

Call for Abstracts: ESPAnet Germany PhD Workshop 2027

"Contested Welfare - Contested Democracy"

Democracy and the welfare state are among the central defining characteristics of modern societies, and both are under considerable pressure to transform. Democracies are confronted with growing polarization, authoritarian tendencies, and an erosion of the principles of the rule of law. At the same time, welfare state arrangements face demographic shifts, funding issues, problems of legitimacy, and social inequalities. Historically, welfare states have played a central role in mediating the tension between inequalities produced by capitalist markets and democratic promises of equality and social inclusion; for instance, by providing unemployment benefits and pensions that protect people from market risks, ensuring access to education and healthcare regardless of individual income, and redistributing resources through progressive taxation and social transfers. Yet this relationship has never been free of contradictions: Welfare states have reduced social inequalities while also reproducing social hierarchies and boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, and democratic politics have contributed both to the expansion and restriction of social rights. Rather than telling a straightforward story of social progress, the history of democracy and the welfare state is thus also a history of social struggles over who deserves protection, who belongs, and how resources, opportunities, and life chances are distributed.

Today, growing economic inequalities, ecological transformation, migration, and changing patterns of work and care raise new questions about this relationship. How do welfare state institutions shape social relations, political participation, and democratic legitimacy? How do social inequalities, power relations, and political conflicts reshape social rights and solidarity? And how do welfare states and democracies enable or constrain societies' capacity to respond to major transformations? We welcome contributions exploring these questions from different theoretical, empirical, and comparative perspectives.

The ESPAnet Germany PhD Workshop 2027 will be hosted by Potsdam University of Applied Sciences on February 24–25, 2027. ESPAnet Germany cordially **invites contributions from doctoral researchers at any stage of their dissertation that address the links between democratic transformations and welfare states**. Comparative papers are highly welcome,

as well as those taking a longitudinal perspective. Methodologically, the workshop is open to a broad range of approaches and analytical perspectives. Admitted participants will be expected to **submit their workshop paper by 25 January 2027** and **give a 15-minute presentation** at the workshop. Each paper will receive **individual feedback** by a senior scholar at the workshop. Confirmed paper discussants include Agnes Blome, Stefanie Börner, Christopher Grages, Friederike Römer, Thorsten Schlee, Nhat An Trinh, Jana Windwehr, Hannah Zigel, Katharina Zimmermann.

This ESPAnet Germany workshop is a joint endeavor of the working group on welfare state research of the German Political Science Association (DVPW) and the Social Policy Section of the German Sociological Association (DGS). It is organized by Hannah Zigel (TU Dortmund) and Agnes Blome (FH Potsdam) in collaboration with the German Institute for Interdisciplinary Social Policy Research (DIFIS).

Please apply with a short abstract (max. 1 page, including research question, theory, and analytical approach) to the organizing team (phd.workshop.espanet@difis.org) by 30 November 2026. The abstract should clarify how the research relates to the workshop topic. Notification on acceptance of abstracts will be sent mid-December 2026.