

Reflections on Democracy and Governance Studies at Georgetown University

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Democracy and Governance Studies at GU: A Unique MA Program

Georgetown University's [MA Program](#) in Democracy and Governance was created in 2005. While there are other MA programs that include topics such as democracy, elections, human rights and governance, ours appears to be the only one in the U.S. that focuses on democratization and governance. That said, the democracy and governance theme provides [a broad canopy](#) under which a large array of topics are included. The program's location in Washington DC provides an additional advantage that has been fundamental to our success

To set the stage for these reflections I would emphasize four other key issues regarding the program's intellectual and institutional provenance:

First, it grew out of the GU Government Department's PhD program in democracy studies headed up Professor Steven Heydemann. When that program ended Heydemann and I drew ideas and inspiration from the PhD program to create the DG MA. The MA focus on the link between theory and concrete practice reflects this legacy. Our guiding assumption that effective policy makers and activists working in the fields of democracy assistance, human rights, elections and the like require the ability to think and analyze conceptually and deductively. The goal of theory is to sharpen analysis rather than serve as an end in and of itself.

Second, this focus on theory and practice provided the basis for training a new generation of analysts and activists in a field that was expanding but which was marked by a lack of professionalization. Democracy assistance such as the National Endowment for Democracy, the International Republican Institute, the National Endowment for Democracy, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the State Department's related bureaus and programs were filled of talented men and women. But there was no center of intellectual and theoretical gravity—no core field of training—for the field. Our MA program addressed this need. We are proud to say that [our graduates](#) can be found in a wide range of DC based democracy assistance organizations in government, think tanks, private sector firms, and of course, in civil society NGOs in the Middle East, Africa, Southeast Asia, South America and other regions.

Third, the two founders of this MA program were scholars of comparative politics. Our conceptual and empirical focus has been the endurance of authoritarianism. This was perhaps an unusual orientation for the directors of a democracy program. And yet it turned out to be a vital element in the success of the MA for one simple reason: efforts to foster democracy must begin and clear understanding of autocracy and the factors that sustain and also make it vulnerable to

internal and external pressures for change. Animated by the research we had undertaken in the Middle East and our knowledge of foreign languages (Arabic and French), or focus on autocracies gave the program a realism that was inspired by our normative commitments, but was *not rooted* in an evangelical vision of democracy studies. This made for a better program both in terms of the education we provide, but also in terms of the wide appeal of the program itself.

Fourth, the program was born in a particular historical moment defined by what appeared to be a rising tide of democracies in many regions, the geo-strategic decline of Russia, and the push in China for market reforms – a process that seemed to hold out the possibility of eventual political liberalization. The changes were all occurring in the context of what many assumed would be uni-polar system ed by one superpower that was a democracy. While we have worked hard to avoiding “preaching,” we and our students drew inspiration from an emerging world order in which democracy, pluralism and human rights all seemed on the ascendancy.

Keeping Up with A Shifting Global Landscape

Our program reflected and addressed this optimistic context by offering courses in comparative democratization, political development, social movements and democratic transitions. These courses highlighted dynamics and challenges that cut across time and space, in contrast to GU’s long and well respected tradition of regional studies. While not ignoring the many obstacles to it (not least of which is the path dependent nature of autocracy), our MA program focused on democratic change, rather than on the complex science (and art) or governance in emerging, new or established democracies.

I emphasize the above points because as we well know, the global system has changed dramatically since the inception of our program. We have worked hard to make changes in our curriculum that reflect these developments. The fact that we are a small two year program, with an incoming class of 12-15 students each year, has helped. Still, with a small staff --which in Fall 2022 will see the positions of director and assistance director fused under the leadership of our current associate director [Professor Elton Skendaj](#)--it has often been a challenge to muster the time and resources to align our program which a changing global system and the increasingly important problem of governance in new and established democracies. Nevertheless, I believe we have done good job retooling and reinventing our program. On this score I would emphasize the following four directions in our program:

First: Incorporating Governance Dynamics. Some five years into the MA—and working with our co-Director Sam Mujal-Leon, who many of you know—we endeavored to give more attention to governance. This was reflected not only in new name of the MA, but in our efforts to include courses offered by the Government Department and other university arenas on issues such as the politics of economic reform, comparative constitutionalism, human rights law, security sector reform, and perhaps most importantly, comparative politics of corruption. That said, given the vast nature of the topic itself, incorporating governance studies into our MA has always been and remains a challenge.

One new course I created four years ago that covers many governance related issues is "[The Politics of Democratic Consolidation \(and Deconsolidation\)](#)." The course highlights how the different democratic transition shape or undercut consolidation in a myriad of institutional, legal, social and economic arenas. Part and parcel of this course was a 10 day field study in Tunisia. In 2019 we partnered with the "[Tunis Exchange](#)" to bring 12 of our MA students to Tunis. They were joined by other students, policy analysts, government officials and journalists from many countries. The full group's meetings with Tunisian leaders from diverse fields and ideological backgrounds provided a "hands on" way to explore the link between the theoretical topics that are featured in the course and the grass roots struggles in one country to consolidate democracy. Needless to say, the constitutional coup engineered by President Kais Saied, not to mention the Covid crisis, have tossed huge obstacles in our path and will probably prevent us from resuming the field study program in Tunis. Still, the course itself will continue, but in a revised format that will highlight the link between challenges to consolidation and democratic backsliding.

