

Winter term 2025/2026

Challenges to Democracy

Version: September 25, 2025

Seminar Date and Format

The seminar is scheduled every week on Wednesday from 14:00 to 16:00 (c.t.). The first session takes place on 15 October 2025 and the final session will be held on 28 January 2026. The seminar is open to undergraduate students, the course language is English. The seminar follows the form of a ‘Lektürekurs’ which is heavy on literature (every week two empirical articles). No prior knowledge is needed. Credits can only be granted if participants read and engage with the readings before the seminar and pass the seminar requirements.

Course Overview

The seminar seeks to analyse the current challenges democratic regimes face. It is structured along four blocks. In the first block, we will learn about the essential features of a democracy and discover what shapes the quality of democracy. In a second block, we will engage with different empirical analyses of the current state of democratization and democratic systems. We will zero in on how institutions are sidelined; how actors, such as far-right parties, challenge democracies; and how democracy is threatened by crises. In the third block, we will look at potential solutions and scenarios of how democracy could cope with the current challenges. In the final block, a practitioner will visit the class and discuss their experience with democratic innovations before students get the opportunity to present research ideas for their term paper.

Learning Outcomes

At the end of the course, you have been introduced to key concepts in democratization and democratic backsliding. You will learn about how democracies are defined and what determines the quality of democracies. Empirically, you will have acquired an understanding of the current state of democratic systems around the world. Further, you will have learnt about different threats to democracy – both coming from the inside and outside. Finally, you will be able to critically evaluate potential solutions to the problems democracies are facing. Through reading and application, you will get a glimpse on different methodological approaches to assess democratic quality and its challenges. Further, you will have learned how to collect, analyse, summarise and present your own empirical data.

The goal of the individual sessions is to offer you different perspectives on how to study democracy. While being exposed to these different sub-dimensions will give you a basic insight into the discipline, what you will have learnt is invariably linked to your own interests, so your input in the seminar shapes your individual learning outcomes.

Requirements

The amount of credits granted depends on the programme you are enrolled in. Keep in mind that each ECTS amounts to about 30 hours of working time. The final mark is composed of the following components. A successful seminar participation requires the following tasks to fulfil (estimated hours based on $7 \text{ ECTS} * 30 = 210$)

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|---|-------------|
| • regular attendance and active participation in discussion | 18 hours |
| • questions on three empirical articles | } 192 hours |
| • podcast project | |
| • term paper (graded) | |

Attendance and Questions on the Readings

Students should regularly attend the seminar. In case you miss a session, please inform me about your absence. Attendance requires active participation in class which presumes careful reading of the literature. This is a reading-intensive seminar; each session is based on at least two readings. The readings are usually below 50 pages but require a thorough read.

When reading the empirical paper: There are different reading techniques but most require multiple runs for a paper (cf. Keshav). You should always take notes – either during or directly after reading the text. Focus on the core message of the author. Try to identify the puzzle and the question an author presents, their arguments, and the general methodological approach (for a first read, do not get lost on details!). Then always ask yourself whether you can follow the argumentation. On which point do you disagree and why? Once you are able to summarize the core idea of a paper within two minutes, you are ready to go. If you have problems in understanding the text, write them down and we'll clarify them in class.

For two sessions of your choice (except for weeks 1-2, 6, 12-14), you are asked to write down three different questions about the readings. These questions must be submitted by Monday, 23:59, in the preceding week of the respective session. The questions can be informed by the questions you had on the readings but should not be comprehension questions about the text (these can and should be raised separately in class). For instance, while your written questions should not ask what the main results of the article are, you could question the consistency of a theoretical argument made in the paper, the fit between theory and research design or the wider implications of a research finding for a democracy, the policy-making process etc. Each question should clearly relate to an article which was assigned for the class.

Podcast project

In small groups of 4-5 people, you are asked to work on a small podcast project. The podcast should be no longer than 10 minutes in length. Everyone in the group needs to participate – at the end of the project, you need to break down who did what. This implies that some of you may focus on the empirical analysis, others may interview people on the streets and others create the final project/presentation. You can record citizens and yourself with your mobile device. If you want, you can edit the recordings using Shotcut, a free editing software offered by the University of Münster (here's a short tutorial). However, it is totally fine just to present your empirical findings and play supporting interviews in the session. In other words, do not worry about the technical realization of your podcast.

