Institute of Political Science (IPW) — University of Bern

Proseminar · Political Science · Autumn Semester 2026 (HS26)

Suffering Citizens

Distress, Discontent and Democracy in Contemporary Societies

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Type	Proseminar (Bachelor)	**Language**	English
ECTS	4	**Grading**	1–6
Time	Tue 16:15–18:00	**Room**	vonRoll Campus Seminarraum 003, Fabriksstrasse 2e

Course description

Something seems to be wrong in contemporary democracies. Citizens express deep distrust toward political institutions, cynicism toward elites, and resentment toward fellow citizens. Far-right parties are gaining ground, conspiracy theories circulate widely, and political debates feel increasingly hostile. Behind these visible challenges lies a less visible layer: how citizens *actually feel* about society, about their place within it, and about the political system meant to represent them.

This course takes these subjective realities seriously. We start from the idea that suffering—the felt experience of distress, grievance, and discontent—is not merely a private matter but a deeply political one. How citizens feel is shaped by how societies are structured: by the distribution of power, recognition, and resources. And in turn, these feelings shape how citizens act politically.

Together we explore: What does it mean to suffer as a citizen in a contemporary democracy? Where do feelings of distrust, resentment, and powerlessness come from? How do social scientists make sense of phenomena such as affective polarisation, marginalisation and discrimination, relative deprivation, status loss, loneliness, political inefficacy, lack of recognition, and conspiracy thinking? Are some of these forms of suffering enduring features of democratic life, while others are distinctive to our current form of liberal democracy and capitalism?

Learning outcomes

By the end of the course you will be able to...:

- name and distinguish different forms of citizen distress (political distrust, affective polarisation, marginalisation, etc.);
- explain how social scientists make sense of these experiences, using key concepts from political sociology;
- connect felt experiences of suffering to how societies are structured and to the political behaviour they fuel;
- read, analyse, and discuss scientific texts and empirical findings on citizen grievances and democratic discontent;
- apply course concepts to new topics and broader social science questions in a written assignment.

Schedule

#	Date	Topic	Reading
1	15 Sep	Introduction of the course	
Act I — The Suffering Self			
2	22 Sep	Loneliness, isolation & depression	Langenkamp
3	29 Sep	Dignity, recognition & stigma	Lundberg & Syltevik
4	06 Oct	Anomie & alienation	Carstens et al.
13 Oct — no class			
Act II — The Suffering Group			
5	20 Oct	Relative deprivation, status threat & the grievance debate	Gidron & Hall
6	27 Oct	The left behind in left-behind places	Cramer
7	03 Nov	Gender & sexism	Off et al.
8	10 Nov	Cultural backlash	Norris & Inglehart
9	17 Nov	*Overlooked sufferings: lightning round & poster session*	
Act III — Citizens vs. the System			
10	24 Nov	Political trust & distrust	Grande & Gonzatti
11	01 Dec	Powerlessness & political inefficacy	Seeman
12	08 Dec	Affective polarisation	Westheuser et al.
13	15 Dec	*Essay exam*	

Readings by session

Week 2 — Loneliness, isolation & depression

Langenkamp, Alexander (2025). Linking social deprivation and loneliness to right-extreme radicalization and extremist antifeminism. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 63.

Week 3 — Dignity, recognition & stigma

Lundberg, Kjetil G., & Syltevik, Liv J. (2024). Welfare stigma in a social democratic welfare regime during a decade of national public debate: production, contestation and continuities. *European Societies*, 26(5), 1572–1595.

Week 4 — Anomie & alienation

Carstens, Jens, Freitag, Markus, & Herren, Nathalie (2026). *The Political Heterogeneity of Anomia*. Working paper (currently under review), University of Bern.

Week 5 — Relative deprivation, status threat & the grievance debate

Gidron, Noam, & Hall, Peter A. (2017). The politics of social status: Economic and cultural roots of the populist right. *British Journal of Sociology*, 68(S1), S57–S84.

Week 6 — The left behind in left-behind places

Cramer, Katherine J. (2016). *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Week 7 — Gender & sexism

Off, Gefjon, Charron, Nicholas, & Alexander, Amy (2022). Who perceives women's rights as threatening to men and boys? Explaining modern sexism among young men in Europe. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 4. doi:10.3389/fpos.2022.909811

Week 8 — Cultural backlash

Norris, Pippa & Inglehart, Ronald (2019). *Cultural Backlash – Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, "Chapter 1: Understanding Populism."

Week 10 — Political trust & distrust

Grande, Edgar, & Daniel Saldivia Gonzatti (2025). A Revolt of the Distrustful? Political Trust, Political Protest and the Democratic Deficit. *Journal of European Public Policy* 32 (8): 1986–2014. doi:10.1080/13501763.2024.2447457.

Week 11 — Powerlessness & political efficacy

Seeman, Melvin (1959). On the meaning of alienation. *American Sociological Review*, 24(6): 783–791.

Week 12 — Affective polarisation

Westheuser, Linus, Lux, Thomas, & Mau, Steffen (2026). Why do Public Debates Escalate? Trigger Points and the Moral Dynamics of "Hot Politics." *The British Journal of Sociology.* doi:10.1111/1468-4446.70115

Assignments

- Active course participation (10%): attendance and substantive contribution to discussion; assessed pass/fail.
- Group presentation (40%): In groups of three, you identify a form of citizen suffering that this course has overlooked and make the case that it belongs on the syllabus. You explain how it is rooted in societal structure and its political consequences. Poster session and lightning round in Session 9 (Nov 17), individual one-pager due 23 Nov. Group assignments and topics are finalised in week 7.
- Written exam (50%): A written exam in the final session (15 Dec), sat in class without electronic devices. Short questions on core course concepts, followed by one longer essay testing critical thinking. You may bring your notes (open book).

Students who miss Session 9 for documented reasons submit an extended individual paper on the same topic in place of the poster, pitch, and one-pager. Please contact me prior. Absence from the written exam for documented reasons is handled according to the standard regulations; contact me as soon as possible.

Deadlines

- **03.11.2026** — Groups and presentation topics finalised (Session 7, in class)
- **17.11.2026** — Poster session & lightning round (Session 9, in class)
- **23.11.2026** — Individual one-pager due, 23:59
- **15.12.2026** — Written exam, in class, 16:15–18:00 (Session 13)

Important note: If you struggle with any of the deadlines or assignments — let me know *before the deadline* and we will figure it out together!