages
- explain the how democracies emerge and survive
- explain how some forms of autocracies can make the transition to democracy challenging than others
- explain how democratically elected leaders can undermine democratic regimes
- explain whether the world is in a democratic recession

Global Employability Skills

Below are the three most relevant employability skills that students acquire by undertaking this course which can be conveyed to future prospective employers:

1. Persuasion and negotiation
2. Decision making
3. Communication

Essential reading

For full details please refer to the reading list.

Books

Noakes, Stephen & Chris Wilson (2023) *Democratisation: A Thematic Approach*. Bloomsbury Press.

Clark, W.R., Golder, M. & Golder, S.N., 2025. In: *Principles of Comparative Politics*. 4th. Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press/SAGE

Dahl, Robert A. 1998. *On Democracy*. New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press.

Przeworski, Adam. 2018. *Why Bother with Elections?* Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Journal articles

- Acemoglu, Daron, Simon Johnson, James A. Robinson, and Pierre Yared. 2008. "Income and Democracy." *American Economic Review* 98(3): 808-42.
- Gandhi, Jennifer, and Ellen Lust-Okar. 2009. "Elections under Authoritarianism." *Annual Review of Political Science* 12: 403-22.
- Huber, Evelyne, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and John D. Stephens. 1993. "The Impact of Economic Development on Democracy." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 7(3): 71-85.
- Knutsen, Carl Henrik, et al. "Conceptual and measurement issues in assessing democratic backsliding." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 57.2 (2024): 162-177.
- Lindberg, S. I. (2009). Democratization by elections? A mixed record. *Journal of Democracy*, 20(3), 86-92.
- Lipset, Seymour M. 1959. "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy." *American Political Science Review* 53(1): 69-105.
- Little, Andrew T., and Anne Meng. "Measuring democratic backsliding." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 57.2 (2024): 149-161.
- Miller, Michael K. 2015. "Democratic Pieces: Autocratic Elections and Democratic Development since 1815." *British Journal of Political Science* 45(3): 501-30.
- Munck, Gerardo L. 2018. "Modernization Theory as a Case of Failed Knowledge Production." *Comparative Democratization (APSA-CD)* 16(3): 37-41.
- Ofosu, George Kwaku. "Do fairer elections increase the responsiveness of politicians?." *American Political Science Review* 113.4 (2019): 963-979.
- Przeworski, Adam, and Fernando Limongi. 1997. "Modernization: Theories and Facts." *World Politics* 49(2): 155-83.
- Treisman, Daniel. 2023. "How great is the current danger to democracy? Assessing the risk with historical data." *Comparative Political Studies* 56.12 (2023): 1924-1952.
- Treisman, Daniel. 2020. "Democracy by Mistake: How the Errors of Autocrats Trigger Transitions to Freer Government." *American Political Science Review* 114(3): 792-810.
- Waldner, David, and Ellen Lust. 2018. "Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding." *Annual Review of Political Science* 21: 93-113.

Assessment

This course is assessed by a three-hour and fifteen-minute closed-book written examination.

Syllabus

This course considers various aspects of the conditions of democracy, the processes of democratisation, and the breakdown of democratic regimes.

Conceptualising democracy. Pre-World War II thinking about the nature of democracy. Schumpeter's critique of the classical conception of democracy. Schumpeter's alternative. A procedural conception of democracy. Dahl's approach to democracy: principles and "institutions". Varieties of democracy

The Value of Democracy. Intrinsic and instrumental value. Argument for and against democracy. The limit of democracy or what we should not expect from democracy. Democracy as a mechanism for processing conflicts peacefully..

Process of democratisation. Paths to democracy. Modernization theory. The Lipset hypothesis about the economic determinants of democracy. The distinction between the origins and stability of democracy. Critiques of modernization theory: power structure theory, political actors and strategic choices, and economic inequality and redistribution.

Conditions of Democracy and its maintenance. The concept of democratic consolidation. When are democracies likely to endure.

Democratic erosion or backsliding and breakdown. The debate about patterns in the state of democracy since the end of the Cold War. Is there a democratic recession? Thinking about democratic backsliding or erosion.

A range of countries will be examined in relation to these themes from Europe, Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America.