The aim of the project is to develop a question about the quality of democracy. We will initiate this in the third session when we talk about different indices to measure the state of

democracy. The session (on 12 November 2025) will give you additional information on how to collect empirical evidence on the state of democracy in a country. In addition to your prepared information on a certain aspect of democracies, you are asked to go on the streets of Münster surveying citizens about their experiences with democracy. What you want to ask them is entirely up to you. Some questions which may guide your podcast could be:

- What does *democracy* mean to you?
- Do you remember an event in your life which felt like lively democracy?
- When you think about the future of democracy, what comes into your mind?
- Are there certain things you would like to change about how our democracy currently works?
- Do you think there are any threats to our current democracy, if yes, which ones?

These questions should be tailored to the research question you choose.

The podcast need to be submitted by Monday, 01 December, and will be presented in the first half of our session in week 8.

Research Paper

In case you need a grade, you are supposed to draft a research paper on one of the topics we covered (6,000 words \pm 10%, font size 11/12, 1.5 spacing, justified text, margins 2.5cm). Please list the number of words on your title page. The research paper is due 31 March.

In your term paper, you are asked to apply the knowledge you have learnt in previous sessions. The research paper should follow the basic structure of an academic paper. Your academic paper should start with a research puzzle (some empirical phenomenon which cannot be explained by existing work), introduce the specific research question and motivate why it is important to examine this question. You should then review the existing literature on which base you develop your own theoretical framework formulating research hypotheses. You are required to test this argument empirically. In the data and methods section, you are expected to describe your analytic approach thoroughly before presenting your results and concluding with the overall implications for your research question.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism and ghostwriting are forbidden. Written assignments may be checked for plagiarism using the plagiarism software Turnitin.

Students are required to use referenced work in their assignments with proper documentation and citation. To facilitate the citation workflow and prepare for future assignments in the programme, students are encouraged to use reference software. Students can use the open-source software Zotero free of charge. When in doubt about proper citation, please refer to the Leitlinien zum wissenschaftlichen Arbeiten provided by the Department of Political Science.

You need to be transparent about the usage of AI tools at the end of your submitted writings (Which tools did you use? Which prompts did you issue?). AI can be a helpful tool for coding, language editing and information retrieval. Still, please keep in mind that you are expected to submit original work which is based on your *own* ideas. Thus, a term paper written by AI cannot be accepted.

Inclusiveness

To promote inclusiveness, the seminar instructor uses gender-inclusive language (on why this may be helpful: Pérez and Tavits 2019; Vervecken, Hannover, and Wolter 2013). Participants are invited to share their pronouns with the class. For a dynamic feedback culture, students are encouraged to regularly submit (anonymous) feedback via Google Forms (link tba) or by sending me a mail.

Readings and Timetable

Week	Date	Topic	Main Readings	Complementary Readings
1	15 October 2025	Introduction	No reading required	
Block 1: Basics				
2	22 October 2025	Research Design	King, Keohane, and Verba (1994)	Powner (2014) Kellstedt and Whitten (2018), Ch. 3
3	29 October 2025	What is Democracy?	Merkel (2004) Munck (2016)	Sartori (1970)
4	05 November 2025	Democracy - A Winning Formula?	Fukuyama (1989) Boese et al. (2022)	Wuttke, Gavras, and Schoen (2022)
5	12 November 2025	How to Analyse Democracies	No readings required	
Block 2: Challenges				
6	19 November 2025	Stretching the Rules of the Game	Bermeo (2016) Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018)	Poblete-Cazenave (2024)
7	26 November 2025	The Far-Right	Dipoppa, Grossman, and Zonszein (2023) Blasingame et al. (2024)	Grumbach (2023) Haas et al. (2024) Mudde (2019)
8	03 December 2025	Democratic Norms and Affective Polarization	Graham and Svolik (2020)	Broockman, Kalla, and Westwood (2023) Cohen et al. (2023) Badrinathan, Chauchard, and Siddiqui (2024)
9	10 December 2025	Global Crises	Mittiga (2022) Cerkez (2024)	
Block 3: Solutions				
10	17 December 2025	Performance and Resilience	Magalhães (2014) Rovny (2023)	
11	07 January 2025	Participation	Smith (2009) Simonovits, Kézdi, and Kardos (2018)	Flanigan et al. (2021) Kalla and Broockman (2020)
12	14 January 2026	Hansaforum		
13	21 January 2026	Student Presentations I	No reading required	
14	28 January 2026	Student Presentations II	No reading required	
15	04 February 2026	No Session		

