

Comparative Politics I (Fall 2026)

Examining Structural Flaws in Democratic and Not-so-Democratic States

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Class Date/Period: 3:00-4:30pm, Tuesday & Thursday

Classroom(s): TBD

Course Description/Synopsis:

Democracy is supposed to be the “best” form of government, where citizens decide policies through elected representatives, direct democracy, or both. Democracy thrives when voters have a voice in the national discourse of a country, but that often runs into trouble when there are bitter disagreements and political polarization that make national politics a highly competitive and sometimes dangerous affair. In the balance, the fate of millions or vulnerable minority groups, from women, different ethnicities, religion groups, sexual preferences, identities, or socioeconomic classes. Democracy is not easy. As Benjamin Franklin, an 18th Century American entrepreneur and Founding Father once said, “*A republic, if you can keep it,*” meaning that despite all of the work done to create a “perfect” democracy, it still requires the care and attention of all concerned. Can democracy survive the threats and convenience of autocratic behavior, or the threats from apathy or voter interest? The results are often mixed.

This interdisciplinary course is divided into three distinct parts. Part one will provide an analytical framework for discussion by debating the foundations of democratic state building, through constitutional design. Second, the course will explore judicial, electoral, and institutional challenges through recent case studies in Poland, the United States, Sub-Saharan Africa, South Korea, Thailand and Myanmar. Finally, the course will feature analyses of democratic contexts through group presentations and participation. This course is aimed at first and second-year undergraduate students. Previous studies in political science or international relations are not required.

Course Objectives:

This undergraduate course will explore the building blocks of democracy through prescient case studies and substantive discussion. By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- **Understanding Democratic Design:** Students will understand the structural designs of democratic states, from legislative, executive, and judicial authority, as well as institutions designed to preserve continued universal suffrage, transparency and accountability in governance.
- **Recognize Structural and Normative Flaws:** This course will attempt to provide answers to key questions: What structural factors contribute to stronger democracies? Is design sufficient to withstand strains placed on systems? What are the roadblocks or obstacles to further democratization?
- **Evaluate Country Contexts:** Students will learn to distinguish histories and events that explain political behavior in different country contexts, each emanating from challenges to democratic structures, political behavior and changing political norms.

By the end of this entry-level course, students should gain a basic understanding of the structural challenges facing democratic governance, political structures and institutions, while gaining insight to potential solutions that could strengthen democratic traditions.

Classroom, Literature and Materials:

This course combines formal lectures by the instructor with assigned group work and student-led in-class activities. Before each class session, students are expected to have read the assigned reading before coming to class, where participation is both encouraged and expected. Reading newspapers, periodicals and other relevant material is encouraged. Student knowledge and analysis of the assigned material will be tested in class through conversation, participation, debate, and a final group presentation. Students will also be required to participate actively and equally to small group activities and discussions.

Each session will last 90 minutes, with classes held twice per week. Some classroom time will be allotted to small groups to discuss and prepare for assigned presentations.

Regular attendance *is* a requirement for this course. I will take attendance during the first 5 minutes of class. If you are late, you will need to come see me *after* class to make sure you are counted. I do acknowledge that life will find a way to interfere with classroom activities, from family visits, illnesses, pre-arranged travel, and other personal matters. Therefore, to avoid an unexcused absence, please notify me no later than 2 hours before class. Medical emergencies can be resolved later. Please use common sense. If you are ill, please do NOT come to class. If you must be absent, please notify me BEFORE class so I can help you catch up on missed discussions or lecture points that you will have missed. It is up to you to communicate with me on attendance and missed lecture material.

Course Readings: Readings for this course have been uploaded to [Blackboard](#). No textbook is required.

Course Schedule:

Introduction	
1 - 9/3	Introductions / Syllabus ❖ Please review the course syllabus, become familiar with Blackboard, access all required course readings and familiarize yourself with the KGU Library.
2 - 9/8	Class Dynamics / Course Expectations
3 - 9/10	What's <i>in</i> a Democracy? ❖ We will form small groups and have a class exercise on the issue of democracy. No advance reading is required. ❖ MUST READ: Dahl, R. (1998) <i>On Democracy</i>, Chapter 2
4 - 9/15	Introduction to Group Dynamics / Mock Exercises • The Conflict Triangle • Ownership of the Orange • Needs/Wants Communication Exercise
5 - 9/17	Governance and Ideology ❖ MUST READ: Dahl, R. (1998) <i>On Democracy</i>, Chapter 3
A Not-so-Democratic Simulation: The Republic of Genovia*	
6 - 9/24	"A Republic, If You Can Keep It": Genovia Simulation #1 (Group Preparation) ❖ MUST READ: Dahl, R. (1998) <i>On Democracy</i>, Chapter 4 ❖ For Reference: Böckenförde, M. (2011). <i>A Practical Guide to Constitution Building: The Design of the Legislature</i> (p. 58). International IDEA. ❖ Questions for your group will be given to you in addition to a briefing packet.
7 - 9/29	"A Republic, If You Can Keep It": Genovia Simulation #2 (Inter-Group Dialogues) ❖ MUST READ: Dahl, R. (1998) <i>On Democracy</i>, Chapter 5.

