



## **Digital Democracy**

### **How Digitalization Shapes Democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

University of Zurich, Fall 2025

**Lecturer:** Prof. Dr. Karsten Donnay  
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**Office Hours:** By appointment  
**Course number:** 06SM615n515 Seminar

#### **Overview and Objectives**

The rapid digitalization of the private and public sphere is not only fundamentally changing the way we interact, communicate or work but also affects politics and our democratic institutions. This course introduces students to research on digital democracy, i.e., research on the impact of digitalization on politics. It bridges current substantial topics of interest with the underlying advances in (digital) research technologies that allow to explore those topics and provides hands-on insights into the research process.

#### **Course Objectives and Key Skills**

- Students will develop a good understanding of current (quantitative) research in the social and behavioral sciences studying the implications of digitalization on politics with a particular focus on the role of political behavior.
- They will familiarize themselves with state-of-the-art quantitative approaches in this domain, be able to evaluate their strengths and limitations and appropriately select suitable methods for their own research.

#### **Course Times**

The course takes place every Tuesday 14:00 – 15:45 starting on Sep. 16, 2025; the last session of the class is on Dec. 16, 2025. The seminar sessions take place in person in AFL-F-150.

#### **Course Assessment**

The seminar is reading-based, i.e., 3-4 papers will be assigned to be read per session. Students are required to prepare three response papers throughout the term that analyze the readings of a given week in more detail. A full list of readings is provided in the course outline below.

- Response papers should be short discussion papers (max. 2 pages) that summarize the main arguments of the week's readings, critically evaluate them and put them into context. These papers are due Friday (end of day) before each of the respective session.
- Students are encouraged to prepare these papers together with other students assigned to the same week (if applicable) but each student is expected to hand in their own response paper.
- Students are then expected to be able to summarize the main arguments verbally and lead the in-class discussion for their session. A few slides may be used to support the in-class discussion, but this is not required.



Students are expected to prepare an (empirical) research design together with a proof-of-concept implementation as the final assignment for the seminar. The topic can be freely chosen but must fall within the substantive areas (broadly conceived) covered in the seminar. The deadline to submit the research design is at the end of term on Friday Dec. 19, 2025 (midnight). The proposed research should make an empirical contribution to a question in the domain of digital democracy leveraging the questions, theoretical insights, quantitative methods and data discussed in class.

- There will be sessions dedicated to presenting and discussing initial research ideas and designs in weeks 10 and 11 of the term. This will leave enough time to finalize the research design before the end of the class.
- The idea for the research design has to already be formalized in a short research design note to be submitted prior to those sessions. This note will not be graded but serves as the basis for discussion of the idea for the paper; details on what is expected for the short research design note will be given in class.
- Students are expected, in addition to presenting their own idea, to also discuss the idea of one of their fellow students in the sessions in week 10 and 11 of the term and provide detailed feedback on their ideas and empirical strategies.
- The final research design paper with proof-of-concept implementation is expected to expand on the initial short research design note and cover the full motivation, prior work (i.e., a literature review), derivation of the research gap/question/hypotheses, a detailed description of the empirical strategy and some first preliminary results based on the initial implementation. Further details will be provided in class.

The course grade is then based on the response papers (with in-class presentation/discussion) (20%) and the final research design they submit at the end of the class (80%). Please note that the module will only be considered passed if all components of the portfolio are passed.

### Information on the Use of AI tools

The use of generative AI (artificial intelligence) in assignments is only permitted for the purpose of idea generation, copy-editing and to support coding tasks (e.g. in R for the proof-of-concept implementation). All other uses are prohibited. Please note that IPZ has issued a new declaration of authenticity where the use of AI tools must be clearly stated; you are required to use this new form when submitting your final assignment for this class. If you have questions regarding the use of AI tools as part of this seminar, please contact me. Please remember that the sole responsibility for the correctness of all content rests with you when you submit your final assignments.

### Course Outline and Readings

#### Week 1 (Sep. 16). Introduction

Farrell, Henry. (2012). "The Consequences of the Internet for Politics." *Annual Review of Political Science* 15(1): 35–52.

Gilardi, Fabrizio. (2022). *Digital Technology, Politics, and Policy-Making*. Cambridge University Press. *Chapter 1*.

Lazer, David M., Alex Pentland, Duncan J Watts, Sinan Aral, Susan Athey, Noshir Contractor, Deen Freelon, et al. (2020). "Computational Social Science: Obstacles and Opportunities." *Science* 369(6507): 1060–1062.



*Part 1 – (Negative) Consequences of Digitalization*

**Week 2 (Sep. 23). Social Influence Online & Polarization**

- Wood, Wendy. (2000). "Attitude Change: Persuasion and Social Influence." *Annual Review of Psychology* 51(1): 539–570.
- Sunstein, Cass R. (2002). "The Law of Group Polarization." *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 10(2):175–195.
- Bail, Christopher et al. (2018). "Exposure to Opposing Views on Social Media can Increase Political Polarization." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115(37): 9216–9221.
- Yarchi, Moran, Christian Baden & Neta Kligler-Vilenchik. (2020). "Political Polarization on the Digital Sphere: A Cross-Platform, Over-Time Analysis of Interactional, Positional, and Affective Polarization on Social Media." *Political Communication* 38(1–2): 1–42.

**Week 3 (Sep. 30). What about Echo Chambers?**

- Bakshy, Eytan, Solomon Messing & Lada Adamic. (2015). "Exposure to Ideologically Diverse News and Opinion on Facebook." *Science* 348(6239): 1130–1132.
- Eady, Gregory, Jonathan Nagler, Andrew Guess, Jan Zilinsky & Joshua A. Tucker. (2019). "How Many People Live in Political Bubbles on Social Media? Evidence from Linked Survey and Twitter Data." *SAGE Open* 9(1): 1–21.
- Yang, Tian, Sílvia Majó-Vázquez, Rasmus K Nielsen & Sandra González-Bailón. (2020). "Exposure to News Grows Less Fragmented with an Increase in Mobile Access." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 61(46): 202006089–683.
- Chang, Ho-Chun Herbert, James N Druckman, Emilio Ferrara & Robb Willer. (2025). "Liberals and Conservatives Share Information Differently on Social Media." *PNAS Nexus* 4 (7): pgaf206.

**Week 4 (Oct. 7). Influence of (Social) Networks**

- DellaPosta, Daniel, Yongren Shi & Michael Macy. (2015). "Why Do Liberals Drink Lattes?" *American Journal of Sociology* 120(5): 1473–1511.
- Bond, Robert M., et al. (2012). "A 61-million-person Experiment in Social Influence and Political Mobilization." *Nature* 489(7415): 295–298.
- Mutz, Diana C. (2002). "The Consequences of Cross-Cutting Networks for Political Participation." *American Journal of Political Science* 46(4): 838–855.
- Fletcher, Richard & Rasmus Kleis Nielsen. (2018). "Are People Incidentally Exposed to News on Social Media? A Comparative Analysis." *New Media & Society* 20(7): 2450–2468.



### Week 5 (Oct. 14). Online News Diets

- Guess, Andrew M., Pablo Barberá, Simon Munzert & Junghwan Yang. (2021). "The Consequences of Online Partisan Media." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118(14): e2013464118.
- Osmundsen, Mathias, Alexander Bor, Peter Bjerregaard Vahlstrup, Anja Bechmann & Michael Bang Petersen. (2021). "Partisan Polarization Is the Primary Psychological Motivation behind Political Fake News Sharing on Twitter." *American Political Science Review* 115(3): 999–1015.
- Kim, Eunji, Yphtach Lelkes & Joshua McCrain. (2022). "Measuring Dynamic Media Bias." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 119(32): e2202197119.
- Zoizner, Alon, Jörg Matthes, Nicoleta Corbu, Claes H. de Vreese, Frank Esser, Karolina Koc-Michalska, Christian Schemer, Yannis Theocharis & Jan Zilinsky. (2025). "Can AI-Attributed News Challenge Partisan News Selection? Evidence from a Conjoint Experiment." *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612251342679>.

### Week 6 (Oct. 21). Facebook & Instagram 2020 US Election Study

- Guess, Andrew M. et al. (2023). "Reshares on Social Media Amplify Political News but Do Not Detectably Affect Beliefs or Opinions." *Science* 381(6656): 404–8.
- González-Bailón, Sandra et al. 2023. "Asymmetric Ideological Segregation in Exposure to Political News on Facebook." *Science* 381(6656): 392–98.
- Nyhan, Brendan et al. (2023). "Like-Minded Sources on Facebook Are Prevalent but Not Polarizing." *Nature* 620: 137–144.
- Guess, Andrew M. et al. (2023). "How Do Social Media Feed Algorithms Affect Attitudes and Behavior in an Election Campaign?" *Science* 381(6656): 398–404.

### Part 2 – (Positive) Disruption and Change

### Week 7 (Oct. 28). Less Polarization, More Diversity?

- Guess, Andrew, Jonathan Nagler & Joshua Tucker. (2019). "Less Than you Think: Prevalence and Predictors of Fake News Dissemination on Facebook." *Science Advances* 5: eaau4586.
- Scharkow, Michael, Frank Mangold, Sebastian Stier & Johannes Breuer. (2020). "How Social Network Sites and Other Online Intermediaries Increase Exposure to News." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117(6): 2761–2763.
- Balietti, Stefano, Lise Getoor, Daniel G. Goldstein & Duncan J. Watts. (2021). "Reducing Opinion Polarization: Effects of Exposure to Similar People with Differing Political Views." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118(52): e2112552118.
- Praet, Stiene, Andrew M. Guess, Joshua A. Tucker, Richard Bonneau & Jonathan Nagler. (2022). "What's Not to Like? Facebook Page Likes Reveal Limited Polarization in Lifestyle Preferences." *Political Communication* 39(3): 311–338.



### **Week 8 (Nov. 4). Fighting Misinformation and Highly Partisan Content**

- Guess, Andrew et al. (2020). "A Digital Media Literacy Intervention Increases Discernment Between Mainstream and False News in the United States and India." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117(27): 15536–15545.
- Bright, Jonathan, Nahema Marchal, Bharath Ganesh & Stevan Rudinac. (2022). "How Do Individuals in a Radical Echo Chamber React to Opposing Views? Evidence from a Content Analysis of Stormfront." *Human Communication Research* 48(1): 116–145.
- Aslett, Kevin, Andrew M. Guess, Richard Bonneau, Jonathan Nagler & Joshua Tucker. (2022). "News Credibility Labels Have Limited Average Effects on News Diet Quality and Fail to Reduce Misperceptions." *Science Advances* 8(18): eabl3844.
- Altay, Sacha, Emma Hoes & Magdalena Wojcieszak. (2025). "Following News on Social Media Boosts Knowledge, Belief Accuracy and Trust." *Nature Human Behaviour*, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-025-02205-6>.

### **Week 9 (Nov. 11). Online Mobilization and Offline Consequences?**

- Coppock, Alexander, Andrew Guess and John Ternovski. (2016). "When Treatments are Tweets: A Network Mobilization Experiment over Twitter." *Political Behavior* 38(1): 105–128.
- Munger, Kevin, Richard Bonneau, Jonathan Nagler & Joshua A. Tucker. (2019). "Elites Tweet to Get Feet Off the Streets: Measuring Regime Social Media Strategies During Protest." *Political Science Research and Methods* 7(4): 815–834.
- Karell, Daniel, Andrew Linke, Edward Holland & Edward Hendrickson. (2023). "'Born for a Storm': Hard-Right Social Media and Civil Unrest." *American Sociological Review* 88 (2): 322–349.
- Lobera, Josep & Martín Portos. (2022). "The Private Is Political: Partisan Persuasion through Mobile Instant Messaging Services." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 34(1): edab033.

### *Student Presentations*

### **Week 10 (Nov. 18). Presentation of Research Designs**

### **Week 11 (Nov. 25). Presentation of Research Designs**



### *Part 3: Applied Research and Implications for Policy*

#### **Week 12 (Dec. 2). Fighting Harmful Online Content**

- Siegel, Alexandra & Vivienne Badaan. (2020). “#No2Sectarianism: Experimental Approaches to Reducing Sectarian Hate Speech Online.” *American Political Science Review* 114(3): 837–55.
- Hangartner, Dominik et al. (2021). “Empathy-Based Counterspeech Can Reduce Racist Hatespeech in a Social Media Field Experiment.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118(50): e2116310118.
- Yildirim, Mustafa Mikdat, Jonathan Nagler, Richard Bonneau & Joshua A Tucker. (2023). “Short of Suspension: How Suspension Warnings Can Reduce Hate Speech on Twitter.” *Perspectives on Politics* 21(2): 651–663.
- Haimson, Oliver L, Daniel Delmonaco, Peipei Nie & Andrea Wegner. (2021). “Disproportionate Removals and Differing Content Moderation Experiences for Conservative, Transgender, and Black Social Media Users: Marginalization and Moderation Gray Areas.” *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 5(CSCW2): 1–35.

#### **Week 13 (Dec. 9). Content Moderation**

- Margolin, Drew B., Aniko Hannak & Ingmar Weber. (2018). “Political Fact-Checking on Twitter: When Do Corrections Have an Effect?” *Political Communication* 35(2): 196–219.
- Molina, Maria D. & S. Shyam Sundar. (2024). “Does Distrust in Humans Predict Greater Trust in AI? Role of Individual Differences in User Responses to Content Moderation.” *New Media & Society* 26(6): 3638–3656.
- Gillespie, Tarleton. (2020). “Content Moderation, AI, and the Question of Scale.” *Big Data & Society* 7(2): 2053951720943234.
- Wang, Sai. (2020). “Moderating Uncivil User Comments by Humans or Machines? The Effects of Moderation Agent on Perceptions of Bias and Credibility in News Content.” *Digital Journalism* 9(1): 1–20.

#### **Week 14 (Dec. 16). Digital Transformation and e-Democracy**

- Petitpas, Adrien, Julien M. Jaquet & Pascal Sciarini. (2021). “Does E-Voting Matter for Turnout, and to Whom?” *Electoral Studies* 71: 102245.
- Mergel, Ines, Noella Edelmann, and Nathalie Haug. (2019). “Defining Digital Transformation: Results from Expert Interviews.” *Government Information Quarterly* 36(4): 101385.
- Valsangiacomo, Chiara. (2022). “Clarifying and Defining the Concept of Liquid Democracy.” *Swiss Political Science Review* 28(1): 61–80.
- Mossberger, Karen, Seongkyung Cho, Pauline Hope Cheong & Daria Kuznetsova. (2023). “The Public Good and Public Attitudes toward Data Sharing through IoT.” *Policy & Internet* 15 (3): 370–396.