

Winter term 2026/2027

Challenges to Democracy

Version: September 2, 2026

Seminar Date and Format

The seminar is held as an online block seminar. It consists of an introductory session on 4 November 2026 (14:00-16:00), and two full-day blocks on 07 and 21 January 2027. After the introductory session, you must bindingly confirm your registration to the course. The seminar is open to graduate students, the course language is English. No prior knowledge is needed. Credits can only be granted if participants read and engage with the readings before the seminar, attend all three sessions and pass the seminar requirements.

Course Overview

The seminar seeks to analyse the current challenges democratic regimes face. It is structured along two main blocks. The first block concerns ‘Conceptualization and description of democratic backsliding’. In the first session of the block, we will learn what (the quality of) democracy entails. Thereafter, the second session deals with measuring democracy and understanding what leads to its survival. The third session consists of a role play introducing the concept of democratic backsliding. In the final (short) session of the day, we will discuss an institutional attack on the Supreme Court as a form of institutional backsliding.

The second block revolves around the ‘Causes of and solutions to democratic backsliding’. The first session will zoom in on the role of democratic norms and citizen’s willingness to defend them. The second session takes a supply-side view, reviewing the role of propaganda for democratic backsliding. The third session will look into potential cures to democratic backsliding, focusing on the role of reducing polarization in society. At the end of the second block, students introduce their research proposal for a term paper to receive feedback from their peers in term paper workshops.

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 learned about institutions that can be exploited to sideline democracy, as well as how demand-side polarization and supply-side misinformation might fuel into democratic backsliding. 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.

Requirements

A block seminar is very densely organized. This implies that you, as a student, have prepared the seminar adequately, attend all session in full, and spend substantial time for postprocessing the sessions. 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 instance, consider the following example for a student who gets 5 ECTS for the seminar.

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|--|----------|-------------|
| • attendance and active participation in discussion | 16 hours | |
| • being the author/reviewer of an article discussed in class | | } 134 hours |
| • draft research proposal | | |
| • term paper (graded) | | |

Attendance and participation

Attendance in the seminar is compulsory. Students need to attend each session to pass the seminar. Attendance requires active participation in class which presumes careful reading of the literature.

Most reading techniques 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. The vast amount of in-class activities will take place in break-out session that require in-depth knowledge of the readings. So, please come prepared.

Author vs. reviewer sessions

In one session of your choice, you will be the expert of the empirical reading. In practice, this implies two things: First, together with the other experts, you briefly present the paper of that session. This should be very brief, it only takes 5-7 minutes. Ensure that your summary does not involve any judgment about the paper's strengths and weaknesses. Second, during the session, you'll randomly be assigned as the author or reviewer of that paper. As the author of the paper, you try to defend the paper from potential criticism. As reviewer, you try to identify the main weaknesses of the paper.

This seminar assignment involves a proper preparation of the seminar reading. You need to be able to properly summarize the paper (its research question, the theoretical argument, the research design and the results). Moreover, you need to engage both with weaknesses and strengths of the paper, so that you are prepared to serve as a reviewer or author on the spot. Submit your notes before the session (at latest on Monday evening before your session). The notes should be 3-4 pages long and can be written down in bullet points or textual form.

When you are part of the audience, you still serve an important function: together, you'll form the editorial board. You listen to the reviewer's critique and the author's defense, and vote whether the paper should be accepted for a R&R process or be rejected right away. Of course, you'll need to note down the reasons for your decision. You'll later present your reasoning in class.

Research Paper

In case you need a grade, you are supposed to sketch a research design for a further investigation of 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 the block seminar. The exact topic can go beyond the readings but needs to deal with the seminar's title. The research paper should follow the basic structure of an academic paper that is rooted in empirical comparative politics – except for the analysis. Hence, 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. In the data and methods section, you are expected to describe your analytic approach. You are not required to implement the analysis. Instead, after presenting your research design, you will give a brief outlook on how to pursue in the future, including an honest evaluation of strengths and challenges of your design.

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. 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. You need to attach a complete list of tools and prompts you used during your research as an appendix to your manuscript. If you fail to be transparent, you'll fail the class. In case of doubt, you need to defend your research paper in an office hour.

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 LamaPoll or by sending me a mail.

