

Dr. Kamil Bernaerts

POST-DOCTORAL RESEARCHER IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

Summary

I am an ambitious, critical and collaborative post-doctoral researcher specializing in the relationship between (affective) polarisation and democracy, with broad interest in all forms of political polarisation and conflict. My research examines both how affective polarisation is (not) linked to democratic attitudes, and how democratic institutions shape polarisation dynamics and their consequences for democratic societies. In my dissertation, I combined theoretical advancement of the concept of polarisation with extensive empirical analysis. Winner of the prestigious Frank Cass Prize 2023 for best article in *Democratization*, my published work spans polarisation, institutional design, deliberative democracy, and political violence.

Positions

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| 2025-2026 | Guest professor (10% ZAP)
UHasselt
<i>Course: Introduction to Political Science and Governance (SSW)</i> |
| 2025-2026 | Post-doctoral researcher
Vrije Universiteit Brussel
<i>Program: Evaluating Democratic Governance in Europe (EDGE)</i> |
| 2021-2025 | PhD candidate
Vrije Universiteit Brussel & University of Warwick |

Education

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| 2021-2025 | PhD in Political Science
Vrije Universiteit Brussel & University of Warwick
<i>Successful public defence held at VUB on September 15, 2025</i>

Dissertation title: "Friends or Foes: Does polarisation really undermine democracy? Understanding the two-way relationship between polarisation dynamics and the processes and institutions of democratic contestation."

<i>Supervisors: Didier Caluwaerts (VUB) & Michael Saward (Warwick)</i> |
| 2020-2021 | Master of Science in Political Sciences: European and International Governance
Vrije Universiteit Brussel

<i>Graduated Summa Cum Laude</i> |
| 2017-2020 | BSc in Social Sciences
Vrije Universiteit Brussel & Universiteit Gent
Minor Political Science

<i>Graduated Magna Cum Laude</i> |
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Prizes and awards

I have been awarded the Excellence Award by the Faculty for being the top student in my master's program. Then, I have been awarded an EUTOPIA PhD scholarship to fund my PhD research. In 2024, I have been awarded the Frank Cass Prize for best article featuring in the journal Democratization in 2023.

March 2024	Frank Cass Prize for Best Article of 2023 Democratization, journal
June 2021	EUTOPIA Co-tutelle Scholarship for joint PhD Program EUTOPIA university alliance
June 2021	Excellence Award Faculty of Economy and Social Sciences, Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Teaching experience

In this academic year (2025-2026) I temporarily fill in as guest-professor at the UHasselt to teach an introductory course in political science. Before, I have given guest lectures on polarisation and statistics, and supervised multiple bachelor and master theses.

2025-2026	Guest-professor UHasselt (10% ZAP) Course: Introduction to Political Science and Governance Program: Bachelor's in social sciences (UHasselt)
2025-2026	Bachelor thesis workshop: polarisation and democracy Supervision of 3 bachelor theses Program: Bachelor's in political science (VUB) Prof. Dr. Didier Caluwaerts & Prof. Dr. Dimokritos Kavadias
2025-2026	Guest lecture: polarisation and democracy, a complicated relationship Course: Democratic Theory and Practice Program: Bachelor's in Social Sciences (VUB) Prof. Dr. Eline Severs
2024-2025	Bachelor thesis workshop: polarisation and democracy Supervision of 4 bachelor theses Program: Bachelor's in political science (VUB) Prof. Dr. Silvia Erzeel
2023-2024	Bachelor thesis workshop: polarisation and democracy Supervision of 5 bachelor theses Program: Bachelor's in political science (VUB) Prof. Dr. Silvia Erzeel
2023-2024	Guest lecture: exploring quantitative research methods Course: Research methodology Program: Master's in political science (VUB) Prof. Dr. Vjosa Musliu
2022-2023	Bachelor thesis workshop: polarisation and democracy Supervision of 5 bachelor theses Program: Bachelor's in political science (VUB) Prof. Dr. Dimokritos Kavadias
2022-2023	Guest lecture: polarisation and democracy Course: Challenges to Democracy Program: Master's in political science (VUB) Prof. Dr. Didier Caluwaerts

Presentations

I have presented working papers in 13 international academic conferences or workshops.

- 2026 **Polarising alone? The relationship between social contact and affective polarisation in Belgium and the UK**
Presentation at State of the Federation (Antwerp)
- 2025 **Friends or Foes: Does polarisation really undermine democracy? Understanding the two-way relationship between polarisation dynamics and the processes and institutions of democratic contestation**
PhD defence presentation (VUB)
- The Polarisation Paradox? Rethorizing Political Division in Democracy**
Presentation at the Political Studies Association Conference (Birmingham)
- 2024 **"Your liberty ends where mine begins". Which forms of polarisation lead to political intolerance?**
Presentation at State of the Federation (Liège)
- 2023 **"Your liberty ends where mine begins". Which forms of polarisation lead to political intolerance?**
Presentation at WVS Conference: (De)polarisation in values, attitudes & beliefs (London)
- Polarising alone? Exploring Social Capital's Mitigating Effect on Polarisation**
Presentation at International Conference of Europeanists: Europe's past, present and future (Reykjavik)
- Fight or Unite? How Satisfaction with Democracy Moderates the Relationship between Affective Polarization and Support for Political Violence**
Presentation at International Conference of Europeanists: Europe's past, present and future (Reykjavik)
- Divided we fall? How polarization shapes (anti-)democratic process preferences**
Presentation at ECPR General Conference (Prague)
- Democracy: still the only game in town? Unpacking polarisation's influence on democratic, autocratic and technocratic preferences**
Presentation at Politicologenetmaal (Maastricht)
- Fight or unite? A global view on how institutions moderate the link between affective polarization and political violence**
Presentation at MPSA Conference (Chicago)
- 2022 **Polarisation: to feel or not to feel?**
Presentation at Filolab Polarization and Social Change Summer School (Granada)
- Hot or cold? Disentangling the concept of polarisation**
Presentation at ECPR General Conference (Innsbruck)

