

Winter Term 2025/26

Political Parties in a Comparative Perspective

Seminar Date and Format

Version: December 17, 2025

The seminar is scheduled every week on Wednesday from 16:00 to 18:00 (c.t.). The first session takes place on 15 October 2025 and the final session will be held on 21 January 2026. The seminar is open to undergraduate students, the course language is English. The seminar takes the form of a ‘Standardkurs’ which introduces students to different aspects in the study of political parties. 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

This seminar deals with a critical actor in representative democracies: political parties. The course is structured along four blocks. The first block introduces students to the topic. Methodologically, we will learn how to approach and critically assess the course literature. Substantively, we will discuss the role of parties in contemporary democracies. The second block is dedicated to the origins of political parties. We will explore how institutions and societal developments contribute to their emergence. In a third block, we will learn about parties’ functions in democracies. We will start with their recruiting functions and assess the implications of candidate selection methods for democratic representation. Thereafter, the following three sessions deal with parties as electoral organizations. How do parties appeal to their voters? On which agenda do they decide and which groups do they target? How do they respond to their competitors? And how do parties behave when forming (coalition) governments? We will close the block with an outlook on the current state of party democracy: are there any indications for a crisis of political parties? The final block is reserved for a

practice session on how to study political parties and a session in which students present their project ideas for the oral exam.

Learning Outcomes

The course will familiarize you with key concepts and approaches in the study of political parties. You will learn what parties are and how they are embedded in different party systems. You will acquire an understanding of the institutional and sociological determinants of parties' origins. Moreover, you will explore which tasks parties fulfill in representative democracies. More specifically, you will learn how they appeal to voters, how they recruit their political personnel and how they behave in government. Methodologically, the course will prepare you with reading academic articles and accessing data sources to examine parties. In a practical session, you will learn more about how local politics is organized.

We will deal with various aspects of political parties during the course. However, in the end, your learning outcomes heavily depend on your own interest. The writing of your essay and the choice of a topic for your oral exam will further sharpen your theoretical knowledge on the respective topic and your methodological know-how on the research design you propose.

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. For a ‘Standardkurs’ with ‘Prüfungsleistung’, regulations foresee 150 working hours.

- regular attendance and active participation in discussion 30 hours
 - questions on two empirical articles
 - connecting-thoughts essay
 - oral exam (graded) 120 hours

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 an introductory class, which reviews essentials in the study of party politics. Each week, there is one main reading everyone is supposed to read. In addition, the complementary readings contain further information that support you in writing your essay and preparing for the oral exam.

When reading the empirical paper: There are different reading techniques (cf. Keshav), often requiring several rounds. 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 in the 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 try to clarify them in class.

For two sessions of your choice (except for week 1-3, 8, 12-15), you are asked to submit two questions about the main reading. The questions need to be submitted on Monday, 23:59 in the week of the respective session. You are, in general, free to choose the sessions you would like to submit your questions on, but for a better distributions across sessions, the number of students submitting questions to a seminar session is limited to five (a distribution will take place on Learnweb after the first session of the seminar). The questions should not be about the general comprehension of the text (these can and should be raised separately in class). For instance, you should not ask what the results of the article are. Instead, your written questions should critically engage with the theoretical argument of an article, the match between theory and research design or the wider implications of a research finding for the behaviour of political parties (among other things). Each question should be followed by a brief explanation (2-3 sentences) on why this question came to your mind, i.e., why is the question important? The questions must clearly relate to the article. Please ensure your attendance in the respective session as you might need to explain your question in class and moderate the discussion.

‘Connecting-Thoughts’ Essay

During the term, you are asked to prepare one ‘connecting-thoughts’ essay that is used to stimulate in-class discussions. The session you prepare your essay on is up to you – with the exception of week 1-3, 8 and 12-15. The essays should be no longer than three pages (12

font size, 2.5cm margins, 1.5 spacing). It needs to be submitted on Monday, 23:59 in the week of the respective session, late submissions cannot be accepted and lead to a ‘fail’ on the assignment.

