

Joint Panel MA's at the Catholic University of Portugal & Georgetown University: A Conversation on Democracy and Governance in a Context of Global Recession of Democracy.

Educating Thought Leaders in Democracy Studies in the Context of Democratic Erosion

Dr. Elton Skendaj (Associate Director, Democracy and Governance Program, Georgetown University)

How do we conduct productive research as well as teach and train future practitioners and thought leaders in democracy and governance? Democracy around the world is [under attack](#), as we have seen declines in the quality of democracy and good governance in dozens of countries for the past seventeen years. Both new and consolidated democracies face challenges ranging from spread of fake news, rise of populist strongmen who attempt to dismantle rule of law institutions and foster toxic polarization, as well as autocratic threats. We need new thinking and tools to address these multiple challenges.

At Georgetown's M.A. in [Democracy & Governance](#), faculty and students produce both leading academic research and applied analysis that bridges the divide between scholars and policymakers. While we have focused on international democracy promotion in the past, we are now also examining how to address democratic challenges in consolidated democracies, such as the US and European Community.

We are currently using a Designing the Future model to help students foster new ideas. In the Countering Polarization class, we use the following model. Students design a paper that develops a blueprint for an intervention: workshop /campaign/ activity for campus or community. What do we know about the causes and impact of political polarization? How does academic research and practitioner insights help us to understand cases of polarization in contemporary politics? In what ways might this inform our practice or policymaking? Each student is to identify a hypothesis that scholars and practitioners have examined in a polarization case study. Students will familiarize themselves with the state of research on that hypothesis and develop a blueprint for an intervention: workshop/campaign/activity for campus or community.

Students use the prompt to come up with creative interventions to address toxic polarization, such as parent-child mindfulness practice training, improv comedy for congress staff, using moral reframing to address the values of each community, dialogue, bridge building, investment in local media, civic curricula education. Students are making fascinating connections with insights from political science, psychology and neuroscience to address these challenges.

Similarly, in our Comparative Political Institutions class, students look at the potential and limits of institutional design. The final assignment in this course is a paper in which students tackle an issue of social or political concern and offer recommendations for institutional reform to address it. Students have to provide an overview of 2-3 possible institutional options, a recommendation of one option as a preferred course of action that includes, an explanation of how the institutional

reform would impact the issue at hand, as well as evidence from other contexts that demonstrates the viability of this solution and a brief assessment of the political viability of the solution. Students have proposed institutional reforms to address the Catalan crisis, shifting to more proportional representation voting system in the USA and Iraq, or judicial sector reform to address transnational crime in Brazil. Some of these solutions are less likely to be political viable now, such as ending sectarian system in Lebanon. However, the students have to think about the coalitions of actors that would support and obstruct such institutional change.

As we notice erosion in both electoral and consolidated democracies, we need to synthesize new ideas and tools to address such global retreat of democracies. Our students are interested in international and local tools to promote and sustain democracy. Using design principles, we can look back and forward to think collaboratively about how we want our future to look, and steps to take to achieve that future. International collaborations between different MA programs in Democracy studies can foster fruitful exchange of diverse ideas that will help grow the subfield of democracy.