Wealth, Politics, and the Ethics of Democracy

Type de cours : CMINT
Langue du cours : English

Enseignante(s) / Enseignant(s) responsable(s) du cours / *Professor(s)*

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Résumé et objectifs du cours / *Course description - Targets*

The democratic ideal of *"one person, one vote"* is often challenged by the influence of wealthy individuals, corporations, and interest groups. Scandals like *Qatargate* or recurring conflicts of interest fuel public concern. But even in ordinary times, is it fair to say that we live in a *plutocracy* – government by the wealthy? This course explores the links between wealth and political power in contemporary European democracies. How does wealth translate into influence? Through which channels? And how can democratic equality be restored? We will pursue three goals:

- **Theoretical**: Understand how political institutions shape the influence of money – through campaign finance, electoral systems, media ownership, lobbying, and more.
- **Empirical**: Compare how different European democracies regulate money in politics and how much inequality in political participation and representation they exhibit.
- **Methodological**: Learn to analyze these issues using scholarly articles, focusing on comparative and causal strategies in political economy.

Each session includes:

- **A collective discussion** of a required academic article, based on your questions and insights;
- **A very brief individual presentation** on a comparative factual question (e.g. *"In which EU country are private donations to parties the highest and the lowest per capita?"*)
- **A debate** between student groups on a related motion (e.g. *"Voting should be compulsory"*);
- **A wrap-up** connecting the session to broader academic debates.

Modalités d'évaluation / *Assessment*

Attendance is mandatory, and active participation is essential. Each session starts around the discussion of one academic article. For each session, you are expected to:

- Read the paper before class.
- Bring one insight (something that surprised or interested you) and one or two clarification questions.

In addition, each student will:

- Give one brief – snapshot – presentation on a factual comparative question about EU countries;
- Participate in two structured debates during the semester – once in favor and once against a motion;
- Sit for a final written exam at the end of the course.

Grading breakdown:
- Class participation (including preparation, in-class contributions, and factual snapshot): 20%
- Debates (two grades, one per debate): 40%
- Final exam: 40%

Comparative Snapshot Presentation

Each student will prepare and very briefly present a comparative fact related to the theme of the session. The goal is to identify the EU country where the phenomenon is strongest and the one where it is weakest, using available data.
- You will be assigned one factual question in the first session.
- During the session, you will present your findings in 3-4 minutes.
- Your presentation should include:
  1. The definition and measurement of the concept (e.g. inequality, campaign spending, media concentration, etc.).
  2. Your source: where the data comes from (e.g. Eurostat, OECD, academic paper, NGO reports).
  3. The top and bottom countries in the EU for that indicator.
  4. One short comment on a surprising result or on possible data limitations.

You may use a simple slide or visual (e.g. chart or map) to support your explanation, but this is not mandatory.

Debates

Each session features a debate between two teams of two students, centered on a motion related to the topic of the day. One team argues in favor of the motion, the other against. Arguments must be supported by concepts and theories from political economy and, as much as possible, empirical data.

Structure:
- **Opening arguments** (7 minutes per team): Presentation of your position and main arguments.
- **Rebuttal** (4 minutes per team): Response to the opposing team's arguments.
- **Closing statement** (1 minute per team): Summary of your key points.

A student moderator ensures timekeeping and fairness. At the end, the class votes for the most convincing team.

Final Exam

The final written exam includes:
- Short-answer questions covering the main readings and classroom discussions.
- One commentary on a quotation or news item related to the themes of the course, requiring you to mobilize concepts and insights from the literature studied.

Plan des séances / *Course schedule (détails susceptibles d'évoluer)*

	Subject	Required reading	Factual question	Debate motion
1	Introduction	/		/
2	Unequal policy responsiveness	Mathisen, R. B. (2023). Affluence and influence in a social democracy. *American political science review*, *117*(2), 751-758.	In which EU country is income inequality the highest and the lowest?	Education gives more political power than money in Europe.
3	Social origins of politicians	Dal Bó, E., Finan, F., Folke, O., Persson, T., & Rickne, J. (2017). Who becomes a politician?. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *132*(4), 1877-1914.	In which EU country do the most and the fewest MPs come from working-class backgrounds?	Politicians should come from the same social background as the people they represent.
4	Private party funding	Baltrunaite, A. (2020). Political contributions and public procurement: evidence from Lithuania. *Journal of the European Economic Association*, *18*(2), 541-582.	In which EU country are private donations to parties the highest and the lowest per capita?	Private donations to political parties should be capped.
5	Public party funding	Broberg, N., Pons, V., & Tricaud, C. (2022). *Spending Limits, Public Funding, and Election Outcomes* (No. w29805). National Bureau of Economic Research	In which EU country does public funding represent the largest and the smallest share of party income?	Public party funding fosters political stagnation.
6	Campaign spending and electoral outcomes	Bekkouche, Y., Cage, J., & Dewitte, E. (2022). The heterogeneous price of a vote: Evidence from multiparty systems, 1993–2017. *Journal of Public Economics*, 206, 104559	In which EU country is campaign spending per voter the highest and the lowest?	Campaign spending should be strictly limited.
7	Media ownership and public opinion	Durante, R., & Knight, B. (2012). Partisan control, media bias, and viewer responses: Evidence from Berlusconi's Italy. *Journal of the European Economic Association*, *10*(3), 451-481.	In which EU country is media ownership the most and the least concentrated?	Mass media shape public opinion.
8	Lobbying and the revolving door	DellaVigna, S., Durante, R., Knight, B., & La Ferrara, E. (2016). Market-based lobbying: Evidence from advertising spending in italy. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, *8*(1), 224-256	In which EU country are MPs subject to the strongest and weakest financial transparency rules?	Politicians should be better paid.
9	Turnout gap between rich and poor	Schafer, J., Cantoni, E., Bellettini, G., & Berti Ceroni, C. (2022). Making unequal democracy work? The effects of income on voter turnout in Northern Italy. *American Journal of Political Science*, *66*(3), 745-761.	In which EU country is the turnout gap between rich and poor the largest and the smallest?	Voting should be mandatory.
10	Electoral systems and redistribution	Iversen, T., & Soskice, D. (2006). Electoral institutions and the politics of coalitions: Why some democracies redistribute more than others. *American political science review*, *100*(2), 165-181.	In which EU country is the electoral system the most and the least proportional?	No debate / conclusion

Information concernant le plagiat / *Plagiarism*

Il faut impérativement prendre connaissance de la charte anti-plagiat que vous trouvez sur le site de Sciences Po Grenoble – UGA. Le plagiat est formellement interdit et susceptible de sanctions disciplinaires. Les travaux écrits rendus en version électronique seront analysés par un logiciel de détection du plagiat (Compilatio).

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Bibliographie indicative / *Bibliography*

Gilens, M. (2012). *Affluence and influence: Economic inequality and political power in America*. Princeton University Press.

Cagé, J. (2020). *The price of democracy: How money shapes politics and what to do about it*. Harvard University Press.