

Democracy, Race, and the American Political Order

A Seminar on Democratic Theory, Measurement, and Exclusion

Instructor Jessala A. Grijalva, Ph.D.

Credits 3 | **Format** Seminar

Meeting Time TBD | **Location** TBD

Office Hours TBD (sign-up required)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What if American democracy has always worked exactly as it was designed to work? This course takes that question seriously. Drawing on democratic theory, American political development, and the political thought of scholars from Du Bois to Baldwin to contemporary political scientists, students develop the tools to analyze what democracy means, how it is measured, and why the gap between democratic promise and democratic reality has proven so persistent. The course culminates in an original research project applying those tools to a nation of the student's choosing.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Articulate the core meaning of democracy and distinguish between the five major varieties identified in the V-Dem framework
- Analyze the assumptions embedded in different frameworks for conceptualizing and measuring democracy
- Evaluate how race, racism, and exclusion challenge dominant democratic theory and measurement
- Use publicly available tools (V-Dem, Freedom House, Polity) to identify democratic trends and trajectories for a specific nation
- Construct a theoretically grounded analytical argument about democratic challenges in a specific case

MATERIALS AND RESOURCES

All readings are posted as PDFs on the course management system or are freely available online. No textbook purchase is required. The following texts appear across multiple weeks:

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

Gerring, John, and Svend-Erik Skaaning. 2020. "Conceptual Scheme." In *Varieties of Democracy: Measuring Two Centuries of Political Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 27–42.

Students will also use the following publicly available tools. No software installation or coding ability is required:

- **V-Dem Online Graphing Tools** v-dem.net/graphing/graphing-tools/
- **Freedom House Country Reports** freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores
- **Polity5 Project Data** systemicpeace.org/polityproject.html

GRADING

Component	Weight
Active Engagement (attendance, discussion, memos, discussion leading)	25%
Midterm Exam	20%
Case Selection Proposal	15%

Final Presentation	15%
Final Paper	25%

REQUIRED INDIVIDUAL MEETINGS

This course includes two required individual meetings built into the schedule.

Check-In 1 Week 7 — No Class Week

Before the midterm and before the course pivots to the race and democracy unit, each student meets individually with the instructor. Come prepared to discuss which democratic variety from Part I you found most compelling and why, and to identify a potential case nation for the final project. Sign-up opens at the end of Week 6.

Check-In 2 Week 14 — No Class Week

Before final presentations, each student meets individually with the instructor to review their draft argument, discuss their evidence, and identify the strongest and weakest parts of their analysis. Bring a one-page outline of your final paper. No student presents in Week 15 or 16 without completing this meeting.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

Each week assigns two priority readings to be completed before the first class meeting. Recommended readings provide additional depth and are not required. Weekly reading memos respond to the priority readings.

PART I — Democratic Theory and Measurement

Week 1 — What Is Democracy? The Electoral Principle

What does democracy minimally require? Dahl establishes the foundational concept. The electoral principle serves as the baseline from which all other varieties depart.

Priority Reading

- *On Democracy*, Chapters 1–4. Dahl (1998).
- "Conceptual Scheme," section on the Electoral Principle. Gerring and Skaaning (2020).

Recommended

- *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, Chapter 22. Schumpeter (1942).

Students identify their discussion leading week by end of Week 1.

Week 2 — Liberal Democracy

Liberal democracy extends the electoral principle by insisting on individual rights, the rule of law, and checks on executive power. Students are introduced to V-Dem's conceptual framework.

Priority Reading

- "Conceptual Scheme," section on the Liberal Principle. Gerring and Skaaning (2020).
- *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, Chapter 1. Dahl (1971).

Recommended

- "Thinking About Hybrid Regimes." Diamond (2002). *Journal of Democracy* 13(2): 21–35.

In-class activity: Introduction to V-Dem online graphing tools.

Week 3 — Participatory and Deliberative Democracy

What does democracy require beyond elections? Participatory democracy demands active citizen engagement. Deliberative democracy insists on reasoned public dialogue as the foundation of legitimate collective decisions.

Priority Reading

- "Conceptual Scheme," sections on the Participatory and Deliberative Principles. Gerring and Skaaning (2020).
- *Participation and Democratic Theory*, Chapter 1. Pateman (1970).

Recommended

- *Why Deliberative Democracy?* Chapter 1. Gutmann and Thompson (2004).
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Week 4 — Egalitarian Democracy

Is political equality meaningful without substantive equality? The egalitarian variety bridges the theoretical framework of Part I and the critical turn that follows in Part II.

Priority Reading

- "Conceptual Scheme," section on the Egalitarian Principle. Gerring and Skaaning (2020).
- *On Democracy*, Chapter 8. Dahl (1998).

