BA Seminar: Political Polarization

(preliminary version: July 14, 2026)

University of Cologne, Winter 26/27

Module: SM Repräsentation und Wahlen	211 - IBW Building
Course number: 14335.0707	(→ Herbert-Lewin-Straße 2)
Time: Mondays, 14:00–17:30*	Room: 3.40, 3rd floor

**Attention:* Biweekly course, see below for exact dates!

Jasmin Rath	Office hours: by appointment
jasmin.rath@wiso.uni-koeln.de	Please register via ILIAS

Course Description

This BA seminar introduces students to political science research on political polarization. The course examines key concepts and definitions of political polarization, including ideological and affective polarization. We will cover empirical trends in Europe and the United States, the causes and consequences of polarization, elite rhetoric, and potential strategies to mitigate its effects. Throughout the course, students will be introduced to theoretical arguments and empirical approaches in the literature, and will receive hands-on tips on how to formulate and investigate their own research questions (starting from Week 6).

By the end of the course, successful students will achieve the following learning goals:

- **Conceptual knowledge:** Students will be able to explain and compare key concepts and theoretical approaches related to political polarization, and to outline potential implications for democracy.
- **Empirical methods toolkit:** Students will develop the ability to assess empirical approaches to measuring political polarization and to design basic elements of an own research project, including formulating a research question, writing literature reviews, and knowledge about existing data.
- **Communication skills:** Students will improve their oral and written communication skills by presenting research ideas, writing structured academic texts, and discuss with their peers during the seminar sessions.

Pre-requisites and Expectations

This seminar is aimed at undergraduate students who are interested in political science research (e.g., enrolled in the program *B.Sc. Sozialwissenschaften*). No specific prior knowledge is required. Students should be able to understand and express themselves in English, and to read and analyze English-language academic papers. The seminar sessions are held in English. All coursework should also be completed in English.

Since this seminar is based on discussions of the topics of the week and the assigned literature, I expect all students to attend the sessions regularly, to have read the texts for the week, and to be able to discuss them.

General Reading

- Fiorina, M. P. & Abrams, S. J. (2008). Political Polarization in the American Public. *Annual Review Political Science*, 11, pp. 563-588.
- Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N. & Westwood, S. J. (2019). The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States. *Annual Review Political Science*, 22, pp. 129-146.
- Jost, J. T., Baldassarri, D. S. & Druckman, J. N. (2022). Cognitive-motivational mechanisms of political polarization in social-communicative contexts. *Nature Reviews Psychology*, 1 (10), pp. 560-576.
- Leininger, A., Grünewald, F. & Buntfuß, N. (2024). Ideological and affective polarization in multiparty systems. *Working paper.* Available online: doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/mz6rs

  → also check the corresponding website: Encyclopedia of Polarization

Examination

The course is evaluated via the following assignments (*"Kombinierte Prüfung"*):

- **Presentation** *(mandatory)*, 40% of the final grade
  - Students will present their idea on the research puzzle they plan to address in their term paper. The presentation should explain the societal and academic relevance of the topic, clearly articulate the research question, and provide a first overview of existing findings from the academic literature (rule of thumb: the presentation should be based on 8-10 academic journal articles).
  - Students must also submit an annotated bibliography as a handout for the presentation. This bibliography should list the sources/academic journal articles used and briefly summarize the main arguments or findings of each. A template for this assignment will be provided on ILIAS.

- **Term paper** *(mandatory)*, 60% of the final grade
  - At the end of the course, students will submit a term paper addressing their chosen research question. Students can choose between two formats:
    - *Research design:* A comprehensive literature review on the research question, accompanied by a detailed proposal for a research design that outlines how the question could be answered using existing data.
    - *Research design with own empirical analyses:* A comprehensive literature review, a research design proposal, and preliminary empirical analyses (e.g., descriptive statistics, basic visualizations) based on existing data.
  - Length (applies to both formats): 4,000 words, ± 10%, rule of thumb: the term paper should be based on 12-15 academic journal articles, term papers with own empirical analyses may be less detailed regarding the other aspects.
  - The reference list does not count towards the word count. Term papers should also be properly formatted and use consistent in-text citations.

