

ONLINE COMMUNICATION AND POLITICAL RHETORIC

Winter Term 2024/25

Freie Universität Berlin

Forschungsprojekt mit Nachwuchsforschenden – X-Student Research
Group

Instructor:	Dr. Rebecca Kittel, Freie Universität Berlin & WZB
Email:	rebecca.kittel@fu-berlin.de
Time:	Friday, 10:00 - 17:00 (see schedule)
Location:	Garystr. 55, Seminarraum B
Office Hours:	By appointment or after class.

1. Course Description

This X-Student Research Group will focus on how political communication can help us to understand political processes and protest movements by analysing social media data. The project is directed towards students who have an interest in Computational Social Science Methods.

We will discuss different quantitative methods to analyse political and protest rhetoric by looking at various online text sources. Afterwards, students will pick one data source and define their own research goal. The course teaches students (i) state-of-the-art literature of online communication in politics and protest; (ii) how to collect data using web-based methods; (iii) how to analyze huge datasets through computational methods; (iv) basic coding skills in R and/or Python; and (v) how to present research output to a wider audience. The course is designed in an interactive way that consists of teaching blocks and input by the instructor as well as independent research by the students. As such, all stages of a research process in Sociology/Political Science are covered in this course.

More precisely, we will decide on a case study (protest movement, e.g. Fridays for Future) and detect various data sources to analyse their communication strategies on different platforms. Students will collect their own data and then apply different methods to that data. Aim is to answer a commonly decided research question that connects protest movements and political discourse.

2. Target Audience and Course Objectives

The X-Research project is directed towards Master's and advanced Bachelor's students who have an interest in Computational Social Science Methods. This includes students from programs of Political Science, Sociology or any related fields as well as students from Computer Science who share an interest in the Social Sciences. Students do not need particular knowledge or need to meet any pre-requirements. However, they should be able and willing to read English literature and participate in English during the course. Also, a prior knowledge of R and/or Python is an advantage. This is, however, no formal requirement as long as students are willing to learn some basic coding skills in R and/or Python which will be taught during the course. As students will work in teams, different levels of R and/or Python are seen as advantages as students will be able to help each other.

On the one hand, students will learn state of the art research on protest camp research with a strong focus on online communication strategies. The course will focus on protest literature and explores what we know so far. The course aims to connect protest literature to party politics and how protests and party behaviour interact.

As such, students will learn how to read scientific papers and discuss them in class. We will focus on pitfalls, but also strengths of the required readings, so that students are prepared to conduct their own research.

3. Participation in an X-Student Research Group and Course Requirements

Students from all universities within the Berlin University Alliance are allowed to register for the X-Student Research Group. To register for the X-Student research group, please check out the following [Link](#).

Students can receive 6 LP for participating in the X-Student Research Group. The credit points can be earned in the interdisciplinary compulsory elective area (üWP) (überfachlichen Wahlpflichtbereich (üWP)) / in the free elective area (im freien Wahlbereich)/ in the compulsory elective area (im Wahlpflichtbereich) / in the study area General Vocational Preparation (ABV) (im Studienbereich Allgemeine Berufsvorbereitung (ABV)) for both Bachelor's and Master's degree programmes. In addition, for some compulsory elective modules have been approved by the examination boards. Upon application to the responsible examination board, there is the possibility of individual crediting in your own degree programme. Possibilities for credit transfer should be clarified in advance with the examination office in advance.

Requirements:

Students are required to have done the assigned readings before each class. Further on students are required to actively participate in the course and take part in the discussions and the collaborative work. As such, students have to define their own sub-research questions. They will also collect their own data of a protest from different online channels using web-scraping methods that are taught in class. After the data collection, students will apply different computational methods depending on their own research question and evaluate their data. In the end, students will present their work (data collection and analysis) in a poster format which the students will then also be able to present at the Berlin Conference of Student Research on **October 2025**. No exam or other formal requirements are expected.

4. Course Outline

Session 1 (October 25, 2024, 10:00-12:00): Introductory Meeting

- What is quantitative text analysis? And how can we use it to analyse political protest?
- Introduction to text-as-data as well as protest literature
- Outline of the course, case study we want to analyse (possible case study: *Fridays for Future*)
- **Literature:**
 - Grimmer, Justin and Brandon M. Stewart. 2013. Text as Data: The Promise and Pitfalls of Automatic Content Analysis Methods for Political Texts. *Political Analysis*, 21(3), 267-297.