Introductory Readings

The following readings are not compulsory. However, they can guide you through the process of writing and provide you with a broader perspective on the future of democracy.

On the comparative method:

1. **King G, Keohane RO, and Verba S** (1994) *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research, New Edition*. Princeton University Press. 266 pp.
2. **Cunningham S** (2021) *Causal Inference: The Mixtape*. Yale University Press. DOI: 10.2307/j.ctv1c29t27

On democracy:

1. **Levitsky S and Ziblatt D** (2018) *How Democracies Die*. 1st ed. New York, NY: Crown. 320 pp.
2. **Nai A and Maier J** (2024) Introduction: Investigating Dark Politicians. *Dark Politics: The Personality of Politicians and the Future of Democracy*. Ed. by A Nai and J Maier. Oxford University Press, 0. DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197681756.003.0001
3. **Przeworski A** (2019) *Crises of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: 10.1017/9781108671019

On writing:

1. **Powner LC** (2014) *Empirical Research and Writing: A Political Science Student's Practical Guide*. CQ Press. 321 pp.

A tutorial about R

1. **Schröder P, Kiemes L, and Wuttke A** (2024) *R for Social Science Data Analysis - R for Social Scientists*

Week 1: Introduction [15 October 2025]

There is no need to prepare anything from your side. We will talk about the structure of the seminar, expectations and your pre-knowledge on the issue.

Week 2: Research Design [22 October 2025]

In this session, we will discuss the method of comparison in political science and explore key elements of political science literature.

Main readings

1. **King G, Keohane RO, and Verba S** (1994) *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research, New Edition*. Princeton University Press. 266 pp., Ch. 1

Complementary readings

1. **Powner LC** (2014) *Empirical Research and Writing: A Political Science Student's Practical Guide*. CQ Press. 321 pp.
2. **Kellstedt PM and Whitten GD** (2018) *The Fundamentals of Political Science Research*. 3rd ed. Cambridge University Press. DOI: 10.1017/9781108131704

Week 3: What is Democracy? [29 October 2025]

In this session, we will talk about different conceptualizations of democracy, laying out the foundation for the subsequent sessions in which we will always come back to what democracy really means.

Compulsory readings

1. **Merkel W** (2004) Embedded and Defective Democracies. *Democratization* **11** (5), 33–58. DOI: 10.1080/13510340412331304598
2. **Munck GL** (2016) What Is Democracy? A Reconceptualization of the Quality of Democracy. *Democratization* **23** (1), 1–26. DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2014.918104

Suggested reading

1. **Sartori G** (1970) Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics*. *American Political Science Review* **64** (4), 1033–1053. DOI: 10.2307/1958356

Week 4: Democracy - A Winning Formula? [05 November 2025]

In this session, we will look at different indices measuring the quality of democracies. Please bring your laptops.

Compulsory readings

1. **Fukuyama F** (1989) The End of History? *The National Interest* (16), 3–18. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184> (visited on 08/05/2024)
2. **Boese VA et al.** (2022) State of the World 2021: Autocratization Changing Its Nature? *Democratization* **29** (6), 983–1013. DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2022.2069751

Optional: **Wuttke A, Gavras K, and Schoen H** (2022) Have Europeans Grown Tired of Democracy? New Evidence from Eighteen Consolidated Democracies, 1981–2018. *British Journal of Political Science* **52** (1), 416–428. DOI: 10.1017/S0007123420000149

