

# Challenges to Democracy

## Introduction

Mirko Wegemann

Universität Münster  
Institut für Politikwissenschaft

15 October 2025

## About me

### Mirko Wegemann (he/him)

- Since October 2024: Research Associate in the Department of Comparative Politics (Prof. Daniel Bischof)
- Previously: PhD Candidate at the European University Institute in Florence
- Research interests
  - Political parties
  - Political communication
  - Political culture of gender roles

# Tell me a bit about yourself...

A small survey:

<https://www.menti.com/alpf6hxcg7qo>



# Learning Outcomes

- Understanding of how we can define and measure democracy and backsliding

# Learning Outcomes

- Understanding of how we can define and measure democracy and backsliding
- Overview of causes for democratic backsliding and potential solutions

# Learning Outcomes

- Understanding of how we can define and measure democracy and backsliding
- Overview of causes for democratic backsliding and potential solutions
- Developing your own original research questions

# Learning Outcomes

- Understanding of how we can define and measure democracy and backsliding
- Overview of causes for democratic backsliding and potential solutions
- Developing your own original research questions
- Analysing current trends in democratization and democratic quality

# Timetable I

---

Week 1 Introduction

---

**Block 1: Basics**

Week 2 Research Design

Week 3 What is Democracy?

Week 4 Democracy - A Winning Formula?

Week 5 How to Analyse Democracies

---

**Block 2: Challenges**

---

Week 6 Stretching the Rules of the Game

Week 7 The Far-Right

---

## Timetable II

---

Week 8 Democratic Norms and Affective Polarization

Week 9 Global Crises

---

### Block 3: Solutions

---

Week 10 Performance and Resilience

Week 11 Participation

Week 12 Hansaforum

---

### Block 4: Presentations

---

Week 13 Student Presentations I

Week 14 Student Presentations II

Week 15 No Session

---

This is a *Lektürekurs*, every week we will read at least two readings (except for session 5, 8, 12-14).

## Course Infrastructure

- Communication and literature via Learnweb (please check your mails, password: **ctd\_25**)
  - Literature research via ULB Münster, Google Scholar, or Web of Science
  - Access to most articles via the WiFi network of the University of Münster, from home via VPN
  - For an intro into the university library: Library Audiotour
- Slides on my website

# Requirements I

## Workload

*Workload is always an approximation but the regulations for evaluation foresee a workload of about 150 hours<sup>1</sup>*

Participation in the course:

*30 hours*

Preparation and follow-up of the course + oral exam

$$150 - 30 = 120 \text{ hours}$$

---

<sup>1</sup> regulations

## Requirements II

- Regular attendance and participation
- Prior engagement with the session literature
- Submit two questions on the literature in two different sessions
- Podcast project
- Term paper on your own research project

## Requirements III

- *Studienleistungen*: Questions about the literature **and** podcast project
- *Prüfungsleistung*: Term paper

# Partial requirements 1 |

Engagement with session literature and questions

For all sessions

- read and engage with the session literature in advance
- make notes
- raise questions whenever something remained unclear

# Partial requirements 1 II

Engagement with session literature and questions

For two sessions of your choice

- develop two questions on the session literature (on one or more readings)
- questions should go beyond clarification questions; rather questions about the consistency of an argument, the chosen design or possible implications of the research
- each of the questions should be briefly elaborated
- submit on **Monday, 23:59 before the session** > late submissions cannot be accepted

# Partial requirements 1 III

Engagement with session literature and questions

- in the session, we'll often do group work on the readings in which you serve as a moderator for your own question (so you need to show up!)
- submission not possible for sessions 1-2, 5, 12-14

# Partial requirements 2 |

## Podcast project

You are asked to prepare a small podcast project in a group of 4-5 people, the deadline is 1 December

- in week 5, we will discuss how you can trace patterns of democratic development (e.g., how do different components of democratic quality develop?)
- you are asked to develop a potential research question on democracy, collect some macro-level evidence and then survey citizens on the street about their opinion on your research inquiry
- prepare either an audio file (like a podcast) or a presentation of max. **10 minutes**
- afterwards, we will discuss your projects and the experiences you made (week 8)

