

Political Elites

Prof. Christian Breunig, PhD

Time: Wednesdays 10:00 - 11:30 Room: D433

1 Statement of Purpose

We love to hate politicians. In public discourse, politicians and decision-makers are often described as deceptive, opportunistic, and purely self-centered actors with unlimited resources. In reality, politicians often lack time and resources to make informed decisions, suffer from cognitive biases, and rely on misperceptions and stereotypes that are ultimately reflected on policy. Political elites are also responsible for a great deal of unrecognized work that cannot be explained simply by the desire to be re-elected. This course introduces students to the study of elite behavior and decision-making, drawing from historical and contemporary research in political science, psychology, economics, and sociology. The course will pool insights from scholarship on elite behavior in subnational, national, and supranational governments.

Throughout the term, we will learn: What drives individuals to run for office? What roles do legislators adopt? How do politicians learn about policies? How do psychological biases influence elite behavior, and how can these biases be overcome? How do representatives build their image of the electorate? How do parties constrain legislators? By focusing on political elites, the course will help students understand the underlying challenges of the policymaking process as well as the pitfalls of representative democracy. More importantly, it will provide tools for students to address these challenges.

2 Prerequisites

This course is designed for master students in political science. At a minimum, students need to have taken at BA courses in comparative politics or economics; well-prepared students will have completed courses in research design, too.

3 Requirements

Students are evaluated based on three types of assignments that are weighted in the following fashion: Resident Expert Duty (20%), Participation (10%), Research Proposal (10%), Design of Survey Instrument (10%), and Research Paper (50%). All assignments need to be complete for receiving a grade in the course. Students are expected to read assigned readings before class and participate in class discussion. Active participation based on careful reading is given substantial weight in the determination of the final grade. You may miss up to two sessions for receiving a participation grade. In the first week of the course, you will sign up to be a *resident expert* for one meeting of the class. The resident experts on any given meeting are prepared to theoretically review and empirically consider the meeting's reading material and therefore are especially responsible for starting and rescuing class discussion. The following scheme is used for evaluating your participation and resident expert duties:

Students write a 5,000 word paper that draws on and expands the course readings. The paper should not be a full-fledged research paper; instead a research proposal or an initial empirical exploration that might be used for kick-starting a thesis is ideal. Each student proposes a research

Grade	Contribution
very good	Active and voluntary participation in almost all discussions, combination of constructive contributions <i>and</i> the ability to listen to others.
good	Active participation in at least some discussions and regular non-dormant presence in all.
satisfactory	Minimal voluntary contribution to discussions.
poor	Minimal presence and no voluntary contribution to discussions.

topic before the 7th session and presents the proposal in the 9th session. The goal of the proposal is to develop research questions related to topics in elite behaviour and political decision-making. Students then will design a survey instrument to answer this question. This can be done individually or in groups. The final paper expands on the proposal and instrument. The research paper's date is set by the department.

Please attach a statement of [academic integrity](#) to the paper and submit both as a pdf with the following naming convention (LastName-TypeOfPaper.pdf). If you employ artificial intelligence, such as ChatGPT, in the writing process, indicate its usage with a citation and URL documenting the conversation. [Mollick and Mollick \(2023\)](#) offer good guidance on usage.

4 Readings

The course draws on readings published in academic books and journals. All materials are available electronically through ILIAS - the university's e-learning platform.

5 Class Schedule

Session 1: Introduction

Who are political elites and how can we study them?

Session 2: Studying political elites

Who (actually) governs? Is power in democratic systems concentrated in a small group of individuals or distributed broadly? How can we study what political elites do and think?

Kenneth Prewitt and Alan Stone. 1993. The Ruling Elites. In *Power in Modern Societies*, edited by Marvin E. Olsen and Martin N. Marger, 125–136. Boulder [u.a.]: Westview Press. Pp. 125-136.

Robert A. Dahl. 1967. *Who governs? Democracy and Power in an American city*. 10th ed. New Haven: Yale University Press. Chapters 1 and 8.

Joshua D. Kertzer and Jonathan Renshon. 2022. Experiments and Surveys on Political Elites. *Annual Review of Political Science* 25:529–550. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051120-013649>

Session 3: Politicians' motivations and roles

What drives politicians' behaviour? Which roles do politicians adopt either as legislators and representatives?

David R. Mayhew. 197. *Congress: The Electoral Connection*. 2nd ed. New Haven; London: Yale University Press. Chapter 1

Donald D. Searing. 1991. Roles, Rules, and Rationality in the New Institutionalism. *American Political Science Review* 85 (4): 1239–1260. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1963944>

Kaare Strøm. 2012. Roles as Strategies. Towards a Logic of Legislative Behavior. In *Parliamentary Roles in Modern Legislatures*, edited by Magnus Blomgren and Olivier Rozenberg, 85–100. London [u.a.]: Routledge

Session 4: Running for office

What is political ambition and what are the supply and demand effects related to ambition? How does candidate selection work and what are its consequences?