	❖ Questions for your group will be given to you in addition to a briefing packet.
8 - 10/1	“A Republic, If You Can Keep It”: : Genovia Simulation #3 (Convention) ❖ No prior reading required.
9 - 10/6	Constitutional Convention Debriefing/Discussion (#1) ❖ No prior reading required. NOTE: Participation is important and will count as part of your Discussion Participation grade. Your attendance is highly recommended.
10 - 10/8	Designated Group Presentation Preparation Period #1 ❖ This period has been set aside for preparations for your Group Presentations scheduled for the end of the semester. NOTE: Attendance is required (unless you have a medical/family reason).
11 - 10/13	Reading Summary Quiz #1 (In-Class) ❖ A two-question quiz (essay format) will be distributed <i>during</i> class. You will have the entire class period to complete it. Notes and class readings are allowed.
Poland and the Question of an Independent Judiciary	
11 - 10/15	Poland's Right-Wing Turn ❖ Hedling, N. (2011). <i>A Practical Guide to Constitution Building: The Design of the Judicial Branch</i> . International IDEA, (p. 15-21 IS REQUIRED) ❖ Macy, J., & Duncan, A. (2020). The Collapse of Judicial Independence in Poland. <i>Judicature</i> . Web . ★ ❖ Gera, V., & Scislowska, M. (2020). Legal chaos in Poland deepens, posing major challenge for EU. AP News. Web .
12 - 10/20	The Significance of a Fragile Judiciary ❖ Kovács, K., & Scheppele, K. L. (2018). The fragility of an independent judiciary: Lessons from Hungary and Poland—and the European Union. <i>Communist and Post-Communist Studies</i> , 51(3), 189–200. ★
13 - 10/22	Has Poland Reversed Course? ❖ Schmitz, R. (2024, February 26). Poland's judiciary was a tool of its government. New leaders are trying to undo that. <i>NPR</i> . Web . ❖ Freedom House. (2022). Poland: Nations in Transit 2022 Country Report. Web . ❖ News Summary #1: Related to what has been assigned so far, bring in a news article to class. In person, summarize the article and explain why it relates to the material we have been discussing in class. As many as three people will be called upon at random to present their articles. Not having an article prepared will count as a zero grade for the exercise. (3-5 minutes) ❖ Each of you may be called upon at random to present their articles. Not having an article prepared will count as a <i>zero</i> grade for the exercise. (3-5 minutes each.)
14 - 10/29	Poland Case Study Class Discussion (#2) ❖ As a class and in small groups, we will have a synthesis discussion about the Poland case study. NOTE: Participation is important and will count as part of your Discussion Participation grade. Your attendance is highly recommended.