Students must complete BOTH mandatory assignments to receive a passing grade. Written assignments must be handed in via ILIAS. *In order to receive credits, please note that you have to register for the exam on KLIPS in time!*

Late submissions of assignments will not be accepted without prior approval. Extensions can only be granted in exceptional cases and must be requested in advance.

Schedule & Assigned Readings

Week 1: Introduction
October 12, 2026 | 14:00 - **15:30** | IBW, Room 3.40

In this session, we cover organizational aspects of the course. Please read the syllabus beforehand to identify open questions. We will also explore the content of the course and learn about different concepts of political polarization in political science literature.

Required reading:

- Please read the course syllabus, that is, this document!
- Jost J. T., Baldassarri D. S. & Druckman J. N. (2022). Cognitive-motivational mechanisms of political polarization in social-communicative contexts. *Nature Reviews Psychology*, 1 (10), pp. 560-**563**.

  → Please focus your reading primarily on the introduction and the chapter "Types of mass political polarization".

Week 2: Measuring and explaining trends in political polarization
October 19, 2026 | 14:00 - 17:30 (incl. 15 min. of break) | IBW, Room 3.40

In this session, we focus on political polarization in Europe and the United States. We discuss how the concept is measured empirically, learn about trends over time, and cover (some) factors that drive political polarization.

Skill-sharing session: Reading academic literature efficiently

Required reading:

- Dias, N., & Lelkes, Y. (2022). The nature of affective polarization: Disentangling policy disagreement from partisan identity. *American Journal of Political Science*, 66(3), pp. 775-790.
- Wagner, M. (2021). Affective polarization in multiparty systems. *Electoral Studies*, 69, pp. 102199.

Additional reading:

- Jost J. T., Baldassarri D. S. & Druckman J. N. (2022). Cognitive-motivational mechanisms of political polarization in social-communicative contexts. *Nature Reviews Psychology*, 1 (10), pp. **563-576**.
- Abramowitz, A. I. & Saunders, K. L. (2008). Is Polarization a Myth? *The Journal of Politics*, 70(2), pp. 542-555.

  → Please note that this article uses data from more than 20 years ago!
- Campos, N. & Federico, C. (2026). A New Measure of Affective Polarization. *American Political Science Review*, 120(1), pp. 160-178.
- Tyler, M. & Iyengar, S. (2024). Testing the Robustness of the ANES Feeling Thermometer Indicators of Affective Polarization. *American Political Science Review*, 118(3), pp. 1570-1576.
- Hobolt, S. B., Lawall, K., & Tilley, J. (2024). The Polarizing Effect of Partisan Echo Chambers. *American Political Science Review*, 118(3), pp. 1464-1479.

✏️ *Please note that you must register for examination via KLIPS (due on October 29, 2026).*

Week 3: Polarization in political discourse
November 2, 2026 | 14:00 - 17:30 (incl. 15 min. of break) | IBW, Room 3.40

In this session, we analyze how political elites may contribute to political polarization through rhetorical strategies. We cover why elites use polarizing language and how this affects voters' political attitudes.

Skill-sharing session: Writing academic texts (in English)

Required reading:

- Poljak, Ž (2023). Parties attack behaviour in parliaments: Who attacks whom and when. *European Journal of Political Research*, 62(3), pp. 903-923.
- Kollberg, M. & Bantel, I. (2025). Communicating a common front: Mainstream party rhetoric and affective polarisation towards the radical right. *West European Politics*, pp. 1-31.
- Renström, E. A., Bäck, H. & Carroll, R. (2023). Threats, Emotions, and Affective Polarization. *Political Psychology*, 44(6), pp. 1337-1366.

Additional reading:

- Røed, M., Bäck, H. & Carroll, R. (2023). Who polarizes parliament? Partisan hostility in Norwegian legislative debates. *Party Politics*, 31(1), pp. 137-147.
- Robinson, J. & Dassonneville, R. (2026). Conflict on the campaign trail? How campaign effort and electoral competitiveness shape affective polarization. *Electoral Studies*, 99, pp. 103042.

