



Vested Interests and Democracy

Research Workshop

with a keynote lecture by [Prof. Emanuela Ceva](#) (University of Geneva)

Dates: Thursday, December 9 and Friday, December 10, 2021

Location: University of Zurich, Switzerland

Co-hosted by the [Doctoral Programme Democracy Studies](#) and [DemocracyNet](#)

Organized by

Olivier Ruchet (University of Zurich, Department of Political Science) and
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Call for Papers

Topic of the Workshop

The institutions and mechanisms of democratic politics make it possible for a variety of interests to be included in decision-making and law-making processes. This can happen through formal processes like public consultations and formal hearings, but also through informal contacts between interest holders/interest representatives and political decision-makers. Yet, in the past decades, the regular occurrence of corruption scandals and lobbying affairs (such as, most recently, the COVID-19 mask affair in the German Bundestag) have fueled public distrust in democratic politics. Skeptical voices have argued that contemporary democracies are broken or corrupt because politicians are subservient to a narrow circle of societal actors instead of serving the public interest. Although the complexity of modern democratic politics may justify that politicians seek input from interest groups, the potentially excessive influence of such groups raises concerns about the integrity of politics and political decision-makers. The blurred line between legitimate interests that are a necessary component of democratic politics and illegitimate (“vested”) interests that corrupt democracy and the political discourses and practices surrounding it will be at the center of this workshop.

The aim of this workshop is to explore the role of (“vested”) interests in a democracy and to highlight the manifold theoretical and empirical issues that this topic raises from the perspective of democracy studies broadly defined, such as:

- What does an “interest” mean conceptually? To what extent does it differ from related concepts, such as “opinions” and “perspectives”? Is there such a thing as a “public interest”, the “common good” and, finally, “vested interests”? How are these various concepts defined philosophically, legally, etc.?
- Can qualitative and quantitative empirical approaches help us operationalize and measure the aforementioned concepts? What can these approaches tell us about political decision-makers’ (“vested”) interests?
- Who are the actors who hold and who represent interests in a democracy? How can these interests be identified? Are the interests of ordinary citizens, civil society organizations, corporate actors, trade unions, political parties, public officials, non-citizens, foreign actors, and non-human entities (e.g., animals and the environment) equally important from the perspective of democratic decision-making, or should they be weighed differently?
- What does the critique of vested interests (e.g. corruption, lobbying, and state capture) tell us about democratic politics? What are the normative criteria that make it possible to distinguish between legitimate and

illegitimate interests/interest representation in democratic politics? At what stage do interests corrupt democracy?

- What influences the success or failure of specific interest holders/interest representatives in democratic politics, e.g. in terms of agenda-setting, articulating and defending viewpoints, and gaining the support of political decision-makers? What legal and institutional mechanisms enable the inclusion or exclusion of specific interests? How does interest representation differ in democratic and non-democratic contexts?
- What institutional arrangements can help to prevent the emergence of vested interests and to include other relevant interests in democratic politics?

This workshop aims at bringing together researchers from various disciplines (including, but not limited to, political science and political theory, law, philosophy, history, and sociology) in academic discussions about the topic of the workshop. The aim of the workshop is for early career researchers (including PhD candidates and postdoctoral researchers) to present their working papers or project proposals and to gain feedback from all participants as well as from senior scholars. Last but not least, we are delighted to announce that the workshop will also include a public keynote lecture by Prof. Emanuela Ceva (University of Geneva).

General Information and Guidelines for Participation

The research workshop is part of the Doctoral Programme Democracy Studies (DPDS) at the University of Zurich and is organized by DemocracyNet. The workshop is open to early career researchers (including PhD candidates and postdoctoral researchers) working in this field. We encourage applications from researchers from a broad range of disciplines who are interested in democracy studies in general, and in the study of interest groups and interest representation in particular. Each participant is invited to present a current research paper, which will be shared with the participants ahead of the workshop. Participants are expected to attend the whole workshop.

We aim to hold the workshop physically at the University of Zurich. However, further adjustments may be necessary due to the epidemiological situation.

Doctoral students may be awarded 1 ECTS for successful participation. Conditions for participation include attendance at the entire workshop (including the keynote), active participation, and the provision, ahead of the workshop, of written feedback to two speakers.

Application

Researchers interested in participating as presenters can apply by sending an abstract of up to 500 words and a short CV to olivier.ruchet@uzh.ch by Friday, September 10.

Researchers interested in attending the workshop without presenting can apply by sending an email to olivier.ruchet@uzh.ch by Friday, October 1. As the number of spots is limited, the selection will be on a first come, first served basis.

Costs and Grants

The workshop is free of charge. As a matter of principle, travel and accommodation are at the expense of participants. We will do our best to cover the travel and accommodation costs of a small number of participants who cannot get funding via their institution. Please contact us as soon as possible if you would require such funding.

Further Information

DemocracyNet is a non-partisan and non-profit association of researchers in democracy studies that was founded in 2011. For more information about DemocracyNet, its members and other project activities, please visit <http://www.democracynet.eu/>.