Francis Bacon thought that knowledge is power, but many contemporary studies of democracy disagree with him. At first sight it seems rather trivial that the more knowledgeable citizens are about political matters, the better they can express their preferences through the vote, and there is overwhelming empirical evidence that most people have an extremely haphazard understanding of political issues. Yet democratic governments are not entirely out of touch with citizens’ preferences. How is this possible? Would it make any difference in election outcomes if people were better informed? Are all citizens really equal at the voting booth despite the striking differences between their level of political knowledge and sophistication?

This course reviews answers to these question in contemporary empirical studies of electoral behaviour. First we will examine why most citizens in democratic elections lack motivation to be informed about political matters, and why a few citizens nevertheless end up with exceedingly high levels of political knowledge. Is it true that everyone is just as knowledgeable about the issues they really care about as they can possibly be, or are there reasons to believe that some people are chronically ignorant even about the issues that they care about most? Do the politically ignorant have systematically different preferences than the politically more knowledgeable? Is it possible, as many scholars argue, that ingenious information shortcuts – such as observing the campaign behaviour of candidates, or watching polls, or listening to the advice of trusted sources – assure that people with identical political preferences vote much the same way, irrespectively of their political knowledge level?

After reviewing the extensive and contradictory literature on these issues, we shall contemplate whether there is any evidence that better informed citizens are more likely than ignorant electorates to bring such governments into power that match citizens preferences on major political issues. If yes, how much difference does the political information level of the electorate makes in election outcomes, and what factors explain that some countries have less knowledgeable voters than others? If the political information level of the voters makes no difference in how closely governments match popular preferences, then how is this possible? What kind of theories or observations can explain this result and what the implications for 21st century governments are?

Participants in the course are expected to participate actively in the discussions about these topics and 20 percent of their grade will be based on their in-class contributions. Another 30 percent of the grade will depend on their short summaries of the arguments of the required readings, which will have to be turned in before class. These summaries are expected to reconstruct both the argument and the empirical evidence put forward by the readings on the agenda of the class. Finally, the remaining 50 percent of the grade will be based on a 10 to 15-
The course is divided into 10 classes running in the second half of January. The topics and readings for each class are listed below, following a list of recommended readings that are relevant for the whole course.

**Recommended readings:**


1. Introduction: the major schools and issues in electoral research. Basic findings of the Columbia, Michigan, and Rochester schools

Recommended readings (there are no mandatory readings for the first two classes):


2. Campaign information and election outcomes: does it matter after all? The state of the art answers in election studies.

Recommended reading:

3. Democracy and voter inequality: the example of turnout. Determinants and consequences of turnout and the paradox of voting. Can the unequal intensity of preferences explain unequal participation? Can citizen involvement in politics be equal across groups with different preference profiles?

Mandatory readings:


Mandatory reading:

5. The problem of (mis)information in the sociological model of the vote. Two-step information flows, social conformity and cue-taking effects in interpersonal and impersonal communication

Mandatory readings:
6. The problem of information in the psychological model of the vote. The nature of party identification and the problem of on-line vs. memory based information processing.

Mandatory readings:

7. The problem of non-attitudes and the existence of policy preferences in the mass public. From Converse’s black-and-white model of attitude formation to the “out-of-top-of-our-head” model of the survey response.

Mandatory readings:

8. Cognitive shortcuts and the Drunkard’s Search: why we deploy them and why they fail us?

Mandatory readings:

9. Political attitude differences by political knowledge level and the impact of deliberative polls on the attitudes. The impact of political information level on electoral outcomes.

Mandatory readings:
10. The impact of citizens’ information level on what governments do.

Mandatory reading: