

VU Political Communication and Electoral Analysis

Comparative perspectives on elite rhetoric and democratic competition

Summer term 2025

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Place: SoWi Building, SR 5

Time: Monday, 16:45 – 18:15

VIS: [402131](#)

OLAT: [5819007035](#)

Course short description Politicians choose their words carefully to emphasize which issues matter to them, frame political choices, undermine their opponents' support, and appeal to voters. This course provides students with an overview of political science research on the role rhetorical strategies play in democratic political competition. The course is divided into one introductory and four topical blocks. In the first topical block, we will discuss how politicians use *emotive rhetoric and sentiment* in political campaigns and debates. In the second block, we learn about when, how, and why parties and their representatives *attack* each other. In the third block, we examine when and why politicians use *populist and anti-elite rhetoric*. In the last topical block, we learn about *group-based political rhetoric* and discover how and why politicians appeal to specific social groups. Overall, the course covers observational and experimental quantitative empirical studies on the use and effects of elite rhetoric in contemporary democratic politics.

Course Description

This course provides participants with an overview of contemporary scholarly debates on the role that political rhetoric and communication strategies play in democratic competition and representation. Political science has a long tradition of considering politics as competition over alternative policies along ideological lines of conflict. Yet, researchers increasingly focus on how politicians' rhetorical appeals shape contemporary politics. Among others, this literature emphasizes the relevance of voters' perceptions of candidates' and incumbents' character, integrity, and ability (so-called "valence" characteristics) in determining electoral turnout and behavior, the role that emotions and the tone of the debate play in shaping political outcomes, and how important it is to understand politicians' group-based rhetorical strategies to understand the age of identity politics.

The course is organized into six blocks. The first block (week 2) focuses on fundamentals. Blocks 2–5 each focus on one topic. In the first topical block (weeks 3 and 4), we will discuss how the tone of political campaigns and emotional appeals shape contemporary political debates, covering research documenting observational evidence on politicians' strategic use of emotive language and sentiment. The second topical block (weeks 5 and 6) focuses on relations between political competitors and the literature on negative campaigning and related attack behaviors. The third topical block (weeks 7 and 8) concentrates on populist communication and anti-elite rhetoric. In the fourth and last topical block (weeks 9 and 10), we will dive into the literature on parties' group-based rhetoric and their effects on voters. The literature covered in these blocks will be examined in a take-home exam in week 11. Finally, the last block (weeks 12 and 13) is reserved for preparing participants' final term papers.

Prerequisites

1. Mandatory participation in the first session on 10. March 2025, 16:45 – 18:15, SoWi Building, SR 5. Failure to meet this requirement will lead to deregistration from the course and a VIS status "cancellation (unexcused)" ("Abbruch (unentschuldigt)").
2. Successful completion of prerequisites, specifically modules 1, 2, 3, and 9 in the BA Political Science (see [the Curriculum](#), module 14) at latest until the second session (17. March 2025)
3. Participation in at least 11 of 13 in-person sessions, regardless of reason (this includes having a doctor's note). If you miss three or more sessions, you will receive a failing grade (NGD5).
4. Strong command of English. All course readings are in English, all discussions and presentations will be in English, and participants are expected to write their final paper in English.

Course Dates and Times

The seminar will take place in **SoWi Building, SR 5** (Universitätsstraße 15, 6020 Innsbruck). We will meet weekly Mondays for 90-minute sessions from 16:45 – 18:15. The course dates and times are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Course dates and and important deadlines

kick-off session	10. March 2025	16:45 – 18:15 CET
Fundamentals	17. March 2025	16:45 – 18:15 CET
Topic I	24. March 2025	16:45 – 18:15 CET
	31. March 2025	16:45 – 18:15 CEST
Topic II	7. April 2025	16:45 – 18:15 CEST
	14. April 2025	Eastern break
	21. April 2025	Eastern break
	28. April 2025	16:45 – 18:15 CEST
Topic III	5. May 2025	16:45 – 18:15 CEST
	12. May 2025	16:45 – 18:15 CEST
Topic IV	19. May 2025	16:45 – 18:15 CEST
	26. May 2025	16:45 – 18:15 CEST
Take-home exam	30. May 2025	tasks uploaded at 12:00 CEST
	4. June 2025	submission by 22:00 CEST
	9. June 2025	public holiday
Term paper preparation	23. June 2025	16:45 – 18:15 CEST
	23. June 2025	16:45 – 18:15 CEST
Term paper submission	28. July 2025	23:59 CEST