Recommended

- "Essentially Contested Concepts." Gallie (1956). *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56: 167–198.
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Week 5 — Measuring Democracy: V-Dem, Freedom House, and Polity

How do the three major measurement projects work? What does each capture and what does each miss? Students explore all three tools and begin identifying potential case nations.

Priority Reading

- "Conceptualizing and Measuring Democracy: A New Approach." Coppedge et al. (2011). *Perspectives on Politics* 9(2): 247–267.
- "The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism." Levitsky and Way (2002). *Journal of Democracy* 13(2): 51–65.

In-class activity: Students explore V-Dem Country Graphs, Freedom House country reports, and Polity scores for potential case nations.

MIDTERM

Week 6 — Midterm Exam

No new readings. The midterm covers all material from Weeks 1–5 and is administered during the first class meeting of the week. Students are asked to define and distinguish the five democratic varieties, evaluate the assumptions embedded in at least two measurement frameworks, and apply a conceptual framework to a brief empirical case. Approximately 90 minutes. Returned with written feedback before Week 9. The second class meeting transitions to Part II.

NO CLASS — INDIVIDUAL CHECK-IN MEETINGS

Week 7 — Required Individual Meetings with Instructor

No class sessions. Each student meets with the instructor during a scheduled 20-minute appointment. Come prepared to discuss which democratic variety from Part I you found most analytically compelling, one or two potential case nations for the final project, and any questions about the transition to Part II. This meeting is required.

BREAK

Week 8 — Spring / Fall Break

No class. No assignments due.

PART II — Race and Democracy

Week 9 — The Hard Critique: Settler Freedom and the Racial Contract

American freedom was built on racial exclusion, not in spite of it. Rana argues that American liberty has always been settler freedom, premised on the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and the exclusion of the enslaved. Mills argues that the social contract was always a racial contract, and that Western political philosophy has systematically obscured that fact.

Priority Reading

- "Conclusion: Democracy and Inclusion in the Age of American Hegemony." In *The Two Faces of American Freedom*. Rana (2010). Harvard University Press, 326–348.
- *The Racial Contract*, Chapter 1. Mills (1997).

Recommended

- "The Souls of White Folk." Du Bois (1920). In *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*.
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Week 10 — The Liberal Response: Racial Orders and the American Dilemma

Race is deeply embedded in American political development, but the democratic project contains competing orders and the trajectory bends toward inclusion — or does it? King and Smith identify competing racial institutional orders. Myrdal frames racial exclusion as a moral contradiction that American ideals can ultimately resolve.

Priority Reading

- "Racial Orders in American Political Development." King and Smith (2005). *American Political Science Review* 99(1): 75–92.
- *An American Dilemma*, Introduction and Chapter 1. Myrdal (1944).

Recommended

- "The Possibilities for Democracy in America." Hochschild (2002). In *The Making and Unmaking of Democracy*. Routledge.

Case Selection Proposal due Friday of Week 10.

Week 11 — Baldwin

Baldwin refuses the categories that both the structural critics and the liberal optimists operate within. Students encounter his critique in three registers: intimate letter, extended essay, and live debate. This week has no recommended reading. The assigned texts require close, unhurried attention.

Priority Reading

- "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew." In *The Fire Next Time*. Baldwin (1963). Complete.
- "Down at the Cross." In *The Fire Next Time*. Baldwin (1963). Selected sections.

Watch

- Baldwin, James. 1965. Cambridge Union Debate: "Has the American Dream Been Achieved at the Expense of the American Negro?" (55 min). Available on YouTube.

Recommended

- "Everybody's Protest Novel." Baldwin (1955). In *Notes of a Native Son*.
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Week 12 — Herrenvolk Democracy

Van den Berghe names the political form: democracy explicitly structured around racial membership, in which democratic institutions serve the dominant group while exclusion of all others is maintained as a structural feature. Grijalva applies this framework to the American founding, arguing that the United States was not a failed attempt at universal democracy but a successful implementation of racial democracy.

Priority Reading

- *Race and Racism: A Comparative Perspective*, selections on herrenvolk democracy. Van den Berghe (1967).
- "Democracy for Whom? Herrenvolk Democracy and the Racial Construction of the American Demos." Grijalva [under review]. Manuscript provided on course management system.

Recommended

- *Cruelty as Citizenship: How Migrant Suffering Sustains White Democracy*, Introduction. Beltrán (2020).
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Week 13 — Democratic Backsliding and the Contemporary Crisis

How do we understand the current moment? Levitsky and Ziblatt provide the canonical democratic backsliding framework. Grumbach documents how the crisis has played out at the state level in the United States. Students evaluate both frameworks through the analytical lenses developed across the course.

