

Course Evaluation: PhD course SOS9238 – Cultural backlash and the rise of authoritarian populism (Spring 2025)

Date: July 3, 2025

Course Responsible: Katrine Fangen

Summary of participants' feedback

The course received overwhelmingly positive feedback from participants. All respondents indicated that they had received sufficient information prior to the course start and found the course highly relevant to their research and interests. Participants particularly valued:

- The course's relevance and well-designed structure, offering both a comprehensive overview of existing literature and insights into cutting-edge research on cultural backlash, populism, and authoritarianism.
- The diversity of lecturers, who brought different perspectives to the subject matter, fostering a stimulating academic environment.
- The interactive atmosphere, with meaningful discussions between lecturers and participants, as well as balanced readings that combined introductory and more advanced materials.

Participants also appreciated the variety of topics covered, which aligned well with the intended learning outcomes of developing theoretical, analytical, and research competencies related to cultural backlash, populism, and authoritarianism.

Areas for improvement

Several constructive suggestions were made for improving the course in future iterations:

- **More focus on societal cleavages:** A deeper exploration of social divides beyond voting behavior and existing theories of illiberalism could enrich the analytical scope.
- **Additional information about course requirements:** Some participants wished for clearer guidelines about the final essay and the participants' presentations earlier in the course.
- **More interactive elements:** Suggestions included incorporating small group discussions or collaborative exercises during lectures, which could work well given the small group size.
- **Broader involvement of UiO faculty:** Some participants proposed inviting more local faculty to provide short lectures on various aspects of authoritarianism.

Assessment of learning outcomes and teaching methods

The course content and organization were well aligned with the stated learning outcomes:

- **Knowledge and understanding:** Participants reported gaining a strong grasp of key theoretical frameworks and contemporary debates, fulfilling the goal of developing a comprehensive understanding of cultural backlash, populism, and authoritarianism.
- **Analytical and research skills:** The combination of lectures, readings, discussions, and the research paper requirement supported participants in critically analyzing empirical research and applying appropriate methodological approaches.
- **Practical and scholarly engagement:** Through class discussions and preparation for their own presentations and papers, participants engaged with policy implications and broader societal debates, consistent with the course's objectives of fostering scholarly contribution and public sociology.

The teaching was generally perceived as very good, though with some variation in pedagogical delivery across lecturers. While lectures by Daphne Halikiopoulou and Katrine Fangen were highlighted as fitting well within the course structure, it was noted that some guest lectures (e.g., by Jupskås and Kotsadam) were less pedagogically engaging, though still intellectually interesting.

Adjustments made during the course

The course included ample space for lecturer-student interaction, which allowed for ongoing adaptation to participants' interests and questions. This responsive approach helped address emerging needs, although no formal structural adjustments were reported during this iteration.

Recommendations for further development

For future deliveries of the course, the following recommendations will be considered:

- Providing more explicit information on the expectations and deadlines for the final essay and presentations at the beginning of the course.
- Exploring opportunities to incorporate more interactive activities such as small group discussions or workshops.
- Considering inviting additional UiO faculty to present on different dimensions of authoritarianism to leverage local expertise.
- Possibly broadening the focus to include deeper discussion of societal cleavages beyond electoral behavior.

Conclusion

Overall, the course successfully met its objectives and provided participating PhD candidates with valuable theoretical, analytical, and methodological insights into cultural backlash, populism, and authoritarianism. The positive and engaged feedback from participants confirms the relevance and quality of the course content and teaching. The constructive suggestions offered will serve as important input for continuous improvement.

This evaluation will be shared with the course owner and all participants and will be posted on the Faculty's webpages in accordance with university guidelines.