Second: Adding More Practice [and Skills-Oriented Courses](#) The Tunis course was one example of a growing trend in our MA –and many others MA programs at GU and other universities-- to offer classes that highlight the practice element in our theory-practice formula. These include one and two credit courses on subjects such as program monitoring and evaluation, proposal and policy writing, election monitoring and anti-polarization strategies (on this see below). Students can take similar courses in the Conflict Resolution MA program, and in other GU departments.

Third: Addressing the Interplay of Between Conflict and Democracy The interplay of democracy and conflict has always been a key theme in our program. Indeed, I think it is fair to say that Elton and I teach democracy from a conflict perspective, as we see democratic institutions as vital to moving conflicts from the battle field to the political realm. Elton teaches a course specifically on democracy and conflict, while my course on "Theories of Political Development" and especially our "Gateway" course emphasizes the democracy/conflict nexus. In this spirit, we are seeking to expand cooperation between our MA program and GU's Conflict Resolution Program.

Fourth: A Gateway Course on Democratization and Governance In Fall 2020 we added a new "Gateway Course" that is now required for all our incoming MA students. The course provides a comprehensive and challenging theoretical and practical overview of a myriad of topics that are essential to studying democracy and governance and to working in this vast field.

Fifth: Addressing the Interplay of Domestic and International Politics Our MA has long placed an emphasis on comparative political change. This made sense not only because all of our directors and associate directors of the MA have been scholars of comparative politics, but also because the social science literature demonstrates that the domestic realm of any country or political system sets the boundaries of foreign influence in both autocracies and democracies. That said, because the nexus between domestic and international politics is a vital issue, and because it has become even more important in the context of a multi-polar world that has witnessed the rising influence of China and Russia and the growth of populist nationalist movements in new and established democracies, we have tried to include courses that illuminate the impact of global politics on democratization and autocratization.

My course on [“Globalization and Autocracy”](#) highlights conceptual topics such as authoritarian cooperation, autocracy promotion, political learning and dynamics of ideological and institutional diffusion. These topics are explored in sections and readings on Eastern Europe, the Middle East, South America, and sub-Saharan Africa. Elton’s work on Eastern European politics, especially in the Balkans, and his own deep background in international relations, is adding much to this expanding focus on the interplay of national, local and global politics.

Part and parcel of our work on these global topics has been cooperation with a myriad of governmental and non-governmental institutions in DC. Moreover, and as many of you know, under the leadership of our former co-director, Sam Mujal-Leon, we co-hosted several international conferences co-organized that were funded by FLAD. These meetings included the 2016 conference on [“Forty Years of the Democratic Constitution,”](#) and the 2018 conference on [“Enduring Alliances.”](#) FLAD’s ongoing [sponsorship](#) of a Visiting Professor from Portugal is an essential part of this fruitful relationship. On this score, we were delighted [to host Professor Livia Franco](#) at Georgetown in Spring 2021 and to have [Professor Carlos Jallali](#) this past Spring.

Populist Nationalist Movements, Democratic Backsliding and International Politics

As we well know, over the last five or so years the emergence of populist nationalist movements, parties and leaders has played a fundamental if malign role in eroding democracies and in fostering illiberalization--a dynamic which is ongoing and increasingly dangerous in the US. We have striven to include these issues in our program.

One result of this focus on right wing extremism is that we are giving far more attention to the challenges and dangers of political polarization both abroad and at home. I teach a wide angle comparative course this largely conceptual in nature, and this past year, Elton and I launched a new course on polarization that highlights practical, grass roots strategies for countering polarization in the US and in other liberal democracies. This new course, [“Countering Political Polarization,”](#) includes several class sessions that draw from a multi-disciplinary project that I created in partnership with Professor Derek Goldman, the Director of GU’s [Theater and Performance](#) Studies Program. This project and its related course, [“In Your Shoes,”](#) uses theater and performance to foster communication and empathy across the cultural, social and ideological divides that fuels America’s polarized political landscape. This project, we are happy to note, has gained some national and international attention.

Our MA program looks forward to working with Professor Goldman and other colleagues at GU and beyond to advance these and other similar initiatives. We hope that these efforts shine a more encouraging light on the increasingly dark horizons of our national politics-- and on a global arena that has been shaken to its core by multiple crises, some which have come through the barrel of Russian guns and bombs in Ukraine, and some which have originated in the fraught landscape of democratic crisis in Western democracies, not least of which is the U.S. where the specter of a violent coup attempt on January 6, 2021 put our very democracy in peril.