Session 2 (November 22, 2024, 10:00-17:00): Political Discourse and Introduction to R

- How is protest politicised? And how is protest communicated?
- Setting up R
- Loading datasets, running some basic commands
- Practical session: Working with R → **Please bring your Laptop!**
- What are possible data sources to analyse protest behaviour?
- Students should start thinking of questions they are interested in and that they aim to answer during the course of the X-Student Research Group
- **Literature:**
 - Bremer, B., Hutter, S. & Kriesi, H. (2020), Dynamics of protest and electoral politics in the Great Recession. *European Journal of Political Research*, 59: 842-866.
 - Eltantawy, N., & Wiest, J. B. (2011). The Arab Spring— Social Media in the Egyptian Revolution: Reconsidering Resource Mobilization Theory. *International Journal of Communication*, 5(0), Article 0.
 - Staes, L., & Wouters, R. (2023). “Indoctrinated by the left!.”: How politicians respond to street protest on social media. *New Media & Society*, 0(0)
 - Schürmann, L. (2023). The impact of local protests on political elite communication: evidence from Fridays for Future in Germany. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 34(3), 510–530.

Session 3 (November 29, 10:00-17:00): Research Design and Data Management

- What is the research question you are interested in?
- Overview of computational social science methods to analyse our data
- Scraping data from the web (e.g. press releases, Telegram messages,..)
- Practical session: Working with R → **Please bring your Laptop!**
- **Literature:**
 - Erfort, C., Stoetzer, L. F., & Klüver, H. (2023). The PARTYPRESS Database: A new comparative database of parties’ press releases. *Research & Politics*, 10(3).
 - Gessler T. & Hunger S.(2022) How the refugee crisis and radical right parties shape party competition on immigration. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 10(3):524-544.
 - Milan, S. (2014). The Ethics of Social Movement Research. In D. della Porta (Hrsg.), *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research* (S. 0). Oxford University Press.
 - Minkoff, Scott L. (2018). A Guide to Developing and Writing Research Papers in Political Science. Website: www.scottminkoff.com/guides/ , last accessed July 2022.

Week 4 (December 6, 10:00-17:00): Analysing Text Data through Computational Methods - 1

- Dictionary Approaches
- Tone and complexity detection

- Topic models
- Validation strategies
- Practical session: Working with R/Python → **Please bring your Laptop!**
- **Literature:**
 - Breyer, M. (2023). Populist positions in party competition: Do parties strategically vary their degree of populism in reaction to vote and office loss? *Party Politics*, 29(4), 672-684.
 - Kathirgamalingam A., Lind F., Bernhard-Harrer J. & Boomgaarden H.G. (2024). Agree to Disagree? Human and LLM coder bias for constructs of marginalization. Working Paper. <https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/agpyr>
 - Kittel, R. C. (2022). ‘Language Complexity in Parliament: Use and Effect of Simple Language Among Populist and Mainstream Actors in Parliamentary Debates’. Working Paper, 1–26.
 - Widmann, T. (2020). ‘How Emotional Are Populists Really? Factors Explaining Emotional Appeals in the Communication of Political Parties’. *Political Psychology* 41(1): 163–81.

Session 5 (December 13, 2024 10:00-17:00): Analysing Text Data through Computational Methods - 2 & Guest Lecture

- Presenting your results, graphical analysis using R
- Discussing and collecting our results
- Practical session: Working with R → **Please bring your Laptop!**
- **Afternoon Guest Lecture:** Dr. Mirko Wegemann (University of Münster) will give a talk on *From Word Embeddings to Transformer Models*, with hands-on lab session
- **Literature:**
 - Barberá P, Casas, A., Nagler, J., Egan, P.J., Bonneau, R., Jost J.T & Tucker, J.A. (2019). Who Leads? Who Follows? Measuring Issue Attention and Agenda Setting by Legislators and the Mass Public Using Social Media Data. *American Political Science Review*, 113(4):883-901.
 - Casas, A., & Williams, N. W. (2019). Images that Matter: Online Protests and the Mobilizing Role of Pictures. *Political Research Quarterly*, 72(2), 360-375.
 - Wegemann, M. (2024). What Do You Stand For? The Incoherence of Positional Ambiguity and its Consequence for Party Competition. Working Paper. 1-40.
 - Widmann, T. & Wich, M. (2022). Creating and Comparing Dictionary, Word Embedding, and Transformer-Based Models to Measure Discrete Emotions in German Political Text. *Political Analysis*. 1-16.

Session 6 (January 17, 2025, 10:00-12:00): Pizza and Presentation Session

- What are our results? What are their implications?
- How can we present these results to a broader audience? Poster Format!
- What did we not find out and how could we address that in future research?
→ **Please bring your Laptop!**