Navigating the cobweb: toward a conceptual typology of polarisation

Presentation at State of the Politicologenetmaal (Nijmegen)

Fight or unite? How democratic institutions moderate the link between polarization and political violence

Presentation at State of the Federation Conference (Brussels)

Beyond the culture wars? Assessing the socio-economic determinants of affective polarization

Presentation at State of the NORFACE GOVERNANCE Mid-Term Conference (Vienna)

2021 **Institutional design and polarisation: do consensus democracies fare better in fighting polarisation?**

Presentation at State of the Federation Conference (online)

Publications

This overview only includes published or accepted articles, datasets and books.

2026 **Bernaerts, K. (2026).** Affect or emotions? Disaggregating affective polarisation to explain support for liberal democracy in Belgium and the United Kingdom. *Political Studies Review* (accepted)

2026 **Bernaerts, K. (2026).** PhD Summary: Friends or Foes, Does Polarisation Really Undermine Democracy? Understanding the Two-Way Relationship Between Polarisation Dynamics and the Processes and Institutions of Democratic Contestation. *Politics of the Low Countries*, 8(1).

2026 **Bernaerts, K.;** Caluwaerts, D. (2026) State of the Unions: survey experiment on various forms of polarisation and democratic consequences in Belgium and the UK. *VUB Institutional Data Repository*.

2025 **Bernaerts, K.;** Caluwaerts, D. (2025) Fight or unite? Exploring the link between consensus institutions, polarization and political violence in 113 democracies over time (1900-2023). *International Political Science Review* (Online First)

Bernaerts, K. (2025) Friends or foes: does polarisation really undermine democracy? VUBPRESS Brussels University Press

2023 **Bernaerts, K.,** Blanckaert, B., & Caluwaerts, D. (2023). Institutional design and polarization. Do consensus democracies fare better in fighting polarization than majoritarian democracies? *Democratization*, 30(2), 153–172.

Caluwaerts, D., **Bernaerts, K.**, Kesberg, R., Smets, L. & Spruyt, B., 2023, *Frontiers in Political Science*. 5(1127372).

Articles in draft

Here I list the articles I am currently working on and/or are under review.

2026 **Bernaerts, K.,** Junius, N. (2026) Polarising alone? The relationship between social contact and affective polarisation in Belgium and the UK (under review)

Bernaerts, K., (2026) Rethinking polarisation: how its conflictual origins explain a contested relation with democracy (under review at *Politics of the Low Countries*)

Bernaerts, K., Kavadias, L. (2026) Smarty-pants vs Simpletons? Exploring affective polarisation between education-based groups (working paper)

Bernaerts, K. (2026) Hate, not dislike. A refinement of the relationship between affective polarisation and anti-democratic attitudes. (under review at *Politics*)

2023 **Bernaerts, K.**, Matthieu, J., Junius, N. & Caluwaerts, D. (2023). Beyond the culture wars? Assessing the socio-economic determinants of affective polarization (working paper)

Professional service

2025 **Academic workshop co-organizer**
Co-organized international workshop “Polarising Performances or Re-engaging the Audience?” at University of Warwick

2024 **Panel chair**
World Values Conference on (De)polarisation in values, attitudes & beliefs: comparative perspectives, King’s College London

2022 **Panel chair**
ECPR General Conference, University of Innsbruck

2022-2025 **Peer review**
Acta Politica
Social Science Quarterly
Social Inclusion
European Journal of Political Research
Nature Human Behaviour

Community service

2026 **Personal blog**
At my personal website, I write [blog articles](#) about my research or matters of interest related to my research for a wider audience. One of these articles was [republished](#) by the Hannah Arendt Instituut.

2023- 2026 **VUB PACT School Tour**
For the VUB-organized Pauwels Academy of Critical Thinking (PACT) school tour, I give [lectures](#) in secondary schools in Flanders on polarisation and democracy.

2022-2024 **Political Science and Sociology Junior Talks**
Co-organizer of a bridging organisation between the departments of political science and sociology which held weekly seminars where junior researchers could present their work across the disciplines.

2022-2025 **Public lectures and debates**
In my role as researcher connected to the valorisation organisation the Hannah Arendt Institute, I have given 10 presentations to the broader public in schools, public events and public debates. I have built a trusted expert status and am still asked regularly to give debates.

2022-2024 **Media occurrences**
The article “Institutional design and polarization. Do consensus democracies fare better in fighting polarization than majoritarian

democracies?” has been featured in Belgian media such as [Knack](#), [Het Laatste Nieuws](#), [RTBF](#) and [Bruzz](#).

Languages

Dutch	Native language
English	Proficient

Relevant research skills

Analysis	3 years of experience (self-taught) in R for own research purposes, limited experience in SPSS and Stata
Data-collection	Scripted and fielded my own survey experiment of 2000 respondents in Belgium and the UK for my PhD research project.

References

Didier Caluwaerts	Associate professor, DFUTURE, Vrije Universiteit Brussel didier.caluwaerts@vub.be
Michael Saward	Full professor, PAIS, University of Warwick m.j.saward@warwick.ac.uk
Nino Junius	FWO post-doc fellow, DFUTURE, Vrije Universiteit Brussel nino.junius@vub.be