Course Requirements

The coursework comprises

1. active participation during our meetings,
 2. reading papers assigned as required readings,
 3. eight weekly in-class online quizzes (5 questions each) about the readings for units 3-10 (your best seven submissions will count into your total score),
 4. a take-home midterm exam in unit 11 (2. June 2025),
- and

5. a final term paper

The in-class online quizzes, the take-home midterm exam, and the final term paper will be graded. The **final grade** will be computed by applying the following formula:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{final grade} &= 10\% \text{ active participation} \\ &+ 30\% \text{ in-class online quizzes (best seven)} \\ &+ 30\% \text{ take-home midterm exam} \\ &+ 30\% \text{ final term paper}\end{aligned}$$

Required readings There are **two required readings each for units 2–10**. These readings are academic articles or book chapters. Copies of the readings will be made available via OLAT. You are expected to read each paper or chapter listed as required reading. You should take notes and bring them to class.

Weekly in-class online tests Your understanding of the required readings will be assessed by **short online quizzes in units 3–10**, that is, eight quizzes in total. You will take these quizzes independently in class via OLAT at the beginning of the respective units. Each quiz will contain **five multiple-choice questions** and you will have 10 minutes to answer them. Each correctly answered quiz question results in one point. So you can earn at most **5 points per quiz**. Your **best seven quizzes** will count. Thus, you can earn a maximum of 35 points for all quizzes. Your performance in these quizzes will **contribute 30% to your final grade**. We will take an example quiz at the end of unit 2. This example quiz will illustrate the type of questions you will need to answer in the quizzes.

Take-home midterm exam After the topical sessions of units 3–10, you will write a **take-home exam** that examines your understanding of the required readings and our related in-class discussions about these readings. The take-home exam will start on 2. June 2025 (the date of the 11th session) at noon (12:00 CEST). The exam will provide three essay questions. You will **choose one of these essay questions** and write an essay of 2500–2750 words about it. The essay will be due on 4. June 2025, 22:00 CEST and graded. Your grade in the take-home exam will **contribute 30% to your final grade**.

Term paper After the course, you will write a **term paper**. In the term paper, you are expected to identify, discuss, and address an open theoretical or empirical question in the literature we have discussed. The last two meetings of the course (and 30. June 2025) are reserved for developing and discussing the research question you will address in your term paper. The term paper should be **3500–4000 words** long, including in the count the title page, text body, footnotes, and figure and table captions, but excluding the list of references. The **deadline for submitting the final paper** is 28 July 2025, 23:59 CEST.

Generative AI policy

The use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI, software tools that create new content based on user input and pre-trained machine learning models) in VU is regulated by the AI policy of the University of Innsbruck's Computer Science Department: <https://iis.uibk.ac.at/courses/aipolicy>

Most important to reemphasize here are the following general rules:

1. You are responsible for your course work (e.g., a term paper), regardless of the information sources or tools you used to produce it.
2. You must declare any use of GenAI for any specific part of your course work.
3. You must document how you verified the GenAI output you use in your course work.
4. Violations entail zero points or a grade of NGD5 for the course work in question. Repeated violations entail zero points or NGD5 for the entire course.

Reasons for cancellation of your participation

1. You decide to drop the course: This option is available until the second session on 17. March 2025. Just inform me via email via hauke.licht@uibk.ac.at
2. If you do not participate in the first session: Should you not participate in the first session on 10. March 2025, you will be deregistered from the course (VIS status "cancellation (unexcused)"/"Abbruch (unentschuldigt)").
3. If you fail to meet the course prerequisites: Should you not fulfill the course prerequisites by 17. March 2025 (successful completion of modules 1, 2, 3, and 9 in the BA Political Science), you will be deregistered from the course (VIS status "registration declined"/"Anmeldung abgewiesen"). ERASMUS students are an exception.
4. If you miss three or more sessions: If you miss three or more sessions, you will receive a failing grade (NGD5)
5. If you repeatedly violate the GenAI policy: Repeated violations of the AI policy listed above will lead to failing the course (NGD5).

