

Elections as Instruments of Democracy

Summer Term 2026

Time: Wednesdays 10:00 AM – 13:30 PM
Location: IBW Gebäude, Seminar Room 3.40

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Office Hours: by appointment

Overview. How effective are elections as ‘instruments of democracy’ (Powell 2000)? Normative democratic theorists, as well as empirical researchers studying elections and voting behaviour, have long debated if and when competition for political office constrains elected politicians to pursue the policies voters most prefer, or enables voters to reward or sanction politicians for their actions when in office. Throughout this seminar, we will ask, and seek to answer, questions like the following. Are politicians more responsive to voter preferences in some settings than others? Are members of the elite able to influence voter preferences through campaigns or the media – and is this problematic? Can, and do, voters use elections to hold politicians accountable for their behaviour? Over the course of the semester, students will learn to how to interpret and evaluate recent quantitative research on the nature and quality of electoral representation. At the same time, students will have the opportunity to develop and enhance their own quantitative research skills, in preparation for an MA or PhD thesis. The regional focus of the class is on the politics of the United States and Western Europe.

Prerequisites. This is an advanced seminar, and I will assume that students are familiar with regression analysis and concepts like statistical significance. As such, it is essential that students have either previously completed the MA course in quantitative methods (or an equivalent), or take it jointly with this course if they have no background in quantitative research methods. Moreover, students should be able to understand and express themselves in English, as this will be the classroom language – though perfection is neither expected nor required. All coursework should also be completed in English.

Course Organization. In each session (starting with the second session), I will spend 20-30 minutes introducing and contextualizing the assigned readings in broader debates on the week’s topic. We will then spend the remainder of the session on two exercises. First, we will spend some time discussing and evaluating the week’s readings, paying particular attention to research design and empirical strategy, in small groups as well as an entire class. Next, we will spend the remainder of each session on an in-class R tutorial, focusing on guided replications of key analyses from the assigned readings.

Assessment. Your performance in this course will be evaluated using a portfolio examination, based on in-class participation (10%), two graded data analysis exercises (20% each), and a research note making use of quantitative research methods (50%). You need to complete all components of the portfolio examination in order to receive a passing grade.

Participation [10%]. As this is a graduate seminar, and not a lecture, the success of the seminar will

hinge entirely on active participation by students in class discussion. To obtain a high grade for participation, students should regularly attend and participate in weekly sessions. Students will need to read all assigned readings for the week to participate effectively in small group discussions during the class. Beginning 10 June (session 2), students are also expected to hand in **two (reasonable) discussion questions** on the week's assigned readings via email by 12 noon on the previous Friday.¹ If there is a reason why you will not be able to regularly attend the seminar (e.g. outside employment or caring responsibilities), please let me know in advance so I can take this into account when determining your participation grade.

Discussion questions should be open-ended and leave room for discussion, disagreement and debate. For instance, "Are policy outcomes better aligned with the median voter's preferences under proportional representation?" is a good discussion question – researchers disagree on the answer. Discussion questions may also single out aspects of the research design that seem unpersuasive (i.e., Is the theoretical argument convincing? Does the evidence provided support the claim being made? Are the measures used appropriate given the research question?). On the other hand, students should not suggest discussion questions where the answer is clear and unambiguous from the assigned readings. For instance, "What are Powell's two visions of democracy?" is not a good discussion question. I will select two to three questions each week from those submitted to guide our discussion.

Data analysis assignments [20% each]. Through these assignments, students will learn (or practice) how to use the statistical software **R** (i) to summarize and visualize data, and (ii) to implement and interpret basic regression analyses (up to and including maximum likelihood estimation). You will have two to three weeks to complete each assignment. Each data analysis assignment will be accompanied by a handout walking students through related commands and packages in **R**. Completed assignments should be uploaded to ILIAS by 23:59 CET on 24 June and 15 July 2026, respectively.

Research note [50%]. A key objective of this course is to help students learn how to write an empirical research note using quantitative research methods. Enrolled students will therefore be expected to complete a 10-15 page **research note** (double-spaced, font size 12, one inch margins) to be uploaded to ILIAS by 23:59 CET on **14 August 2026**. References and appendices will not count towards the page limit. Late submissions will be penalised unless previously arranged with the instructor. Submissions will be checked for plagiarism.