Ernesto Dal Bó et al. 2017. Who Becomes A Politician? *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 132 (4): 1877–1914. <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjx016>

Saad Gulzar and Muhammad Yasir Khan. 2024. Good Politicians: Experimental Evidence on Motivations for Political Candidacy and Government Performance. *Review of Economic Studies* 00:1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1093/restud/rdae026>

Richard L. Fox and Jennifer L. Lawless. 2014. Uncovering the Origins of the Gender Gap in Political Ambition. *American Political Science Review* 108 (3): 499–519. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055414000227>

Session 5: Representation

Should political elites represent their constituency descriptively and substantively? Do they?

Jane Mansbridge. 1999. Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent "Yes". *The Journal of Politics* 61 (3): 628–657. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2647821>

Raghavendra Chattopadhyay and Esther Duflo. 2004. Women as Policy Makers: Evidence from a Randomized Policy Experiment in India. *Econometrica* 72 (5): 1409–1443. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0262.2004.00539.x>

Stefanie Bailer et al. 2022. The Diminishing Value of Representing the Disadvantaged: Between Group Representation and Individual Career Paths. *British Journal of Political Science* 52 (2): 535–552. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123420000642>

Session 6: Biased decision-making

What role do information and cognitive biases play in making decisions about public policy?

Lior Sheffer et al. 2018. Nonrepresentative Representatives: An Experimental Study of the Decision Making of Elected Politicians. *American Political Science Review* 112 (2): 302–321. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055417000569>

Chris Butler and Barbara Vis. 2023. Heuristics and policy responsiveness: a research agenda. *European Political Science* 22:202–227. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-022-00394-6>

Julie Sevenans et al. 2023. Projection in Politicians' Perceptions of Public Opinion. *Political Psychology* 44 (6): 1259–1279. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12900>

Session 7: Politicians' beliefs about voters

How do politicians build their image of the electorate? Are politicians democratic realists?

Robert Rohrschneider. 1994. Report from the laboratory: the influence of institutions on political elites' democratic values in germany. *The American Political Science Review* 88 (4): 927–941. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2082717>

Miguel M. Pereira. 2021. Understanding and Reducing Biases in Elite Beliefs About the Electorate. *American Political Science Review* 115 (4): 1308–1324. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305542100037X>

Jack Lucas et al. n.d. Politicians' Theories of Voting Behavior. *American Political Science Review*

Session 8: Responsiveness

How and when do politicians respond to public opinion? How do parties constrain responsiveness? What explains inequalities in constituency service?

Patrik Öhberg and Elin Naurin. 2016. Party-constrained Policy Responsiveness: A Survey Experiment on Politicians' Response to Citizen-initiated Contacts. *British Journal of Political Science* 46 (4): 785–797. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123415000010>

Peter Thisted Dinesen, Malte Dahl, and Mikkel Schiøler. 2021. When Are Legislators Responsive to Ethnic Minorities? Testing the Role of Electoral Incentives and Candidate Selection for Mitigating Ethnocentric Responsiveness. *American Political Science Review* 115 (2): 450–466. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420001070>

Samuel Brielmaier and Christian Breunig. 2023. Discrimination by Elected Officials against Disadvantaged Group: A meta-analysis. *Working Paper presented at EPSA*

Session 9: Presentation of research proposals

Session 10: Unequal Responsiveness

Are politicians more or less responsive to some segments of society than to others? What can be done about unequal responsiveness?

Mikael Persson and Anders Sundell. 2024. The Rich Have a Slight Edge: Evidence from Comparative Data on Income-Based Inequality in Policy Congruence. *British Journal of Political Science* 54 (2): 514–525. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123423000066>

Julie Sevenans et al. n.d. Are Poor People Poorly Heard? Representational Inequality in Politicians' Perceptions of Public Opinion. *European Journal of Political Research*

Maria Carreri. 2021. Can Good Politicians Compensate for Bad Institutions? Evidence from an Original Survey of Italian Mayors. *The Journal of Politics* 83 (4): 1229–1245. <https://doi.org/10.1086/715062>

Session 11: Information about public policy

Where do politicians get information from? Do they want it and use it?