Priority Reading

- *How Democracies Die*, Chapters 1–2. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018).
- *Laboratories Against Democracy*, Chapter 1. Grumbach (2022).

Recommended

- *Backsliding: Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World*, Chapter 1. Haggard and Kaufman (2021).

Students should be finalizing case analyses and preparing presentations.

NO CLASS — INDIVIDUAL CHECK-IN MEETINGS

Week 14 — Required Individual Meetings with Instructor

No class sessions. Each student meets with the instructor during a scheduled 25-minute appointment to review their draft argument and prepare for the final presentation. Bring a one-page outline of your final paper argument, your V-Dem, Freedom House, or Polity graph for your case, and your two biggest unresolved questions. This meeting is required. No student presents in Week 15 or 16 without completing it.

PART III — Application

Week 15 — Final Presentations, Part I

No new readings. The first half of the seminar presents during Week 15. Each student presents their case analysis for approximately 10 minutes, followed by 10 minutes of questions and discussion. Presentation schedule posted by end of Week 13.

Week 16 — Final Presentations, Part II and Course Conclusion

No new readings. The second half of the seminar presents during Week 16. The final class meeting includes a brief course synthesis discussion: what have we learned about democracy, race, and the limits of our frameworks? Final Paper due during finals week.

ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTIONS

Weekly Reading Memos

Students submit a short reading memo (1 page) before the first class meeting each week responding to the priority readings. Weeks 6, 7, 8, and 14 are exempt. The memo is not a summary. It should identify an argument, a tension, or a question that the readings raise and engage with it critically. Two memos may be dropped over the semester. Memos are evaluated as part of the Active Engagement grade.

Discussion Leading

Each student serves as discussion leader for one week during Weeks 1–5 or Weeks 9–13. Discussion leaders present on the assigned framework or thinker, provide a brief informative memo to the class before the session, prepare 3–5 discussion questions, and guide seminar discussion. Evaluated as part of the Active Engagement grade.

Midterm Exam (Week 6)

An in-class exam covering all material from Weeks 1–5. Students define and distinguish the five democratic varieties, evaluate the assumptions of at least two measurement frameworks, and apply a conceptual framework to a brief empirical case. Approximately 90 minutes. Returned with written feedback before Week 9.

Case Selection Proposal (Due Week 10)

A brief document (2–3 pages) identifying the student's chosen nation, stating the research question, explaining why this case is interesting given the course's theoretical frameworks, and identifying initial evidence from V-Dem, Freedom House, or Polity showing the nation's democratic trajectory. Students must complete the Week 7 check-in before submitting.

Final Presentation (Weeks 15–16)

A formal presentation covering the nation and why it was selected, the key dimensions of democracy at stake, evidence from V-Dem or comparable tools (including at least one graph or score trajectory), the theoretical argument, and a forward-looking assessment. Approximately 10 minutes, followed by 10 minutes of questions. Students must complete the Week 14 check-in before presenting.

Final Paper (Finals Week)

An analytical essay (8–10 pages) examining democratic challenges or advancements in a specific nation. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks from the course and supported by evidence from V-Dem, Freedom House, or Polity. Students trace the democratic trajectory, make a theoretical argument about where the tensions lie, and offer a forward-looking assessment. Incorporate feedback from the Week 14 check-in and the final presentation. V-Dem graphs or Polity trends should be included as figures or an appendix.

COURSE POLICIES

Attendance

Students are expected to attend all class sessions. This is a seminar, and the quality of the course depends on the quality of the discussion. If you need to miss a class, please email in advance. There is no need to justify your absence. Please do not come to class if you are ill. Frequent absences will affect your engagement grade.

Late Work

If you need an extension on any assignment, ask in advance of the due date and we will work out a plan. Late assignments submitted without advance notice will lose 10% of the total assignment points per day. The final paper deadline is firm.

Academic Integrity

All work submitted must be your own. The university's policies on academic honesty apply to this course. Proper citation of all sources is required. When in doubt, cite.

Use of AI Tools

Large language models may be used for brainstorming, locating sources, and revising drafts for clarity. They may not be used to generate analytical arguments, produce readings of texts, or write substantive sections of your assignments. If you use AI tools in any part of your workflow, include a brief statement describing how. The thinking in this course must be yours.

Accessibility

This course is committed to being accessible to all students. If there are circumstances that make any aspect of this course difficult for you, please reach out so we can discuss accommodations. For formal accommodations, please contact your institution's disability services office.

This syllabus is subject to change. Any revisions will be announced in class and posted to the course management system.