Readings and Timetable

Week	Date Time	Topic		Conceptual Readings	Empirical Readings
1	04 November 2026 14:00-16:00	Introductory session		<i>No reading required</i>	
Block 1: Conceptualization and description of democratic backsliding					
2	07 January 2027 09:00-10:30	What is Democracy?		Merkel (2004)	Quaranta (2018)
3	07 January 2027 10:45-12:15	Democratic Coalitions	Support	Lindberg et al. (2014)	Knutsen et al. (2026)
4	07 January 2027 13:15-14:45	Democratic Backsliding		Bermeo (2016) Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018)	Role play cards! Please prepare.
5	07 January 2027 15:00-16:00	Subverting institutions	Institu-		Blasingame et al. (2024)
Block 2: Causes of and solutions to democratic backsliding					
6	21 January 2027 09:00-10:30	Democratic and Affective Polarization	Norms	Bischof et al. (2024)	Graham and Svolik (2020)
7	21 January 2027 10:45-12:15	Propaganda		Stanley (2015)	Adena et al. (2015)
8	21 January 2027 13:15-14:45	Solutions		Lührmann (2021)	Simonovits, Kézdi, and Kardos (2018)
9	21 January 2027 15:00-16:00	Term paper workshop		Powner (2014)	

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
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
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

A tutorial about R

1. **Schröder P, Kiemes L, and Wuttke A** (2024) *R for Social Science Data Analysis - R for Social Scientists*. <https://adp-cvk.quarto.pub/r-for-social-science-data-analysis/>

Session 1: Introduction [04 November 2026]

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

Block 1: Conceptualization and description of democratic backsliding

Session 2: What is Democracy? [07 January 2027, 09:00-10:30]

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. We will also explore how citizens define democracy in their own words.

Compulsory readings

1. **Merkel W** (2004) Embedded and Defective Democracies. *Democratization* **11** (5), 33–58. DOI: 10.1080/13510340412331304598
2. **Quaranta M** (2018) The Meaning of Democracy to Citizens Across European Countries and the Factors Involved. *Social Indicators Research* **136** (3), 859–880. DOI: 10.1007/s11205-016-1427-x

Complementary readings

1. **Dalton RJ, Sin Tc, and Jou W** (2007) Understanding Democracy: Data from Unlikely Places. *Journal of Democracy* **18** (4), 142–156. DOI: 10.1353/jod.2007.a223229
2. **Sartori G** (1970) Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics*. *American Political Science Review* **64** (4), 1033–1053. DOI: 10.2307/1958356
3. **Diamond L and Morlino L** (2004) The Quality of Democracy: An Overview. *Journal of Democracy* **15** (4), 20–31. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2004.0060>

Session 3: Democratic support coalitions [07 January 2027, 10:45-12:15]

In this session, we will look at V-DEM, a large data base that helps us in measuring the quality of democracies. Afterwards, we will discuss how support coalitions affect regime survival.

Compulsory readings

1. **Lindberg SI et al.** (2014) V-Dem: A New Way to Measure Democracy. *Journal of Democracy* **25** (3), 159–169. DOI: 10.1353/jod.2014.0040
2. **Knutsen CH et al.** (2026) Who Rules? Support Coalitions and Regime Survival, 1789–2020. *Comparative Political Studies* **59** (9), 1932–1968. DOI: 10.1177/00104140251369338

Complementary readings

1. **Lührmann A, Tannenbergh 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
3. **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
4. **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

Session 4: Democratic Backsliding? [07 January 2027, 13:15-14:45]

In this session, we will do a role play through which we learn how to conceptualize democratic backsliding.

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 – Chapter 1
or a corresponding podcast on the book:
Abou-Chadi T (n.d.) *Daniel Ziblatt. How Democracies Die*.
3. Role play cards! Please prepare for your role.

Complementary readings

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

Session 5: Subverting institutions [07 January 2027, 15:00-16:00]

In this session, we will discuss how the judiciary can be subverted and which effects this might have on their work.

Compulsory reading

1. **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

Block 2: Causes of and solutions to democratic backsliding

Session 6: Democratic Norms and Affective Polarization [21 January 2027, 09:00-10:30]

At the start of the second block, we will talk about demand-side patterns that can culminate into democratic regression.

Compulsory readings

1. **Bischof D et al.** (2024) *How Citizens Perceive Others: The Role of Social Norms for Democracies*. DOI: 10.31219/osf.io/4qgh8
2. **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

Complementary 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. **Frederiksen K et al.** (2025) *Democratic Transgressions Embedded in Reality*. DOI: 10.31219/osf.io/42vhy_v1

Session 7: Propaganda [21 January 2027, 10:45-12:15]

In the second session on the causes of democratic backsliding, we will talk about state-led misinformation campaigns.