	❖ Each of you may be called upon at random to present their articles. Not having an article prepared will count as a <i>zero</i> grade for the exercise. (3-5 minutes each.) ❖ Print or email your articles prior to the class.
15 - 11/3	Designated Group Presentation Preparation Period #2 ❖ This period has been set aside for preparations for your Group Presentations scheduled for the end of the semester. NOTE: Attendance is required (unless you have a medical/family reason). ❖ Country and context should be finalized and a working outline provided.
Electoral Design in Democratic States	
16 - 11/5	Democratic Growing Pains: Electoral Design Flaws ❖ Traub, J. (2025). <i>The ugly election that birthed modern American politics</i>. National Geographic. Web. ❖ Pomper, G. M. (2001). The 2000 Presidential Election: Why Gore Lost. <i>Political Science Quarterly</i>, 116(2), 201–223. ❖ News Summary #2: Related to what has been assigned so far, bring in a news article to class. In person, summarize the article and explain why it relates to the material we have been discussing in class. As many as three people will be called upon at random to present their articles. Not having an article prepared will count as a zero grade for the exercise. (3-5 minutes)
17 - (On Demand)	How the ‘Citizens United’ Decision Changed U.S. Political Campaigns - On-Demand Activity #2 ❖ Watch online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xxilejOmSo
18 - 11/10	On Paper vs. In Practice: First-Past-The-Post Electoral Systems ❖ Weisfelder, R. F. (2015). Free elections and political instability in Lesotho. <i>Journal of African Elections</i>, 14(2), 50-80. ❖ Cogan, M.S. (2022). Mediation as Peacebuilding: Faith-Based Mediators in Lesotho’s Peacebuilding Process. In: Cogan, M.S., Sakai, H. (eds) <i>Alternative Perspectives on Peacebuilding</i>. Palgrave. ★
19 - 11/12	Toward Better Elections ❖ Landman, T., & Splendore, L. D. G. (2020). Pandemic democracy: Elections and COVID-19. <i>Journal of Risk Research</i>, 23, 1060–1066. ★ ❖ Stewart, C., III. (2022). Trust in Elections. <i>Daedalus</i>, 151(4), 234–253.
20 - 11/17	Class Discussion on Electoral Design (#3) ❖ As a class and in small groups, we will have a synthesis discussion about the electoral design. NOTE: Participation is important and will count as part of your Discussion Participation grade. Your attendance is highly recommended.
21 - 11/19	Designated Group Presentation Preparation Period #3 ❖ This period has been set aside for preparations for your Group Presentations scheduled for the end of the semester. NOTE: Attendance is required (unless you have a medical/family reason). ❖ Country and context should be finalized and a working outline provided.
Beyond Flaws: Autocratic Behavior	
22 - 11/24	Thailand’s 2023 Flawed Elections ❖ Siani, E. (2025). <i>Thailand 2023-2024: A general election and its contested</i>

	<i>aftermath</i>. https://iris.unive.it/handle/10278/5099548 ★ ❖ Kuhonta, E. M. (2024). Thailand in 2023: The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same? <i>Asian Survey</i>, 64(2), 278–287. News Summary #2 ❖ Bring in a news article to class that is related to what has been assigned so far. In person, summarize the article and explain <i>why</i> it relates to the material we have been discussing in class. This is not an exercise where you read from a piece of paper. You have to explain so your classmates understand the article and its contribution to the class. ❖ Each of you may be called upon at random to present their articles. Not having an article prepared will count as a <i>zero</i> grade for the exercise. (3-5 minutes each.) ❖ Print or email your articles prior to the class.
24 - (On-Demand)	Declaration of Martial Law in South Korea - On-Demand Activity #2 ❖ Watch online: https://youtu.be/0zLGNeFeME0
25 - 11/26	Designated Group Presentation Preparation Period #4 ❖ This period has been set aside for preparations for your Group Presentations scheduled for the end of the semester. NOTE: Attendance is required (unless you have a medical/family reason). ❖ Presentations should be <i>near-final</i> and Powerpoint (.ppt) copies of each should be emailed prior to each presentation period.
26 - 12/1	Reading Summary Quiz #2 ❖ A two-question quiz (essay format) will be distributed during class. You will have the entire class period to complete it. Notes and class readings are allowed.
Group Presentations	
27 - 12/3 28 - 12/8	Group Presentations ❖ These two (2) class periods are reserved for group presentations. Attendance is mandatory, regardless of whether you are presenting or not. Please come to support your fellow classmates.

* Genovia is a *fictional* state derived from “The Princess Diaries”, a 2001 Disney film. The exercise has nothing to do with the film itself or its characters.

★ - Indicates a challenging reading. You should make extra time available or work in partners/teams to help better comprehend its meaning.

Class Etiquette:

- Come to class prepared to learn and engage.
- Falling asleep or deliberately tuning out class discussions is disrespectful. If you need a drink of water, coffee, or food to help you maintain your focus, please do so by all means.
- Cellular phones or other mobile devices must be put away–turned off or put on silent.

Learning Assessment/Course Rubric:

Class Attendance	10%
Discussion Participation	20%
News Summaries	10%

Reading Summary Quizzes	20%
Group Presentations	25%
Final Exam	15%

Class Attendance (10%): You get points just for showing up, but you can lose them very quickly. All absences must be approved in advance or excused by valid medical or personal reason.

Discussion Participation (20%): There will be three (3) class discussions of different types, each with different objectives. For some of the discussions, you will be divided into small groups, for others it will be a full class discussion involving largely individual contributions. You will be assessed on the following criteria: 1) Attendance; 2) Contribution to Group Discussions/Research; 3) Individual Contributions; 4) Analysis and Critical Thinking.