While you are usually only obliged to read the main reading, for the ‘connecting-thoughts’ essay, you must read at least one of the complementary readings, too. In preparation to the seminar, you are required to write a short essay on the complementary reading. The essay consists of three parts:

1. brief summary of the complementary readings
2. evaluation of its connection to the main text
3. critical assessment of its strengths and weaknesses

Summarizing the complementary reading should be no more than one page. You should introduce the article’s research question, its main argument, its methodology, before turning to the core result of the paper. Thereafter, you should highlight how the paper relates to the main reading. Which similarities and differences can you identify? Do both readings come to similar conclusions or are there different implications? Do we learn something from the complementary reading we did not know from the main one (e.g., in terms of the methods it is using or its results)? The essay ends with a critical review of the paper’s strengths and weaknesses.

During the seminar session, you are serving as the expert and moderator on the readings. This implies that you are leading a small-group discussion that deals with the other students’ questions on the paper. Moreover, you are asked to provide the class with input and a critical evaluation of the complementary reading.

Oral Exam

To obtain a grade for the seminar (so-called *Prüfungsleistung*), you will be assessed in an oral exam. The oral exam takes place in the final week of the seminar (on February 4/5).

Students can choose among sessions 4-11 to prepare a 10-15 minute presentation. In the presentation, students should pitch a research idea. In principle, the research idea should include all elements of an empirical political science article. Specifically, the presentation needs to include:

- a research question
- an outline of its theoretical and societal relevance
- a brief review of existing literature on the issue
- a theoretical argument with testable hypotheses
- a research design (data and methods) to be used to study the question
- a brief outlook on what potential implications and challenges of the study could be

Students do not need to carry out the analysis, which can however serve as inspiration for future term papers or the BA thesis. The presentation is followed by a 15-20 minute Q&A by the examiner. In the Q&A, you will be asked questions on related readings and on your research idea. Students will be evaluated based on their factual knowledge on the readings and the development of their research idea.

On 21 January, students have the opportunity to present their idea to their fellow classmates. This allows them to receive feedback which they can work on in the remaining two weeks before the actual oral exam.

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. Your creative process can be assisted by AI tools. However, you need to attach a complete list of prompts you used

during your research as an appendix to your manuscript. If you fail to be transparent, you'll fail the class.

Inclusiveness

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

Readings and Timetable

Week	Date	Topic	Main Readings	Complementary Readings
1	15 October 2025	Introduction		<i>No reading required</i>
Block 1: Basics				
2	22 October 2025	Research Design	King, Keohane, and Verba (1994), Ch. 1	Powne (2014) Kellstedt and Whitten (2018), Ch. 3
3	29 October 2025	Party Democracy	Saffon and Urbinati (2025)	Schattschneider and Pearson (2004) Müller (2000)
Block 2: Origins of Political Parties				
4	05 November 2025	Institutions and Party Systems	Tavits (2008) Boix (2009), Section 2.3	Boix (1999) Blondel (1968a)
5	12 November 2025	Cleavages	Ford and Jennings (2020) Boix (2009), Section 2.1	Lipset and Rokkan (1967) Kitschelt (1995) Walsh (2012)
Block 3: Functions of Political Parties				
6	19 November 2025	Candidate Selection	Rahat and Hazan (2001)	Schwenk (2022)
7	26 November 2025	Preference Aggregation and Articulation	Hobolt and Vries (2015)	Huber (2022) De Sio and Weber (2014) Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2009) Thau (2019) Erfort (2023)
8	03 December 2025	Talking with Practitioners		
9	10 December 2025	Mobilization and Competition	Krause, Cohen, and Abou-Chadi (2023)	Downs (1957) Meguid (2005) Hjorth and Larsen (2022)
10	17 December 2025	Governing	Sagarzazu and Klüver (2017)	Bäck, Debus, and Dumont (2011) Sprang (2025) Abou-Chadi and Immergut (2019)
Block 4: Practice and Presentations				
11	07 January 2026	Developing an argument		
12	14 January 2026	Analysing Party Behavior		<i>No reading required</i>
13	21 January 2026	Student Presentations		<i>No reading required</i>
14	28 January 2026	No Session		
15	04 February 2026	Oral Exams		

Introductory Readings

The following readings are not compulsory and you are not expected to read all of them. However, they can be useful to get a more in-depth insight into different aspects of the seminar – from research design to political parties.

