**Threats to Modern Democracy**

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**Course content**

Until recently, a central tenet of political science held that once a country reaches a certain level of political and economic development, democracy will remain strong indefinitely. Yet, contemporary developments in democracies across the globe have challenged this “consolidation thesis”. During the recent decade, many countries seem to have experienced sudden or gradual deteriorations in democracy – so-called democratic erosions, and this includes fairly well established democracies such as Hungary, Poland, Brazil and the United States.

The aim of this course is to understand how and to what extent modern democracies are under threat, and to explore different drivers of democratic erosion. To do so, the course will draw on insights from across various strands of political science – including political behavior, comparative politics, political economy and political psychology. Our focus will be on micro-level processes that drive democratic erosion – including the behavior and choices of key actors such as leaders, political parties and the opposition, and the behavior and preferences of ordinary citizens. Yet, we will also consider how structural forces, such as economic inequality, education and demographic change, feed into these processes.

One recurring theme throughout the course is the question of how we best can draw inferences about the symptoms and causes of democratic erosion. We will critically evaluate and compare evidence from different state-of-the art methodological approaches, such as survey- and lab-experiments, expert-coded data, cross-country time-series analysis, and case studies, discussing when each of these approaches are most suitable, and how they can complement each other.

## **Learning outcomes**

#### ****Knowledge****

After having completed the course, students will:

* Be familiar with how democracy and democratic erosion is defined, operationalized and measured
* Have a good overview of historical and recent developments in democracy across the globe
* Understand theories of democratic backsliding
* Have a solid understanding of how political actors such as leaders, political parties and civil society may undermine or protect democracies
* Be familiar with how modern media outlets may shape the democratic discourse
* Have a solid understanding of the determinants of political polarization and populism, and how this may undermine democracy
* Have a solid understanding of how individual grievances due to, e.g. identity, fear or economic concerns, may fuel anti-democratic tendencies
* Grasp the discussion of how individual commitments to democracy can most accurately be captured and measured
* Understand how mechanisms at different levels of analysis (macro-, individuals, elite actors) work together to influence a macro-level political process such as democratic erosion

#### ****Skills****

Having completed the course, students will:

* Be able to understand and synthesize arguments and evidence in a systematic way, and communicate this to an audience.
* Be able to critically assess and compare different types of empirical evidence from comparative politics and the social sciences more broadly
* Have experience in considering how different methodological approaches may yield different conclusions and how they may complement each other
* Have practical skills in carrying out systematic search for literature and data, and conducting an independent empirical study
* Have skills when it comes to synthesizing findings from different levels of analysis (individual, meso-, macro) and how this can inform conclusions and discussions of a topic such as democratic erosion
* Have improved your academic writing skills

#### ****General competences****

The students will be able to:

* Analyze arguments empirically and theoretically
* Distinguish between evidence that supports general causal inferences and research that does not
* Engage in dissemination of research
* Read and understand findings from scholarly literature
* Engage in technical discussions of research design, data, and interpretation within the field of comparative politics

**Examination**

3-hour written examination and term paper.

The term paper must:

* have a limit of 3500-5000 words
* be either an empirical study or a review essay
* have a topic approved by the course instructor before the deadline
* reflect the course readings and the curriculum
* meet the [formal requirements for submission of written assignments](http://www.sv.uio.no/english/studies/resources/submission-written-assignments/isv.html)

The term paper counts 60 percent of the grade. Your term paper and your written examination must be passed in the same semester as the course is taught. You will receive one overall grade for the course.

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| **Tentative lecture plan** | |  |
| 1. **Concepts, data and historical background** | | |
| 1 | Conceptualizing and measuring democracy and democratic erosion | * Defining democracy and democratic erosion * Existing measures and data sets |
| 2 | Is modern democracy under threat? | * Insights from comparative data * Examples of different cases of (potential) democratic erosion |
| 3 | Lessons from history | * Democratic erosion in the 20th century * Historical theories of democratic backsliding |
| 1. **Key actors** | |  |
| 4 | Leaders and political parties | * Leader rhetoric, propaganda and hate speech * The party system and the nature of modern political parties |
| 5 | Civil society | * Strategies for mass resistance * Explanations for successful mass resistance * Anti-democratic mobilization |
| 6 | The Media | * Fake news and disinformation * Traditional vs social media * Indoctrination and ideology |
| 1. **Ordinary citizens** | |  |
| 7 | Fear and identity | * Multi-culturalism and racism * Political extremism |
| 8 | Political polarization | * Ideological and social polarization |
| 9 | Populist and authoritarian sentiments | * Preferences for strong leadership * The link between populism and authoritarian attitudes |
| 10 | Economic grievances | * Economic inequality, economic crisis and anti-democratic attitudes |