Course Outline

Kick-off session (10. March 2025)

In the first session, you will learn about (i) the course's overall topic, (ii) its learning objectives, and (iii) how to earn credits (examination mode etc.).

Required readings The course syllabus (i.e., this document).

Fundamentals

Before we dive into the course's topical blocks in weeks 3–10, we will engage with foundational literature and concepts.

Parties, candidates, and incentives (17. March 2025)

Required readings

strom_behavioral_1990: Kaare Strom (1990). "A Behavioral Theory of Competitive Political Parties". In: *American Journal of Political Science* 34.2, p. 565. DOI: [10.2307/2111461](https://doi.org/10.2307/2111461)

slapin_theories_2021: Jonathan Slapin and Sven-Oliver Proksch (2021). "Theories and Empirical Applications of Legislative Debate". In: *The Politics of Legislative Debates*. Ed. by Hanna Back, Marc Debus, and Jorge M. Fernandes. Oxford University Press, p. 0. DOI: [10.1093/oso/9780198849063.003.0003](https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198849063.003.0003)

Block I: Sentiment and Emotive Rhetoric

More often than not, how we understand what is said depends on how it is said. Thus, a large body of academic research studies the tone and role of emotions in political communication. In this first topical block of the course, we explore this literature to understand how politicians strategically use sentiment and emotive rhetoric.

Campaign sentiment (24. March 2025)

In this session, we examine studies that seek to explain the overall tone of electoral campaigns.

Required readings

crabtree_it_2019: Charles Crabtree, Matt Golder, Thomas Gschwend, and Indriði H. Indriðason (2019). “It Is Not Only What You Say, It Is Also How You Say It: The Strategic Use of Campaign Sentiment”. In: *The Journal of Politics* 82.3, pp. 1044–1060. DOI: [10.1086/707613](https://doi.org/10.1086/707613)

kosmidis_party_2019: Spyros Kosmidis, Sara Hobolt, Andrew Molloy, and Stephen Whitefield (2019). “Party competition and emotive rhetoric”. In: *Comparative Political Studies* 52, pp. 811–837. DOI: [10.1177/0010414018797942](https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414018797942)

Emotive rhetoric (31. March 2025)

In this session, we learn about research that studies the use of emotions in politicians’ speeches.

Required readings

osnabrugge_playing_2021: Moritz Osnabrügge, Sara B. Hobolt, and Toni Rodon (2021). “Playing to the Gallery: Emotive Rhetoric in Parliaments”. In: *American Political Science Review* 115.3, pp. 885–899. DOI: [10.1017/S0003055421000356](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000356)

boussalis_gender_2021: Constantine Boussalis, Travis G. Coan, Mirya R. Holman, and Stefan Müller (2021). “Gender, Candidate Emotional Expression, and Voter Reactions During Televised Debates”. In: *American Political Science Review* 115.4, pp. 1242–1257. DOI: [10.1017/S0003055421000666](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000666)

Block II: Attack Behaviors

In this second topical block of the course, we will concentrate on how parties and their representatives talk about their competitors. Political scientists have recognized early on that how voters perceive candidates’ character, ability, and competence (valence) can impact their electoral choices. In European politics, where campaigns are often more party-centered, we typically witness this tendency in the form of negative campaigning and valence attacks. Parties’ representatives routinely criticize their opponents in public to convince voters that their rivals are not capable of governing effectively and responsibly. Moreover, with the surge of populist (radical right) parties, many of us have been exposed to anti-elite rhetoric as a more extreme type of valence attack.

Negative campaigning (7. April 2025)

In this session, we will focus on when and why parties attack each other during campaigns.

Required readings

walter_when_2014: Annemarie S. Walter, Wouter Van der Brug, and Philip van Praag (2014). "When the stakes are high: Party competition and negative campaigning". In: *Comparative Political Studies* 47.4, pp. 550–573

nai_going_2018: Alessandro Nai (2018). "Going Negative, Worldwide: Towards a General Understanding of Determinants and Targets of Negative Campaigning". In: *Government and Opposition*, pp. 1–26. DOI: [10.1017/gov.2018.32](https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2018.32)

Valence attacks (28. April 2025)

In this session, we focus on how parties attack their competitors' integrity, character, and competence.