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
3. **Kellstedt PM and Whitten GD** (2018) *The Fundamentals of Political Science Research*. 3rd ed. Cambridge University Press. DOI: 10.1017/9781108131704

On party origins and evolution:

1. **Vries CE and Hobolt SB** (2020) *Political Entrepreneurs: The Rise of Challenger Parties in Europe*. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press. 314 pp.
 2. **Meguid BM** (2008) *Party Competition between Unequals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 322 pp. DOI: 10.1017/CBO9780511510298
- **On parties' programmatic strategies:**
 1. **Downs A** (1957) An Economic Theory of Political Action in a Democracy. *Journal of Political Economy* **65** (2) (2), 135–150. DOI: 10.1086/257897
 2. **Budge I and Farlie D** (1983) *Explaining and Predicting Elections: Issue Effects and Party Strategies in Twenty-Three Democracies*. Taylor & Francis

On parties' demise

- **Mair P** (2013) *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*. London: Verso. 174 pp.
- **Dalton RJ** (2007) *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Comparative Politics. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press. 230 pp. DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199268436.001.0001

On writing:

1. **Powner LC** (2014) *Empirical Research and Writing: A Political Science Student's Practical Guide*. CQ Press. 321 pp.
- **Overview of datasets for Political Science:** PolData by Erik Gahner

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 existing knowledge about political parties.

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. **Powne 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: Party Democracy [29 October 2025]

This week, we will discuss *why* political parties are needed for a functioning democracy. We will also introduce their key functions, which we will discuss in greater detail in the following sessions.

Main readings

1. **Saffon MP and Urbinati N** (2025) Parties As Agents of Equal Political Freedom. *Political Theory* 53 (3), 380–406. DOI: 10.1177/00905917251350108

- **Complementary readings**

1. **Schattschneider EE and Pearson SA** (2004) *Party Government: American Government in Action*. 1st ed. Routledge. DOI: 10.4324/9781315126050
2. **Müller WC** (2000) Political Parties in Parliamentary Democracies: Making Delegation and Accountability Work. *European Journal of Political Research* **37** (3), 309–333. DOI: 10.1111/1475-6765.00515

Week 4: Institutions and Party Systems [05 November 2025]

How do parties emerge? Scholars usually underscore two important determinants: (1) institutions and (2) societal transformations. In this session, we will focus on the former and discuss how the electoral system and other institutional arrangements shape party systems' origins.

- **Compulsory readings**

1. **Tavits M** (2008) Party Systems in the Making: The Emergence and Success of New Parties in New Democracies. *British Journal of Political Science* **38** (1), 113–133. DOI: 10.1017/S0007123408000069

- **Handbook chapter**

1. **Boix C** (2009) The Emergence of Parties and Party Systems. *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*. Ed. by C Boix and SC Stokes. 1st ed. Oxford University Press, 499–521. DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199566020.003.0021, Section 2.3

- **Complementary readings**

1. **Boix C** (1999) Setting the Rules of the Game: The Choice of Electoral Systems in Advanced Democracies. *American Political Science Review* **93** (3), 609–624. DOI: 10.2307/2585577
2. **Blondel J** (1968b) Party Systems and Patterns of Government in Western Democracies. *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue canadienne de science politique* **1** (2), 180–203

Week 5: Cleavages [12 November 2025]

As a follow-up on last week's session, we will engage with the literature on political cleavages. On which issues are people divided and how do parties' exploit these conflicts?