Compulsory readings

1. **Stanley J** (2015) *How Propaganda Works*. Course Book. Princeton Oxford: Princeton University Press. DOI: 10.1515/9781400865802
2. **Adena M et al.** (2015) Radio and the Rise of The Nazis in Prewar Germany*. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* **130** (4), 1885–1939. DOI: 10.1093/qje/qjv030

Complementary reading

1. **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

Session 8: Solutions [21 January 2027, 13:15-14:45]

After having learned what can cause democratic demise, we will turn towards potential solutions. What could prevent democratic backsliding? In the empirical reading, we will focus on anti-polarization measures.

Compulsory readings

1. **Lührmann A** (2021) Disrupting the Autocratization Sequence: Towards Democratic Resilience. *Democratization* **28** (5), 1017–1039. DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2021.1928080
2. **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 reading

1. **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
2. **E. Finkel S, Neundorf A, and Rascón Ramírez E** (2024) Can Online Civic Education Induce Democratic Citizenship? Experimental Evidence from a New Democracy. *American Journal of Political Science* **68** (2), 613–630. DOI: 10.1111/ajps.12765

Session 9: Term paper workshop [21 January 2027, 15:00-16:00]

The term paper workshop is compulsory for everyone. You will pitch your ideas for your term papers.

Helpful readings

1. **King G, Keohane RO, and Verba S** (1994) *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research, New Edition*. Princeton University Press, Ch. 1
2. **Powner LC** (2014) *Empirical Research and Writing: A Political Science Student's Practical Guide*. CQ Press

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- Adena M et al.** (2015) Radio and the Rise of The Nazis in Prewar Germany*. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* **130** (4), 1885–1939. DOI: 10.1093/qje/qjv030.
- 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.
- Bermeo N** (2016) On Democratic Backsliding. *Journal of Democracy* **27** (1), 5–19. DOI: 10.1353/jod.2016.0012.
- Bischof D et al.** (2024) *How Citizens Perceive Others: The Role of Social Norms for Democracies*. DOI: 10.31219/osf.io/4qgh8.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- Cunningham S** (2021) *Causal Inference: The Mixtape*. Yale University Press. DOI: 10.2307/j.ctv1c29t27.
- Dalton RJ, Sin Tc, and Jou W** (2007) Understanding Democracy: Data from Unlikely Places. *Journal of Democracy* **18** (4), 142–156. DOI: 10.1353/jod.2007.a223229.
- Diamond L and Morlino L** (2004) The Quality of Democracy: An Overview. *Journal of Democracy* **15** (4), 20–31. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2004.0060>.
- E. Finkel S, Neundorf A, and Rascón Ramírez E** (2024) Can Online Civic Education Induce Democratic Citizenship? Experimental Evidence from a New Democracy. *American Journal of Political Science* **68** (2), 613–630. DOI: 10.1111/ajps.12765.
- Frederiksen K et al.** (2025) *Democratic Transgressions Embedded in Reality*. DOI: 10.31219/osf.io/42vhy_v1.

- 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.
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- 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.
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- Knutsen CH et al.** (2026) Who Rules? Support Coalitions and Regime Survival, 1789–2020. *Comparative Political Studies* **59** (9), 1932–1968. DOI: 10.1177/00104140251369338.
- Levitsky S and Ziblatt D** (2018) *How Democracies Die*. 1st ed. New York, NY: Crown.
- Lindberg SI et al.** (2014) V-Dem: A New Way to Measure Democracy. *Journal of Democracy* **25** (3), 159–169. DOI: 10.1353/jod.2014.0040.
- Lührmann A** (2021) Disrupting the Autocratization Sequence: Towards Democratic Resilience. *Democratization* **28** (5), 1017–1039. DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2021.1928080
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- 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.
- Pérez EO and Tavits M** (2019) Language Influences Public Attitudes toward Gender Equality. *The Journal of Politics* **81** (1), 81–93. DOI: 10.1086/700004.
- 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.
- Powner LC** (2014) *Empirical Research and Writing: A Political Science Student's Practical Guide*. CQ Press.

- Przeworski A** (2019) *Crises of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: 10.1017/9781108671019.
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