Required readings

jung_valence_2021: Jae-Hee Jung and Margit Tavits (2021). "Valence Attacks Harm the Electoral Performance of the Left but Not the Right". In: *The Journal of Politics* 83.1, pp. 277–290. DOI: [10.1086/709299](https://doi.org/10.1086/709299)

marsh_attribution_2010: Michael Marsh and James Tilley (2010). "The Attribution of Credit and Blame to Governments and Its Impact on Vote Choice". In: *British Journal of Political Science* 40.1, pp. 115–134. DOI: [10.1017/S0007123409990275](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123409990275)

Block III: Populism and Anti-Elite Rhetoric

In this third topical block of the course, we will focus on populism and how and why parties and their representatives use populist rhetoric in their public communication. Further, we will look at research studying anti-elite appeals.

Populist communication (5. May 2025)

In this session, we examine the literature on populist communication.

Required readings

rooduijn_mesmerising_2014: Matthijs Rooduijn (2014). "The Mesmerising Message: The Diffusion of Populism in Public Debates in Western European Media". In: *Political Studies* 62.4, pp. 726–744. DOI: [10.1111/1467-9248.12074](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12074)

dai_when_2022: Yaoyao Dai and Alexander Kustov (2022). “When Do Politicians Use Populist Rhetoric? Populism as a Campaign Gamble”. In: *Political Communication* 39.3, pp. 383–404. DOI: [10.1080/10584609.2022.2025505](https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2022.2025505)

optional breyer_populist_2022: Magdalena Breyer (2022). “Populist positions in party competition: Do parties strategically vary their degree of populism in reaction to vote and office loss?” In: *Party Politics*, p. 135406882210970. DOI: [10.1177/13540688221097082](https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688221097082)

Anti-elite rhetoric (12. May 2025)

In this session, we examine when and why parties attack “the elite.”

Required readings

de_vries_political_2020: Catherine E. de Vries and Sara B. Hobolt (2020). *Political Entrepreneurs: The Rise of Challenger Parties in Europe*. Princeton University Press, Chapter 6

licht_measuring_2025: Hauke Licht, Tarik Abou-Chadi, Pablo Barberá, and Whitney Hua (2025). “Measuring and Understanding Parties’ Anti-elite Strategies”. In: *The Journal of Politics*. DOI: [10.1086/730711](https://doi.org/10.1086/730711)

Block IV: Group-Based Rhetoric

Understanding the role of social classes, ethnic groups, and political movements in politics is a central theme in political science, ranging from political sociology to conflict studies. A growing body of research studies how parties and politicians relate to social groups in their public communication. In this last topical block of the course, we will dive into the literature on group-based rhetoric and its effects on voters.

Parties’ group appeals (19. May 2025)

In this first double session of this block, we will learn about the concepts of “group appeal” and how parties use them in their campaign communication.

Required readings

thau_how_2017: Mads Thau (2017). “How Political Parties Use Group-Based Appeals: Evidence from Britain 1964–2015”. In: *Political Studies*, pp. 1–20. DOI: [10.1177/0032321717744495](https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321717744495)

huber_beyond_2021: Lena Maria Huber (2021). “Beyond Policy: The Use of Social Group Appeals in Party Communication”. In: *Political Communication* 0.0, pp. 1–18. DOI: [10.1080/10584609.2021.1998264](https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2021.1998264)

optional stuckelberger_group_2022: Simon Stuckelberger and Anke Tresch (2022). “Group Appeals of Parties in Times of Economic and Identity Conflicts and Realignment”. In: *Political Studies*, p. 00323217221123147. DOI: [10.1177/00323217221123147](https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217221123147)

(In)effectiveness of group appeals and targeting (26. May 2025)

In the second session of this last topical block, we will learn about how politicians’ group-based rhetoric influences voters.

Required readings

robison_does_2021: Joshua Robison, Rune Stubager, Mads Thau, and James Tilley (2021). “Does Class-Based Campaigning Work? How Working Class Appeals Attract and Polarize Voters”. In: *Comparative Political Studies* 54.5, pp. 723–752. DOI: [10.1177/0010414020957684](https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414020957684)

huber_social_2024: Lena Maria Huber, Thomas M. Meyer, and Markus Wagner (2024). “Social Group Appeals in Party Rhetoric: Effects on Policy Support and Polarization”. In: *The Journal of Politics* 86.4, pp. 1304–1318. DOI: [10.1086/729946](https://doi.org/10.1086/729946)