- **Main reading**

1. **Ford R and Jennings W** (2020) The Changing Cleavage Politics of Western Europe. *Annual Review of Political Science* **23** (Volume 23, 2020), 295–314. DOI: [10.1146/annurev-polisci-052217-104957](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-052217-104957)

- **Handbook chapter**

- **Boix C** (2009) The Emergence of Parties and Party Systems. *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*. Ed. by C Boix and SC Stokes. 1st ed. Oxford University Press, 499–521. DOI: [10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199566020.003.0021](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199566020.003.0021), Section 2.1
- (optional:) **Caramani D** (2020) *Party Systems*. Oxford University Press, 213–230

- **Complementary readings**

1. **Lipset SM and Rokkan S** (1967) *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives*. Free Press
2. **Kitschelt H** (1995) Formation of Party Cleavages in Post-Communist Democracies: Theoretical Propositions. *Party Politics* **1** (4), 447–472. DOI: [10.1177/1354068895001004002](https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068895001004002)
3. **Walsh KC** (2012) Putting Inequality in Its Place: Rural Consciousness and the Power of Perspective. *American Political Science Review* **106** (3), 517–532. DOI: [10.1017/S0003055412000305](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055412000305)

- **Podcast**

- **Abou-Chadi T and Hooghe L** (2020) *The Transnational Cleavage*. URL: <https://on.soundcloud.com/Rb365S2ifp8ynNXvZC>

Week 6: Candidate Selection [19 November 2025]

This session marks the beginning of the third block of this seminar which deals with the functions of political parties in representative democracies. We will zoom in on their ‘recruiting function’ and discuss different means of candidate selection and their implications.

- **Main reading**

1. **Rahat G and Hazan RY** (2001) Candidate Selection Methods: An Analytical Framework. *Party Politics* 7 (3), 297–322. DOI: 10.1177/13540688010070030
03

- **Complementary readings**

1. **Schwenk J** (2022) Candidate Selection and Female Representation in the Context of High Corruption: The Case of Italy’s 2014 Mayor Elections. *Electoral Studies* 79, 102500

- **Podcast**

1. **Haughton T** (2024) *Party People: Candidates and Party Evolution*. URL: <https://newbooksnetwork.com/party-people>

Week 7: Preference Aggregation and Articulation [26 November 2025]

Contemporary elections are unthinkable without political parties. One of their central tasks in structuring elections is to aggregate and communicate citizens demands.

- **Main reading**

1. **Hobolt SB and Vries CE** (2015) Issue Entrepreneurship and Multiparty Competition. *Comparative Political Studies* 48 (9) (9), 1159–1185. DOI: 10.1177/0010414015575030

- **Complementary readings**

1. **Huber LM** (2022) Beyond Policy: The Use of Social Group Appeals in Party Communication. *Political Communication* **39** (3), 293–310. DOI: 10.1080/10584609.2021.1998264
2. **Laver M** (2014) Measuring Policy Positions in Political Space. *Annual Review of Political Science* **17** (Volume 17, 2014), 207–223. DOI: 10.1146/annurev-polisci-061413-041905
3. **De Sio L and Weber T** (2014) Issue Yield: A Model of Party Strategy in Multidimensional Space. *American Political Science Review* **108** (4), 870–885. DOI: 10.1017/S0003055414000379
4. **Rohrschneider R and Whitefield S** (2009) Understanding Cleavages in Party Systems: Issue Position and Issue Salience in 13 Post-Communist Democracies. *Comparative Political Studies* **42** (2), 280–313. DOI: 10.1177/0010414008325285
5. **Thau M** (2019) How Political Parties Use Group-Based Appeals: Evidence from Britain 1964–2015. *Political Studies* **67** (1), 63–82. DOI: 10.1177/0032321717744495
6. **Erfort C** (2023) *Gendered Targeting: Do Parties Tailor Their Campaign Ads to Women?* DOI: 10.31219/osf.io/5vs9b. Pre-published

- **Podcast**

1. **Abou-Chadi T** (2020) *Political Parties as Entrepreneurs*. URL: <https://on.soundcloud.com/V0DmsyvGCu5RB9ytGS>

Week 8: Talking with Practitioners [03 December 2025]

In this week, Thomas Paal and Julia Dickfer will visit us in their role as elections administrator and citizens' service of Münster. They will introduce us to their experiences with organizing elections and their view on political parties. The major part of the session is dedicated to a Q&A with the students. No readings are required, instead, students need to prepare questions in anticipation of the session.

Week 9: Mobilization and Competition [10 December 2025]

No party acts in a vacuum but is integrated in a dynamic party system. They react to other parties' behavior. Focusing on the example of the radical right, we analyse how parties' respond to new challengers and discuss the electoral implications of different strategies.