The Rubric for Class Participation is as follows:

Attendance	1 point for attendance (no deduction for excused absences, which voids grading) 0 points for an unexcused absence		
Contribution to Group Discussions/Research	<u>0 points:</u> Minimal participation in group discussion or research contribution.	<u>1 point:</u> Some participation in group discussions (required some direction, lack of facilitation).	<u>2 points:</u> Active participation in group discussions, self-directed, led or enhanced discussions.
Individual Contributions	<u>0 points:</u> Minimal or no participation in class discussion or lack of individual research contribution.	<u>1 point:</u> Some participation in class discussions (required prompts, research contribution was minimal)	<u>2 points:</u> Active participation in class discussions (self-directed, relevant research contribution)
Analysis and Critical Thinking	<u>0 points:</u> Critical thinking or analytical or research contribution is absent.	<u>1 point:</u> Some presentation or reference to course material or research contribution, but critical thinking largely absent.	<u>2 points:</u> Strong critical thinking and analysis of course materials (e.g. compare/contrast, questioning, relevant application of critical concepts & theories)

News Summaries (10%): Regular outside reading is critical. To see how well you are relating course material to the outside world, you will all bring news articles (as recent as two weeks old prior to presentation) to class. As many as five people will be chosen to summarize their articles and relate them to course concepts and theories. Failure to bring an article or not prepare to present your article will result in a zero for that exercise.

Reading Summary Quizzes (20%): There will be two quizzes (two essay questions per quiz) over the material from the course readings and/or information contained in lectures. The quizzes should be completed in class during the class period. Notes are allowed.

Group Presentations (25%): Your task is present a challenge to democracy from any state you wish. You are assessed on your analysis of democratization, rather than a chronology of events. Consider: *Why* is this topic worthy of study? *What* makes it significant and relevant? All topics must be approved in advance. Your group must provide an outline of their presentation by Session 18 for approval. Presentations should

ideally contain a Powerpoint (.ppt) presentation, with visuals (if needed), but *no “scripts” are permitted*. Speaking notes should also be submitted prior to your presentation. The use of AI-generated text is strictly prohibited.

Final Exam (15%): The final exam is in the same format as the Reading Summary Quizzes, and there will be two questions covering topics discussed throughout the semester. The final exam date/period has yet to be determined.

Classroom Policy Information:

- **Academic Ethics and Cheating Policy:** The use of ChatGPT or other AI-based tools is prohibited and is considered an act of fraud. I employ a range of tools to detect AI. When that fails, I consult AI experts for analysis. Any use of AI tools will be taken seriously and anyone suspected of doing so will fail any assignment (with a 0% score). While second chances are possible, further assessments will be conducted in person and under direct supervision. The use of AI tools on additional assignments or on the final exam will result in a 0% for the course.
- **Plagiarism**, the practice of taking someone else's work or ideas and passing them off as one's own will not be tolerated.
- **Disability Statement:** *This course is open to all students who meet the academic requirements for participation.* Any student who has a need for accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact the instructor privately to discuss the specific situation as soon as possible (within the first week of class). It is the responsibility of the student to contact the instructor then meet to determine reasonable accommodation based on the official documentation/accommodation list.
- **Syllabus:** I reserve the right to modify the course syllabus at any time, especially if I feel it enhances the learning experience or is necessary due to unforeseen circumstances. I will provide advanced warning of any changes.
- **Free Speech/Safe Space:** This course will likely cover difficult topics which will result in a wide range of personal opinions and emotions. It is important to come to class with an open mind and a respect for diversity of opinion. Discrimination, marginalization or other abhorrent behavior based on gender, sex, race, age, national origin, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, or sexual orientation will not be tolerated. Violators will be asked to leave the classroom. In this classroom, we respect each other.

Supplemental Reading (if you're interested in more):

- ❖ Applebaum, A. (2020). *Twilight of democracy: The seductive lure of authoritarianism*. Doubleday.
- ❖ Barber, B. R. (2004). *Strong democracy: Participatory politics for a new age*. University of California Press.
- ❖ Canovan, M. (1981). *Populism*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- ❖ Dahl, R. A. (1998). *On Democracy*. Yale University Press.
- ❖ Farber, D. (2021). *Contested Ground: How to Understand the Limits of Presidential Power*. University of California Press.
- ❖ Finchelstein, F. (2024). *The Wannabe Fascists*. University of California Press.
- ❖ Levitsky, S., & Ziblatt, D. (2018). *How democracies die*. Crown Publishing.
- ❖ Lindstaedt, N. (2021). *Democratic Decay and Authoritarian Resurgence*. Bristol University Press.
- ❖ Plato, The Republic.
- ❖ Posner, E. (2020). *The demagogue's playbook: The battle for American democracy from the founders to Trump*. All Points Books.
- ❖ Scott, J. (1990). *Weapons of the Weak*. Yale University Press.