Suggested readings on the datasets

1. **Lührmann A, Tannenberg M, and Lindberg SI** (2018) Regimes of the World (RoW): Opening New Avenues for the Comparative Study of Political Regimes. *Politics and Governance* **6** (1), 60–77. DOI: 10.17645/pag.v6i1.1214
2. **Holmberg S, Rothstein B, and Nasiritousi N** (2009) Quality of Government: What You Get. *Annual Review of Political Science* **12** (1), 135–161. DOI: 10.1146/annurev-polisci-100608-104510

Week 5: How to Analyse Democracies [12 November 2025]

In this session, we will learn about different data sources that can be used to study the current state of democracies. No readings are required. Instead, **bring your laptops with you.**

Week 6: Stretching the Rules of the Game [19 November 2025]

Democracies are safeguarded by institutions, ensuring that the rule of law is implemented. But what happens if these are sidelined by its enemies? We will discuss theories of democratic backsliding and how informal norms can be weaponized against democracy.

Compulsory readings

1. **Bermeo N** (2016) On Democratic Backsliding. *Journal of Democracy* **27** (1), 5–19. DOI: 10.1353/jod.2016.0012
2. **Levitsky S and Ziblatt D** (2018) *How Democracies Die*. 1st ed. New York, NY: Crown. 320 pp. – Chapter 1

or a corresponding podcast on the book:

Abou-Chadi T (2020) *Daniel Ziblatt. How Democracies Die*. URL: <https://soundcloud.com/user-467531770/episode-12-daniel-ziblatt-how-democracies-die>

Optional: **Poblete-Cazenave R** (2024) Do Politicians in Power Receive Special Treatment in Courts? Evidence from India. *American Journal of Political Science* **n/a** (n/a) (). DOI: 10.1111/ajps.12804

Week 7: Culture, Grievances and the Far-Right [26 November 2025]

Societies are transforming, and the consequences are often attributed to the rise of a major challenger of liberal democracy, the far right. In this session, we will discuss how economic and cultural factors can contribute to the electoral success of the far right, and zero in on Poland, a country in which the far-right has gradually eroded democracy.

Compulsory readings

1. **Dipoppa G, Grossman G, and Zonszein S** (2023) Locked Down, Lashing Out: COVID-19 Effects on Asian Hate Crimes in Italy. *The Journal of Politics* **85** (2), 389–404. DOI: 10.1086/722346
2. **Blasingame EN et al.** (2024) How the Trump Administration’s Quota Policy Transformed Immigration Judging. *American Political Science Review* **118** (4), 1688–1703. DOI: 10.1017/S0003055423001028

Suggested readings

1. **Grumbach JM** (2023) Laboratories of Democratic Backsliding. *American Political Science Review* **117** (3), 967–984. DOI: 10.1017/S0003055422000934
2. **Haas VI et al.** (2024) The Electoral Effects of State-Sponsored Homophobia
3. A general overview tracing the evolution of far-right:
Mudde C (2019) *The Far Right Today*. John Wiley & Sons. 129 pp.
4. More on the relation between economic grievances and the far-right:
Baccini L and Weymouth S (2021) Gone For Good: Deindustrialization, White Voter Backlash, and US Presidential Voting. *American Political Science Review* **115** (2), 550–567. DOI: 10.1017/S0003055421000022
5. More on cultural grievances and democratization:
Leipziger LE (2024) Ethnic Inequality, Democratic Transitions, and Democratic Breakdowns: Investigating an Asymmetrical Relationship. *The Journal of Politics* **86** (1), 291–304. DOI: 10.1086/726949
6. More on radical right parties in (local power):
Paxton F (2023) *Restrained Radicals: Populist Radical Right Parties in Local Government*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: 10.1017/9781009379069
7. Podcast on the Mainstreaming of the Radical Right:
Mudde C (2022) *Aurelien Mondon on the Mainstreaming of the Far Right*. URL: <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1134467/episodes/10821231>

Week 8: Democratic Norms and Affective Polarization [3 December 2025]

This session is split into two parts: in the first 45 minutes, you will present your podcast projects to each other. Afterwards, we will talk about the how affective polarization influences democratic norms.