# Partial requirements 3 |

## Term paper

- if you need to submit a *Prüfungsleistung*, you are asked to submit a term paper by **March 31, 2026** at the latest
- length: **4,500 words**  $\pm$  10 percent (excluding table of contents, bibliography, and cover page)
- Choose your own topic, develop research hypotheses and propose an empirical design
- Standard format of an empirical paper: Introduction (incl. research question and motivation), literature review, theory section (incl. hypothesis development), case selection and method, conclusion but **no results**
- Pay attention to the correct citation style (guidelines, for example, here)
- Submission as a .pdf-file

# Plagiarism I

*"The act of plagiarism is fulfilled when in written study and examination performances "texts of third parties are taken in whole or in part, literally or nearly literally, and presented as one's own scholarly work." This practice "not only contradicts good scientific practice, but it is also a form of intellectual theft and thus a violation of copyright."*

*IfPol: Resolution by the German Association of University Professors and Lecturers*

## Plagiarism II

There are different **types of plagiarism**

- Plagiarism of whole work
- Citation without proper referencing
- Translation plagiarism
- Self plagiarism
- Ghostwriting

In case there is any suspicion of plagiarism, we will check the submission with the plagiarism detection *Turnitin*.

## On the use of AI I

AI tools have facilitated various aspects of our lives. Can we use them in this seminar? **Yes.**

- be transparent about the use of AI
- *Be the human in the loop:* AI output depends on its input; bad input = bad output
- if AI is hallucinating, you'll be responsible for it
- I cannot accept output which is entirely written by AI
- useful tools:
  - **Chat:** Uni-GPT, Mistral AI, Duck AI
  - **Research:** Elicit, Consensus, Connected Papers, Research Rabbit

## On the use of AI II

And, in general, in and outside the seminar:

- Take an AI vacation day. Before prompting anything to AI, how would you approach the research topic? Read the literature, write down notes, sketch a potential research question and your expectations about it.

# Inclusion

We want to establish an open and inclusive culture in this seminar.

- Less relevant in English, but gender-sensitive language is used whenever possible in seminar communication
  - Studies on why it is useful to go beyond the generic masculine: Pérez and Tavits (2019) and Vervecken et al. (2013)
- You are welcome to share your pronouns.
- There is no place for racism, sexism, homo- or transphobia here.
- We learn together: all types questions are legitimate and welcomed, and knowledge gaps are no reason to feel ashamed.

## Contact me

- After the seminar or during office hours (by prior email registration)
- Email: [m.wegemann@uni-muenster.de](mailto:m.wegemann@uni-muenster.de)
- Address  
Institute of Political Science  
Department: Comparative Politics  
Room: 223, Scharnhorststr. 100  
48151 Münster
- Feedback via LاماPoll or by email

# Any further questions?

# What's happening around us? |

## On the one hand...

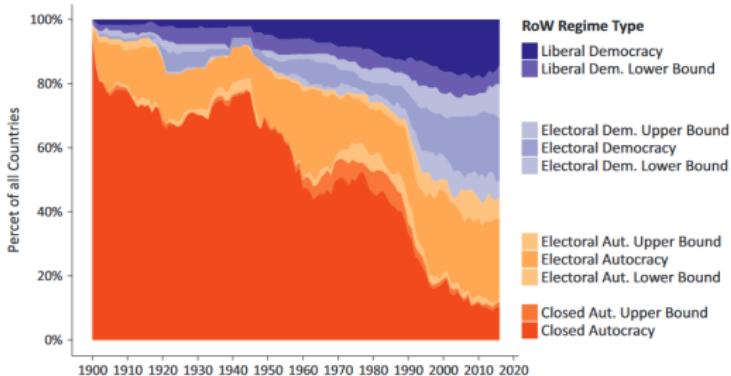


Figure: Regimes of the World 1900-2016 (Lührmann et al. 2018, p. 67)

Democracy is still a very popular regime type.

# What's happening around us?

On the other hand...



Figure: Recent attacks on democratic institutions

But it has become threatened in recent years.

# And how are people conceiving it? I



Figure: Majority of US citizens believe that democracy is under threat (CBS News)

Citizens are often aware of the threat.

## And how are people conceiving it? II

The root of the problem is, however, very differently defined.

