Measuring Political Attitudes through Surveys

University of Cologne | Winter 2026/27

Preliminary version: July 15, 2026

Module: SM Vertiefung Politikwissenschaft
Course number: 14335.0714
Time: Wednesdays, 10:00–13:30*

211 - IBW Building
(→ Herbert-Lewin-Straße 2)
Room: 3.40, 3rd floor

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

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Course Description

This BA seminar introduces students to survey research as a central tool for studying political attitudes and public opinion. The course combines methodological foundations with substantive debates in empirical political science. We will cover core elements of survey methodology, including sampling, measurement, questionnaire design, and the design of survey experiments. Throughout the course, these methodological topics are connected to substantive research on current challenges democratic systems face, including affective polarization, populism, the normalization of the radical right, and public responses to crises.

Each session combines a methods-focused introduction with the discussion of substantive applications in recent political science publications. We will begin with an instructor-led overview of the week's methodological topic, drawing on the required reading and selected examples. This is followed by student presentations of journal articles that apply the respective method to questions related to political attitudes and current challenges to democracy. The presentations serve as a basis for a broader discussion of both the substantive findings and the strengths, limitations, and practical implementation of the research design.

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

- **Conceptual knowledge:** Students will be able to explain key concepts and theoretical arguments related to recent challenges democratic systems face, such as populism, polarization, polycrisis, or the rise of radical-right parties.
- **Evaluating survey designs:** Students will develop the ability to critically evaluate existing survey-based research designs in the context of empirical political science literature.
- **Empirical methods toolkit:** Students have in-depth knowledge of core survey methods, including sampling, measurement, questionnaire design, and advanced techniques like vignettes and conjoint experiments.
- **Communication skills:** Students will improve their oral presentation and written communication skills, enabling them to develop, present, and refine research proposals while providing constructive feedback to their peers.

Prerequisites 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)*. Familiarity with basic quantitative research methods and statistics is not required, but helpful. 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 be also completed in English.

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

General literature

- Druckman, James N., and Donald P. Green, eds. 2021. *Advances in Experimental Political Science.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stantcheva, Stefanie. 2023. "How to Run Surveys: A Guide to Creating Your Own Identifying Variation and Revealing the Invisible." *Annual Review of Economics* 15: 205–234. *Please also see the extensive supplementary material of the article.*
- Lewis, Crystal. 2024. Data Management in Large-Scale Education Research. First edition. London: Chapman & Hall.

Examination

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

- **Presentation, incl. discussion leader role** *(mandatory)*, 40% of the final grade
  - Students will present a journal article which speaks to the week's topic. We will provide a list of articles (tbd). The presentation should explain the motivation of the article, clearly summarize the main theoretical argument and provide an overview on the research design and the results.
  - Students must also submit two or three discussion questions prior to the session and act as a discussion leader following their presentation. At least one of the discussion questions should focus on the week's methods focus.
- **Term paper** *(mandatory)*, 60% of the final grade
  - After the end of the semester, students will write a term paper. The term paper will be an extended review of one of the additional readings/articles for student presentation. Students must choose an article from one of the weeks other than the week they presented in.
  - The term paper will have three parts: 1) summarizing the central argument, 2) connection to the course and other literature, 3) critical discussion focused on survey methods. More details will be given during the course.
  - Length: 3,000 words, $\pm$ 10%.
  - 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 pass 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 & Readings

Week 1: Introduction
October 14, 2026 | 10:00 - **11:30** | LH (& JR)

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 the two types of inference in survey research.

Required reading:

- Please read the course syllabus, that is, this document!
- Groves, R. M., Fowler, F. J., Couper, M., Lepkowski, J. M., Singer, E., & Tourangeau, R. (2009). *Survey methodology* (2nd ed.). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley. Chapter 2 (Inference and Error in Surveys, pp. 39-67).

✏️ *Please note that you must register for the exam via KLIPS (Deadline: October 27, 2026).*

Week 2: Survey Sampling
October 28, 2026 | 10:00 - 13:30 (incl. 15 min. of break) | LH

In this session, we focus on how to decide whom to survey and how to make inferences from samples to populations. We discuss different sampling strategies and their challenges, including probability and non-probability sampling, and consider how choices about survey mode and data collection affect coverage, measurement, and data quality.