Week 4: Political polarization as a challenge to democracy?
November 16, 2026 | 14:00 - 17:30 (incl. 15 min. of break) | IBW, Room 3.40

In this session, we cover articles on the effects of political polarization on political support and democratic processes. We will discuss the question of whether (and which kind of) political polarization promotes democracy or undermines it.

Skill-sharing session: Strategies for finding academic literature

Required reading:

- Skytte, R. (2021). Dimensions of Elite Partisan Polarization: Disentangling the Effects of Incivility and Issue Polarization. *British Journal of Political Science*, 51, pp. 1457-1475.
- Kingzette, J., Druckman, J. N., Klar, S., Krupnikov, Y., Levendusky, M. & Ryan, J. B. (2021). How Affective Polarization Undermines Support for Democratic Norms. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 85(2), pp. 663-677.

Additional reading:

- Piercea, D. R. & Laub, R. R. (2019). Polarization and correct voting in U.S. presidential elections. *Electoral Studies*, 60, pp. 102048.
- Van Elsas, E. & Fiselier, T. (2024). Conflict or choice? The differential effects of elite incivility and ideological polarization on political support. *Acta Politica* 59, pp. 589-618.
- Graham, M. H. & Svolik, M. W. (2020). Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States. *American Political Science Review*, 114(2), pp. 392-409.
- Berntzen, L. E., Kelsall, H. & Harteveld, E. (2024). Consequences of affective polarization: Avoidance, intolerance and support for violence in the United Kingdom and Norway. *European Journal of Political Research*, 63(3), pp. 927-949.

Week 5: Strategies to mitigate political polarization
November 30, 2026 | 14:00 - 17:30 (incl. 15 min. of break) | IBW, Room 3.40

In this session, we will cover different strategies aiming to reduce political polarization. We will also discuss whether these strategies are effective and what side effects they might have.

[tbc] Input on literature research by WiSo Library Support

Required reading:

- Amsalem, E., Merkley, E., & Loewen, P. J. (2022). Does Talking to the Other Side Reduce Inter-party Hostility? Evidence from Three Studies. *Political Communication*, 39(1), pp. 61-78.
- Pedersen, R. T., Christensen, J., & Petersen, N. B. G. (2026). Congenial messages from politicians reduce affective polarization among citizens. *European Journal of Political Research*, 65(1), pp. 65-77.

Additional reading:

- Voelkel, J. G. *et al.* (2024). Megastudy testing 25 treatments to reduce antidemocratic attitudes and partisan animosity. *Science*, 386, pp. eadh4764.
- Blair, R. A., Gottlieb, J., Schenk, M. & Woods, C. (2025). Depolarization and its discontents: Experimental evidence on affective polarization and willingness to confront racism and misinformation from two online workshops. *Political Psychology*, pp. 1-22.
- Huddy, L. & Yair, O. (2021). Reducing Affective Polarization: Warm Group Relations or Policy Compromise? *Political Psychology*, 42 (2), pp. 291-309.

✏️ *Submission of handouts for presentations (via ILIAS) due on December 10, 2026, 23:59.*

Week 6: Student Presentations
December 14, 2026 | 14:00 - 17:30 (incl. 15 min. of break) | IBW, Room 3.40

In this session, each student presents the research puzzle they want to work on in their term paper, as well as first identified academic literature on the topic. This is an opportunity to learn about other topics related to the course and to find peers who are working on similar questions.

Week 7: Data Lab
January 11, 2027 | 14:00 - 17:30 (incl. 15 min. of break) | IBW, Room 3.40

As each student has presented their research interests in Week 6, this session examines what data are available to investigate these questions empirically: What datasets exist (e.g., at the voter-level, elite-level, or party-level)? How to operationalize and measure central concepts?

Skill-sharing session: How to develop a research design

Week 8: Course Wrap-up
January 25, 2027 | 14:00 - **15:30** | IBW, Room S100

In this session, we will summarize what we have learned. There will be time for open questions, either substantive ones about political polarization (and beyond) or about the term paper.

Required reading:

- Törnberg, P. (2026). It's Not Polarization; It's the Radicalization of the Political Right. *Perspectives on Politics*, Online first, pp. 1-15.

✏️ *Submission of term papers (via ILIAS) due on February 28, 2027, 23:59.*