Compulsory readings

1. **Graham MH and Svolik MW** (2020) Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States. *American Political Science Review* **114** (2), 392–409. DOI: 10.1017/S0003055420000052

Optional readings

1. **Broockman DE, Kalla JL, and Westwood SJ** (2023) Does Affective Polarization Undermine Democratic Norms or Accountability? Maybe Not. *American Journal of Political Science* **67** (3), 808–828. DOI: 10.1111/ajps.12719
2. **Cohen MJ et al.** (2023) Winners' Consent? Citizen Commitment to Democracy When Illiberal Candidates Win Elections. *American Journal of Political Science* **67** (2), 261–276. DOI: 10.1111/ajps.12690
3. **Badrinathan S, Chauchard S, and Siddiqui N** (2024) Misinformation and Support for Vigilantism: An Experiment in India and Pakistan. *American Political Science Review*, 1–19. DOI: 10.1017/S0003055424000790

Week 9: External Challenges to Democracy – Global Crises [10 December 2025]

Crises resulting from a pandemic, economic recessions or climate change require appropriate governance. In this session, we will discuss the tension between the climate crisis and the future of democracy.

Compulsory readings

1. **Mittiga R** (2022) Political Legitimacy, Authoritarianism, and Climate Change. *American Political Science Review* **116** (3), 998–1011. DOI: 10.1017/S0003055421001301
2. **Cerkez N** (2024) Extreme Weather Events and the Support for Democracy. URL: <https://nicolascerkez.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/droughtsdemocracy-2.pdf>

Week 10: Solutions – Performance and Resilience [17 December 2025]

After having engaged with multiple threats to democracy, in the next block, we will focus on potential solutions. In the first session, we will discuss how government performance contribute to diffuse and specific support for democracy. Moreover, we will deal with the role of minorities in bolstering democratic resilience.

Compulsory readings

1. **Magalhães PC** (2014) Government Effectiveness and Support for Democracy. *European Journal of Political Research* **53** (1), 77–97. DOI: 10.1111/1475-6765.12024
2. **Rovny J** (2023) Antidote to Backsliding: Ethnic Politics and Democratic Resilience. *American Political Science Review* **117** (4), 1410–1428. DOI: 10.1017/S000305542200140X

Week 11: Solutions – Participation [07 January 2026]

In this session, we will discuss how we can boost participation, one core pillar of democracy in action, to foster trust in the democratic process. We will also prepare the next session, which is an input and discussion session with the ‘Demokratie-Update Münster’.

• Compulsory readings

- **Smith G** (2009) *Democratic Innovations: Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation*. Theories of Institutional Design. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: 10.1017/CB09780511609848 – Introduction, Chapter 1 and 3
- **Simonovits G, Kézdi G, and Kardos P** (2018) Seeing the World Through the Other’s Eye: An Online Intervention Reducing Ethnic Prejudice. *American Political Science Review* **112** (1), 186–193. DOI: 10.1017/S0003055417000478

Complementary readings

1. **Flanigan B et al.** (2021) Fair Algorithms for Selecting Citizens’ Assemblies. *Nature* **596** (7873), 548–552. DOI: 10.1038/s41586-021-03788-6
2. **Kalla JL and Broockman DE** (2020) Reducing Exclusionary Attitudes through Interpersonal Conversation: Evidence from Three Field Experiments. *American Political Science Review* **114** (2), 410–425. DOI: 10.1017/S0003055419000923

Week 12: Solutions – Field trip to ‘Demokratie-Update Münster’ [14 January 2026]

In this session, we will meet the team of the ‘Hansaforum’, a local group of volunteers who organized a local citizen project for co-determination. The session will be held during the regular hours in the seminar room.

Read more about their work here.

Week 13: Student Presentations I [21 January 2026]

At the end of the seminar, you are supposed to draft a research design in your term paper. In this session, you should pitch your preliminary idea to your class mates to obtain valuable feedback.

Week 13: Student Presentations II [28 January 2026]

At the end of the seminar, you are supposed to draft a research design in your term paper. In this session, you should pitch your preliminary idea to your class mates to obtain valuable feedback. In addition, we will do a reflection on the seminar.

References

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- Cerkez N** (2024) Extreme Weather Events and the Support for Democracy. URL: <https://nicolascerkez.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/droughtsdemocracy-2.pdf>.
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