Required reading:

- Cornesse, C., Blom, A. G., Dutwin, D., Krosnick, J. A., De Leeuw, E. D., Legleye, S., ... & Wenz, A. (2020). A review of conceptual approaches and empirical evidence on probability and nonprobability sample survey research. *Journal of Survey Statistics and Methodology*, *8*(1), 4–36.

Articles for student presentations:

- tbd

Week 3: Survey Measurement
November 4, 2026 | 10:00 - 13:30 (incl. 15 min. of break) | LH

In this session, we will focus on constructing adequate questionnaire items and item batteries. We will discuss different item qualities such as reliability, validity, as well as methods for exploring and aggregating item batteries to uncover their underlying latent constructs.

Required reading:

- DeVellis, R. F., & Thorpe, C. T. (2021). *Scale development: Theory and applications*. Sage Publications. Chapters 4 (Validity, pp. 49–58) and 7 (An overview of item response theory, pp. 138–152).

Articles for student presentations:

- tbd

Week 4: (Quasi-) Experiments
November 18, 2026 | 10:00 - 13:30 (incl. 15 min. of break) | LH

In this session, we introduce the logic of experimental and quasi-experimental research designs for identifying causal effects. We discuss how random assignment enables researchers to distinguish treatment effects from selection effects and examine key concepts such as treatment and control groups, potential outcomes, internal and external validity, and treatment noncompliance. We then consider how natural experiments, field experiments, and unexpected events occurring during survey fieldwork can provide quasi-experimental variation when random assignment is not feasible.

Required reading:

- Mutz, D. (2011). *Population-based survey experiments*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Chapters 1&2 (pp. 1–36).

Articles for student presentations:

- tbd

Week 5: Survey Experiments I: Vignettes
December 2, 2026 | 10:00 - 13:30 (incl. 15 min. of break) | JR

In this session, we cover survey experiments, with a particular emphasis on the use of survey vignettes. We discuss common design pitfalls, how to identify them when evaluating existing studies (e.g., when interpreting null results), and how to avoid them when designing survey experiments.

Required reading:

- Mutz, D. (2011). *Population-based survey experiments*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Chapter 4 (Vignette Treatments, pp. 54-67).
- Kane, J. V. (2024). More than meets the ITT: A guide for anticipating and investigating nonsignificant results in survey experiments. *Journal of Experimental Political Science*. Online first.

Articles for student presentations:

- tbd

Week 6: Survey Experiments II: Conjoint Experiments
December 16, 2026 | 10:00 - 13:30 (incl. 15 min. of break) | JR

In this session, we focus on conjoint experiments, a specialized type of factorial experiment that has gained significant popularity in political science research in recent years. We introduce the core idea behind conjoint experiments and discuss their implementation, including how conjoint profiles are presented using tables, visual layouts, and other formats.

Required reading:

- Hainmueller, J., Hopkins, D. J., & Yamamoto, T. (2014). Causal inference in conjoint analysis: Understanding multidimensional choices via stated preference experiments. *Political Analysis, 22*(1), 1–30.

Articles for student presentations:

- tbd

Week 7: Existing Survey Data, Pre-Analysis Plans and Ethical Considerations
January 13, 2027 | 10:00 - 13:30 (incl. 15 min. of break) | JR

In this session, we learn about existing survey data that are readily available for research. We also discuss the role of pre-analysis plans in promoting transparency, as well as key ethical considerations, when collecting survey data.

Required reading:

- Alvesson, M., & Stephens, A. (2024). "Is it worth doing this or is it better to commit suicide?": On ethical clearance at a university. *Human Relations*. Online first.
- Please have a look at the application form for the Ethics Committee of the WiSo Faculty in advance, as we will be working with it in the course (available HERE).

Articles for student presentations:

- tbd

Week 8: Wrap-up
January 27, 2027 | 10:00 - **11:30** | JR (& LH)

In this session, we will summarize what we have learned. There will be time for open questions, either substantive ones about survey methodology, recent challenges to democratic systems (and beyond) or about the term paper.

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