HCOL 186 **Problems in Democratic Theory: How do Democracies Fall Apart (and could it happen here?)**

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**Syllabus**

*They assembled against Moses and Aaron and said to them, “You take too much upon yourselves, for the entire congregation are holy.. So why do you raise yourselves above G-d’s assembly? …Should you exercise authority over us?*

*Saul said to Samuel, “I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of G-d, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice”. I Samuel 24*

On November 8, 2016, many people experienced a shock. Pundits, reporters, analysts, professional and amateur, were taken by surprise and are at pains to come up with a satisfying explanation as to why Donald Trump carried the election and why Republicans garnered a majority in the Congress. This course will take the election of 2016 as a vantage point for exploring the “real world” of democracy as opposed to the prevailing “folk theory” of democracy which would understand the election of 2016 as a pathological outcome. In the course of our discussions, we will look closely at our ***democratic system,*** its virtues and its failings. We will look at ***political parties*** and their historical role in mobilizing and representing interests. Can the 2016 election be explained in terms of the failure of one or both parties? For instance, has the Democratic party lost the allegiance of its traditional base? We will also explore the history and concept of “***populism***” as a possible characterization of a social revolt that the dominant parties failed to contain or even recognize.

In fact, while this election may represent something new, it is not entirely unprecedented. Acrimonious and polarized campaigns have always been a part of American politics. Moreover, the election of Trump in the US seems to be part of a global phenomenon: Putin in Russia, Modi in India, Duterte in the Philippines, Pinera in Chile, the rise of right-wing political parties in Hungary, Austria, Italy, Greece, Poland, the Brexit vote in Great Britain, all suggest that the US election is hardly an isolated event.

Also not an isolated phenomenon is the increasing polarization of voters and the decline in norms of civility that used to allow for sincere dialogue between members of opposing parties. Trump voters have been characterized in unflattering terms: racists, sexists, homophobes, xenophobes, and the like. A host of condescending elites have expressed their contempt: “how could voters not even know their own interests?” “How could women (40%) have voted for Trump?” Academic literature reaching back to the 1950s and 1960s is being resurrected to explain the “authoritarian personality” of the working classes who are allegedly angry and resentful and are rejecting modernity in favor of a return to a past where white, male privilege and patriarchal religion reigned.

The temptation to fall back on simple psychological explanations, particularly when they exonerate the political, academic, and economic elites is understandable, but for our purposes, they obfuscate more than they clarify because they take the onus and the attention off of structural, cultural, global and historical factors that are more salient. Announcing that voters are incapable of assessing their own interests is condescending and unhelpful. For instance, while free trade, globalization, and environmental regulations will all clearly produce good over the long term, the costs in the short term are not evenly shared. Job loss is not a problem across all sectors of the economy. Working people know this. Neither political party has addressed the uneven distribution of burdens head-on. Even more foundational: democracy is supposed to give voice to a range of competing interests and groups. ***Is our democracy becoming more inclusive or more exclusive?***

We will be reading several contemporary books to help us understand the 2016 election. Only one is a straight-up political science text. The others are not explicitly political in their approaches or objectives, but nonetheless, will serve to deepen our understanding of democracy.

In addition to books for purchase at either the UVM Bookstore or online, readings will be added throughout the semester to *Blackboard.*

1. ***Democracy in Decline?*** Ed. Larry Diamond, (Johns Hopkins U.P.: Baltimore, MD) 2015 isbn: 978-1-4214-1818-6

2. ***What Is Populism?*** Hardcover – August 22, 2016 by Jan-Werner Müller (U Penn Press) 2016

ISBN-10: 0812248988, ISBN-13: 978-0812248982 (not sure which is paperback)

3. ***Democracy for Realists*** Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels , (Princeton UP) 2016 isbn: 978-0-691-16944-6

4. ***Strangers in Their Own Land***, Arlie Russell Hochschild (The New Press) 2016 isbn: 978-1-62097-225-0

5. ***Hillbilly Elegy*** J.D. Vance (Harpercollins) 2016 isbn: 978-0-06-230054-6

6. ***Democracy: Stories from the Long Road to Freedom*** Condoleeza Rice, (Hatchette Book Group: Ny NY) 2017 isbn: 978-1-5387-2746-1 (This book is not available in the UVM Bookstore but you can order it at Amazon or another online seller)

It is your responsibility to complete the assigned readings before the class to which they pertain. The success of this seminar depends on your thoughtful participation, which in turn, depends on your having read and thought carefully about the assignments for a given class.

Students will divide themselves into working groups of five or so people who will complete assignments as a collective throughout the semester. Each week students will be expected to complete the assigned readings and to prepare questions that relate to the central concerns of the authors. The group will then present a brief discussion of why the questions are important, as well as discussing provisional answers to the questions you have posed. You should be careful to note the methodology employed by the author and whether you are satisfied with the conclusion that the author drew. Each student will be responsible for handing in a written response as an individual. These responses should be a total of about four pages double-spaced. Papers must be typed and in hard copy. The completion of the essays is a prerequisite for passing the course. No late papers will be accepted without a medical justification. These short essays will constitute 70 % of your final grade. There will be a research paper on a topic of your choice, approved by me, and presented briefly in class. This project will constitute 30% of your grade. Attendance and participation are mandatory and will be duly noted and factored in to your grade.

**WEEK 1**

**Democracy for Realists,** Chs. 1,2,3,4

**WEEK 2**

**Democracy for Realists** Chs. 5,6, 7,8

**WEEK 3**

**Democracy for Realists** Chs. 9, 10,11

**WEEK 4**

**Democracy: Stories from the Long Road to Freedom** Introduction. Is Democracy in Retreat?

**Democracy in Decline?** chs 1 and 2

**WEEK 5**

**Democracy in Decline?** chs 3, 4, 5, 6

**WEEK 6**

Economist article, *Democracy* (Bb)

Balint Szlanko, *Why Democracy Will Struggle In the Arab World in 2014* Daily Beast (Bb) Why Western leftists adore right-wing religious extremists abroad

SETH J. FRANTZMAN *Why Western leftists adore right-wing religious extremists abroad* (Bb)

**WEEK 7**

**New York Times “Why Rural America Voted for Trump”**

**Hillbilly Elegy** Chs. 1,2,3,4,5,6,7

**WEEK 8**

**Hillbilly Elegy** Chs. 9,10,11,12,13,14

**WEEK 9**

**Strangers in Their Own Land** Chs. 1,2,3,4,5,6, 7,8

**WEEK 10**

**Strangers in Their Own Land** Chs. 9,10,11,12,13,14, 15,16

**WEEK 11**

**What is Populism?** Introduction and Ch. 1, 2,3

**WEEK 12**

**Presentations**

**WEEK 13**

**Presentations**