Adam Zelizer. 2019. Is Position-Taking Contagious? Evidence of Cue-Taking from Two Field Experiments in a State Legislature. *American Political Science Review* 113 (2): 340–352. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055419000078>

Martin Baekgaard et al. 2019. The Role of Evidence in Politics: Motivated Reasoning and Persuasion among Politicians. *British Journal of Political Science* 49 (3): 1117–1140. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123417000084>

Pamela Ban, Ju Yeon Park, and Hye Young You. 2023. How Are Politicians Informed? Witnesses and Information Provision in Congress. *American Political Science Review* 117 (1): 122–139. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422000405>

Session 12: Political leadership

How can political elites respond to changes in party politics? How can they be leaders?

Peter Mair. 2013. *Ruling the Void: the Hollowing of Western Democracy*. London; New York: Verso. Chapter 3.

John S. Ahlquist and Margaret Levi. 2011. Leadership: What It Means, What It Does, and What We Want to Know About It. *Annual Review of Political Science* 14:1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-042409-152654>

Session 13: Presentation of survey instruments

Session 14: Presentation of survey instruments

References

- Ahlquist, John S., and Margaret Levi. 2011. Leadership: What It Means, What It Does, and What We Want to Know About It. *Annual Review of Political Science* 14:1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-042409-152654>.
- Baekgaard, Martin, Julian Christensen, Casper Mondrup Dahlmann, Asbjørn Mathiasen, and Niels Bjørn Grund Petersen. 2019. The Role of Evidence in Politics: Motivated Reasoning and Persuasion among Politicians. *British Journal of Political Science* 49 (3): 1117–1140. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123417000084>.
- Bailer, Stefanie, Christian Breunig, Nathalie Giger, and Andreas M. Wüst. 2022. The Diminishing Value of Representing the Disadvantaged: Between Group Representation and Individual Career Paths. *British Journal of Political Science* 52 (2): 535–552. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123420000642>.
- Ban, Pamela, Ju Yeon Park, and Hye Young You. 2023. How Are Politicians Informed? Witnesses and Information Provision in Congress. *American Political Science Review* 117 (1): 122–139. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422000405>.
- Brielmaier, Samuel, and Christian Breunig. 2023. Discrimination by Elected Officials against Disadvantaged Group: A meta-analysis. *Working Paper presented at EPSA*.
- Butler, Chris, and Barbara Vis. 2023. Heuristics and policy responsiveness: a research agenda. *European Political Science* 22:202–227. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-022-00394-6>.
- Carreri, Maria. 2021. Can Good Politicians Compensate for Bad Institutions? Evidence from an Original Survey of Italian Mayors. *The Journal of Politics* 83 (4): 1229–1245. <https://doi.org/10.1086/715062>.
- Chattopadhyay, Raghabendra, and Esther Dufo. 2004. Women as Policy Makers: Evidence from a Randomized Policy Experiment in India. *Econometrica* 72 (5): 1409–1443. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0262.2004.00539.x>.
- Dahl, Robert A. 1967. *Who governs? Democracy and Power in an American city*. 10th ed. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Dal Bó, Ernesto, Frederico Finan, Olle Folke, Torsten Persson, and Johanna Rickne. 2017. Who Becomes A Politician? *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 132 (4): 1877–1914. <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjx016>.
- Dinesen, Peter Thisted, Malte Dahl, and Mikkel Schiøler. 2021. When Are Legislators Responsive to Ethnic Minorities? Testing the Role of Electoral Incentives and Candidate Selection for Mitigating Ethnocentric Responsiveness. *American Political Science Review* 115 (2): 450–466. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420001070>.
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- Lucas, Jack, Lior Sheffer, Peter Loewen, Stefaan Walgrave, Karolin Soontjens, Eran Amsalem, Stefanie Bailer, et al. n.d. Politicians' Theories of Voting Behavior. *American Political Science Review*.
- Mair, Peter. 2013. *Ruling the Void: the Hollowing of Western Democracy*. London; New York: Verso.

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- Rohrschneider, Robert. 1994. Report from the laboratory: the influence of institutions on political elites' democratic values in germany. *The American Political Science Review* 88 (4): 927–941. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2082717>.
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- Sevenans, Julie, Stefaan Walgrave, Arno Jansen, Karolin Soontjens, Stefanie Bailer, Nathalie Brack, Christian Breunig, et al. 2023. Projection in Politicians' Perceptions of Public Opinion. *Political Psychology* 44 (6): 1259–1279. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12900>.
- Sheffer, Lior, Peter John Loewen, Stuart Soroka, Stefaan Walgrave, and Tamir Sheafer. 2018. Nonrepresentative Representatives: An Experimental Study of the Decision Making of Elected Politicians. *American Political Science Review* 112 (2): 302–321. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055417000569>.
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- Zelizer, Adam. 2019. Is Position-Taking Contagious? Evidence of Cue-Taking from Two Field Experiments in a State Legislature. *American Political Science Review* 113 (2): 340–352. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055419000078>.