



When Representation Fails. The Government–Citizen Disconnect

Lecture by Armin Schäfer

Tuesday, March 26, 2019

Room A 300, 4 pm

“Wir sind das Volk”, “defending the heartland”, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”—these are the rallying cries of populists across the globe. If nothing else, a strong anti-elitism unites those parties and movements. However, it remains unclear why this assertion would resonate with citizens if they felt well represented. Citizens who largely think that democracy is working well, that politicians care for their opinions and act on behalf of them, should be immune to populist agitation. Yet, we observe the rise of populist parties in most established democracies. In my talk, I argue that populist parties succeed because they can capitalize on a real deficit in the workings of representative democracy. Recent research has shown that political decisions are biased in favor of better-off citizens across rich democracies. The perception of less resourceful citizens that politics is working against their interests has a real foundation since parliaments often implement policies that are not in line with these groups’ political preferences. Hence, populists point to real existing biases and address groups who feel poorly represented.

Empirically, there is a close link between the perception of a lack of responsiveness and either abstention or the vote for right-wing populist parties. An analysis of voting patterns in 15 European countries and a closer look at the German case support this argument. Citizens who feel poorly represented turn away from established parties—and become either politically inactive or articulate their dismay in a variety of ways. Supporting protest parties is one of the possible reactions. Thus, unequal responsiveness creates the breeding ground for populism. Accepting this insight, while rejecting the populist tale that they speak for “the people” might help to conceive of an effective strategy to defend liberal democracy.

Armin Schäfer is Professor of Political Science with a focus on Comparative Politics at the University of Münster.

This event is part of the “Democracy Research Lecture Series”.

To register, please reply by March 25, 2019 to Friederike Theilen–Kosch:
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Invitation

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Our event location is wheelchair-accessible. If you need support, please let Friederike Theilen–Kosch know: friederike.theilen-kosch@wzb.eu

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