Call for Papers

Politics of Commitment. Militant Subjectivity and Democratic Contestation

Workshop: 22 January 2027, University of Vienna, Department of Political Science
Organisation: Denis Vyaznikov and Anna Wieder

Commitment is indispensable to political action. Political projects require actors who are willing to stand in for particular principles, causes, or collective aims, to sustain their engagement over time, and to act together with others. While strong political commitments can generate collective agency and involvement in political struggles, they can also give rise to exclusion, dogmatism, ideological closure, and an unwillingness to expose one's position to contestation. This ambivalence is particularly challenging for democratic politics: On the one hand, democracy requires politically engaged actors who are prepared to commit themselves to collective projects and sustain them over time. Without such commitments, democratic politics risks being reduced to episodic participation, procedural decision-making, or the management of already existing interests. On the other hand, strong commitments may undermine the very openness and contestability that democracy requires.
The workshop approaches commitment as a problem for political theory and political philosophy. It sets out to fathom which forms of commitment are necessary for politics as well as what kinds of are compatible with the openness, contingency, and conflictuality of democratic politics. How can commitment enable collective political action without foreclosing disagreement and contestation? Can political commitment be strong without becoming absolute, and remain open to revision without losing its binding force? We seek to examine the conditions under which political commitments emerge, how they are sustained and transformed, and how they relate to political subjectivation, collective action, conflict, and democratic practice. In doing so, we aim to bring into dialogue different approaches to commitment, including understandings of commitment as political obligation, loyalty, identification, partisanship, decision, promise, or collective practice. The question of political commitment and political binding force will be explored along the following four lines of discussion:

1. Commitment under Conditions of Contingency: Binding without Foundations
One point of departure is the tension between the need for political binding force and the absence of any ultimate ground that could guarantee such bindingness. Given the contingency of political orders and relations, identities and institutions cannot be grounded in an unquestionable foundation. Yet political action seems to require forms of commitment through which contingent decisions, political projects, and collective identities acquire a degree of durability and practical force. How, then, can political commitment be conceived under conditions of contingency? Does commitment suspend contingency, or is contingency itself constitutive of political commitment? What is the relationship between commitment and decision? Can political actors commit themselves to something whose validity cannot be guaranteed by an ultimate foundation? And how does commitment bind present actors to future possibilities?

2. Commitment and Political Subjectivation
Another question concerns the relation of commitment and subjectivity: does commitment require a stable political subject, or are practices of commitment involved in the very processes of political subject constitution? Through political identification, association, and shared practices, actors may become part of a collective project whose boundaries, aims, and identity remain politically contested. To what extent does commitment constitute political subjectivity

rather than merely express an already existing identity? How do individual commitments become collective political projects? What is the relationship between commitment, identification, affect, solidarity, and political association? How does a political *we* emerge through practices of commitment, and what forms of inclusion and exclusion accompany its constitution?

3. Commitment, Conflict, and Dissensus

Another central tension concerns the relationship between political commitment and democratic discourse/practice. Political projects require a certain degree of stability, persistence, and identification. Yet strong commitments may also become sources of dogmatism, ideological closure, or fanaticism where political subjects fully identify with and absolutely invest in a sacred value. Fanatical actors refuse compromise, reject deliberation, and treat their cause as non-negotiable. This raises a difficult question: can conflicts rooted in such ultimate convictions ever produce democratic effects, or are they simply incompatible with democracy? Can one remain committed to a political project while remaining open to the possibility that one's commitment is mistaken, incomplete, or in need of transformation? What role do antagonism and dissensus play in sustaining or challenging political commitments? Is exposure to contestation a limitation of commitment, or a condition of its democratic character?

4. Symbols, Practices, and Institutions of Commitment

A final line of inquiry concerns the practices and institutions through which political commitments acquire binding force. Political actors make proposals, affirm decisions, negotiate, promise, declare, or otherwise establish claims that acquire collective significance. While acts of political binding often rely on moral norms and legal institutions, the question remains as to what makes these commitments politically effective. What role do promises, declarations, narratives, symbols, and political performances play in producing collective bindingness? And what is the relationship between commitment and institutions? Can institutions sustain political commitments over time without neutralising their conflictual and contingent character? Conversely, what happens to political commitments when the ideas of a movement become institutionalised?

The workshop invites contributions that engage with these questions and, more broadly, with the relationship between different notions of commitment such as conviction, devotion, identification, and solidarity on the one hand, and political concepts such as subjectivation, dissensus, antagonism, collective action, decision-making, and institution. We are particularly interested in contributions that approach commitment from post-foundational and radical democratic perspectives, while also welcoming genealogical, deliberative and critical theoretic engagements from a broad range of disciplinary and intellectual traditions.

Format

The workshop focuses primarily on discussion and collective engagement with the approaches and contributions of the participants. Speakers will be asked to circulate their papers in advance. We kindly ask participants to stick to a 5000 word limit. Each contribution will be followed by a short response identifying central points for discussion.

20 minutes presentation, 5 minutes response, 35 minutes discussion.

Submission

Please submit an abstract of 300–500 words, together with a short biographical note and institutional affiliation.

Deadline for abstracts: 31 October 2026
Notification of acceptance: 15 November 2026
Submission of papers: 6 January 2027

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