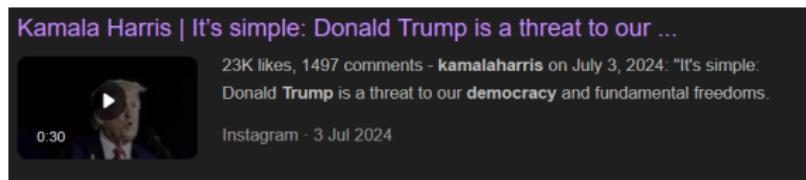


Figure: Harris' on the Risk for Democracy under Trump (Link)

## And how are people conceiving it? III



Figure: 'Is Trump a Threat to Democracy?' asked to MAGA-Supporters (Link)

## And how are people conceiving it? IV

...and while many share the perception, some wish for a different regime

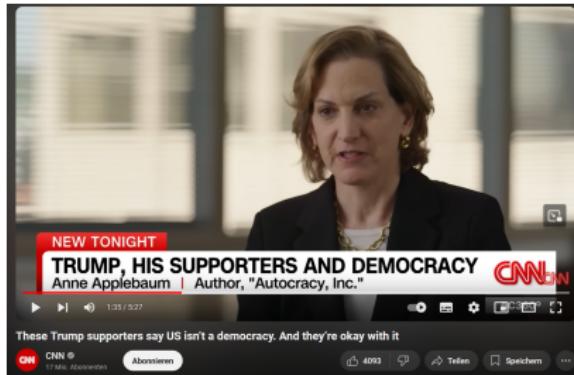


Figure: Is America a Democracy? (Link)

## What will help us to understand the current situation?

- Democracy is not a static concept, its conceptualization evolves
- Democratic quality is gradual, not dichotomous
- Challenges to democracy have different origins
- Democracies can be further developed

## A working definition of democracy

- dichotomous vs. gradual definitions
- minimalist vs. maximalist definitions
- electoral vs. liberal democracies
- tensions between democratic principles, like freedom vs. equality

# An Insight into (some) Challenges to Democracy

After we have established some common understanding of how democracy is defined and how it has evolved, we will look at potential causes for democratic backsliding

- challenges from within:
  - supply side: for example, far-right actors
  - demand side: affective polarization, eroding norms
- challenges from the outside: global crises (like climate change)

# Strengthening democracy

Several possible approaches

- militant democracy
- performance?
- bolstering support for democracy (e.g., better access to more meaningful political participation)?

## To prepare for next week... I

- Reading of the syllabus
  - Is there anything missing?
  - Do you have additional literature suggestions?
  - Do you have any further questions about the seminar requirements?
- on Learnweb: choose sessions to submit your questions

## To prepare for next week... II

- **Main reading:**

- King, G., Keohane, R. O., & Verba, S. (1994). *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research, New Edition*. Princeton University Press – Chapter 1

- **Complementary readings**

- Powner, L. C. (2014, November 4). *Empirical Research and Writing: A Political Science Student's Practical Guide*. CQ Press
- Kellstedt, P. M., & Whitten, G. D. (2018, July 26). *The Fundamentals of Political Science Research* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108131704>

Thank you for your attention!  
Any further questions?

## Literature I

Kellstedt, P. M., & Whitten, G. D. (2018, July 26). *The Fundamentals of Political Science Research* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108131704>

King, G., Keohane, R. O., & Verba, S. (1994). *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research, New Edition*. Princeton University Press.

Lührmann, A., Tannenberg, M., & Lindberg, S. I. (2018). Regimes of the World (RoW): Opening New Avenues for the Comparative Study of Political Regimes. *Politics and Governance*, 6(1), 60–77.  
<https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v6i1.1214>

## Literature II

- Pérez, E. O., & Tavits, M. (2019). Language Influences Public Attitudes toward Gender Equality. *The Journal of Politics*, 81(1), 81–93. <https://doi.org/10.1086/700004>
- Powner, L. C. (2014, November 4). *Empirical Research and Writing: A Political Science Student's Practical Guide*. CQ Press.
- Vervecken, D., Hannover, B., & Wolter, I. (2013). Changing (S)expectations: How gender fair job descriptions impact children's perceptions and interest regarding traditionally male occupations. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 82(3), 208–220. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2013.01.008>