Léandre Benoit

Mattan Family Scholarship 2026 – 2027



Programme: DPhil, Politics, University of Oxford
Biography (IN ENGLISH): Léandre Benoit is pursuing a DPhil in Politics at the University of Oxford. Sitting at the intersection of political parties, the radical right, and democracy, his doctoral research asks a simple but fundamental question: do voters care about democracy, and when and why do parties use democracy against one another? As radical parties have risen and consolidated around the world, and as citizens have grown more divided in their understanding of what democracy means, the question of who counts as a legitimate democratic actor has become central to modern politics. Léandre asks whether democracy has moved from the rules of the game to the game itself, and under what conditions it can be defended. Throughout his DPhil, he is leveraging Large Language Models to develop state-of the-art methods to better measure and understand political parties' positions on issues.

His interest in the contested nature of democracy began in Nicaragua. He travelled there in 2018 with an international cooperation project, returning the following year to co-lead it, bringing students to work alongside remote communities building school facilities. His participation in the project coincided with mass protests against the Ortega government. What struck him most was that both sides claimed to be defending democracy. This was a demonstration of democracy as a contested concept that can be eroded from within by the very people claiming to protect it. He was fascinated by Nicaragua's history and place in the world which led him to study international relations at the Université de Montréal. Turning to political parties in the European Union, his research for a MA in Political Science studied how the radical right's success has shaped mainstream party positions. Short research visits in Germany and the Philippines enabled him to see how politics works outside Canada and learn how to study it. His doctoral research is where all these interests finally meet.

Léandre grew up in a small town near Gatineau (Quebec), just across the river from Ottawa. Politics was rarely discussed at the dinner table, but growing up in the shadow of Parliament Hill and the Peace Tower intrigued him and drew him to study politics. Looking ahead, he hopes to bring that work home to the Parliament Hill he grew up beside. By identifying more effective ways of talking about democracy to increasingly fragmented citizens, Léandre's research offers practical insights into how Canadian political actors can respond to democratic pressures coming from the south and from within, while preserving strong and distinctive democratic traditions. He hopes his research will speak to policy makers, journalists, and civil society actors who seek to counter the normalisation of far-right discourse and defend democracy without deepening polarisation.

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