- **Main reading**

1. **Krause W, Cohen D, and Abou-Chadi T** (2023) Does Accommodation Work? Mainstream Party Strategies and the Success of Radical Right Parties. *Political Science Research and Methods* **11** (1), 172–179. DOI: 10.1017/psrm.2022.8

- **Complementary readings**

1. **Downs A** (1957) An Economic Theory of Political Action in a Democracy. *Journal of Political Economy* **65** (2) (2), 135–150. DOI: 10.1086/257897
2. **Meguid BM** (2005) Competition between Unequals: The Role of Mainstream Party Strategy in Niche Party Success. *American Political Science Review* **99** (03) (3), 347–359. DOI: 10.1017/S0003055405051701
3. **Hjorth F and Larsen MV** (2022) When Does Accommodation Work? Electoral Effects of Mainstream Left Position Taking on Immigration. *British Journal of Political Science* **52** (2), 949–957. DOI: 10.1017/S0007123420000563

Week 10: Governing [17 December 2025]

Ultimately, parties structure policy-making. We will evaluate what coalition government means for the legislative output of the ruling parties.

- **Main reading**

1. **Sagarzazu I and Klüver H** (2017) Coalition Governments and Party Competition: Political Communication Strategies of Coalition Parties. *Political Science Research and Methods* **5** (2), 333–349. DOI: 10.1017/psrm.2015.56

- **Complementary readings**

1. **Bäck H, Debus M, and Dumont P** (2011) Who Gets What in Coalition Governments? Predictors of Portfolio Allocation in Parliamentary Democracies. *European Journal of Political Research* **50** (4), 441–478. DOI: 10.1111/j.1475-6765.2010.01980.x
2. **Sprang T** (2025) Radical Weakness—Do Radical Parties Receive Fewer Ministries? *Comparative Political Studies*, 00104140251349670. DOI: 10.1177/00104140251349670

Week 11: Developing an Argument [07 January 2026]

In this session, we will discuss how you could develop an argument to study your research question.

The session replaces the session on crisis of democracy. However, for those who need to submit an essay task or questions, please do. You will receive individual feedback on your submissions.

- **Main reading**

1. **Mair P** (2013) *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*. London: Verso. 174 pp., Ch. 1

- **Complementary readings**

1. **Garzia D, Ferreira da Silva F, and De Angelis A** (2022) Partisan Dealignment and the Personalisation of Politics in West European Parliamentary Democracies, 1961–2018. *West European Politics* **45** (2), 311–334. DOI: 10.1080/01402382.2020.1845941
2. **Dalton RJ** (2007) *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Comparative Politics. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press. 230 pp. DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199268436.001.0001

Week 12: Analysing Political Parties [14 January 2026]

This is a lab session, where we will exploit potential data sources to study political parties.
Please bring your laptops with you. More information will follow in the preceding week.

Week 13: Student Presentations [21 January 2026]

At the end of the seminar, you are supposed to draft a research design in your oral exam. This session serves as a test run, where you are supposed to pitch your idea to your fellow student mates and receive valuable feedback.

Week 14: No session [28 January 2026]

There is no session in this week. There will be individual consultations upon request.

Week 15: Oral Exams [04 February 2026]

In this week, oral exams take place.

References

- Abou-Chadi T** (2020) *Political Parties as Entrepreneurs*. URL: <https://on.soundcloud.com/VODmsyvGCu5RB9ytGS>.
- Abou-Chadi T and Hooghe L** (2020) *The Transnational Cleavage*. URL: <https://on.soundcloud.com/Rb365S2ifp8ynNXvZC>.
- Abou-Chadi T and Immergut EM** (2019) Recalibrating Social Protection: Electoral Competition and the New Partisan Politics of the Welfare State. *European Journal of Political Research* **58** (2), 697–719. DOI: 10.1111/1475-6765.12308.
- Bäck H, Debus M, and Dumont P** (2011) Who Gets What in Coalition Governments? Predictors of Portfolio Allocation in Parliamentary Democracies. *European Journal of Political Research* **50** (4), 441–478. DOI: 10.1111/j.1475-6765.2010.01980.x.
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