Students should also upload a 1-2 page proposal outlining the (i) research question/puzzle, (ii) theoretical hypotheses, and (iii) proposed data and methodology (e.g. OLS with fixed effects) to ILIAS by 23:59 CET on **17 July 2026**. In the proposal, you should tell me what the regression equation that you want to estimate is. This requires thinking about the statistical model you will use (e.g. OLS), identifying your key dependent/independent variables, and thinking about how your regression model links back to your hypotheses. The research question or motivating puzzle in the note should concern one or more of the topics covered in the course.

Readings. All required readings are listed below and will be made available electronically to enrolled students via ILIAS. Each week, I will also suggest additional (optional) readings for students who may want to deepen their knowledge of a particular topic or debate, especially if considering writing a research note on that topic.

¹That is, I will expect to receive discussion questions from enrolled students beginning Friday 5 June.

Key Dates.

- 3 June 2026: first session
- 10 June 2026: Assignment #1 distributed
- 24 June 2026: Assignment #1 due
- 1 July 2026: Assignment #2 distributed
- 15 July 2026: Assignment #2 due; last session
- 17 July 2026: deadline for 1-2 page proposal (23:59 CET)
- 14 August 2026: deadline to submit research note (23:59 CET)

Course Schedule

3 June: Theories of Representation

- Bernard Manin, Adam Przeworski and Susan C. Stokes. 1999. 'Elections and representation', in Manin et al (eds.), *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*, pp. 29-54.
- Fabio Wolkenstein and Christopher Wratil. 2021. 'Multidimensional representation.' *American Journal of Political Science*, 65(4): 862-876.
- Chitralekha Basu. 2026. 'Communicative power and the pursuit of political equality.' *British Journal of Political Science*, in press.

10 June: Electoral Rules and Ideological Congruence

- G. Bingham Powell Jr. 2009. 'The ideological congruence controversy: The impact of alternative measures, data, and time periods on the effects of election rules.' *Comparative Political Studies* 42(12): 1475-1497.
- Matt Golder and Gabriella Lloyd. 2014. 'Re-evaluating the relationship between electoral rules and ideological congruence.' *European Journal of Political Research* 53(1): 200-212.

17 June: Inequalities in Substantive Representation

- Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page. 2014. 'Testing theories of American politics: Elites, interest groups, and average citizens.' *Perspectives on Politics* 12(3): 564-581.
- Mads Andreas Elkjær and Torben Iversen. 2020. 'The political representation of economic interests: Subversion of democracy or middle-class supremacy?' *World Politics* 72(2): 254-290.

24 June: Inequalities in Descriptive Representation

- Miki Kittilson. 2008. 'Representing women: The adoption of family leave in comparative perspective.' *Journal of Politics* 70(2): 323-334.
- Tom O' Grady. 2019. 'Careerists versus coal-miners: Welfare reforms and the substantive representation of social groups in the British Labour Party.' *Comparative Political Studies* 52(4): 544-578.

1 July: Retrospective Voting and Accountability

- Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels. 2016. *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*, p. 116-145 (ch. 5).
- Andrew Healy and Neil Malhotra. 2010. 'Random events, economic losses and retrospective voting: Implications for democratic competence.' *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 5: 193-208.

8 July: Learning, Priming, and Opinion Change in Campaigns

- Gabriel Lenz. 2009. 'Learning and opinion change, not priming: Reconsidering the priming hypothesis.' *American Journal of Political Science* 53(4): 821-837.
- Michael Tesler. 2015. 'Priming predispositions and changing policy positions: An account of when mass opinion is primed or changed.' *American Journal of Political Science* 59(4): 806-824.

15 July: Media Effects on Voter Preferences

- Lucy Barnes and Timothy Hicks. 2018. 'Making austerity popular: The media and mass attitudes toward fiscal policy.' *American Journal of Political Science* 62(2): 340-354.
- Florian Foos and Daniel Bischof. 2022. 'Tabloid media campaigns and public opinion: Quasi-experimental evidence on Euroscepticism in England.' *American Political Science Review* 116(1): 19-37.