Political Communication

- Department of Political Science, Central European University
- Winter 2019 4 credits, Master Level
- Class meetings: Tuesday/Thursday 17:20-19:00 (Location TBA)
- Instructor: Gabor Simonovits (simonovitsg@ceu.edu)
- Office hours: Tuesday/Thursday 14:00-16:00 (Please email me 24 hours in advance if you want to come by, and tell me what you would like to discuss)

Overview

This course explores the role of the media in politics with a particular focus on how mass and social media influence political attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. The goal of the seminar is to (1) introduce students to the basic concepts of political communication, (2) engage with some of the most important debates over the role of media and (3) demonstrate the strength and weaknesses of empirical research methods used to study these questions. We will do so through reading research articles that contribute to empirical debates using innovative use of data and methods and use these lessons to generate new ideas through in-class discussions.

Given the scope of the literature on political communication – and the limits of my expertise - it is impossible to do more than scratching the surface. Thus, the content of this seminar will be highly selective with regards to both substantive topics (focusing mostly on micro-level rather than structural phenomena), research methodology (focusing almost entirely on large N quantitative analysis) and regional focus (mostly drawing on research focusing on the USA and other industrialized democracies). Finally, given the enormous changes in the media environment with the advent of social media and the proliferation of online news, we will emphasize some of the most recent literature on these topics and also consider the impact of the changing media structure when discussing earlier research.

Pre-requisites

The substantive content of the seminar will be self-contained though some interest/experience in micro-level research in politics would helpful. More importantly, because some of the most interesting debates that we will discuss center on measurement and the establishment of causal effects, previous exposure to quantitative methods at the graduate level is strongly suggested. Depending on the taste and previous exposure of students to substantive and methodological literature, I am open to push the discussion to both directions.
Learning outcomes, requirements and grading

There are three goals that this seminar seeks to achieve. At the most basic level, all participants are expected to develop an understanding of the key concepts in the study of Political Communication. Second, discussions of the assigned empirical research articles should provide participants with tools to critically read contemporary empirical research and to stimulate new ideas that (at least some) participants can use in their own research (e.g. their MA-thesis). Finally, the more practical assignments are meant to improve skills in presentation, writing and problem-solving.

To achieve these goals, the following requirements are expected (with respective weights in the final grade in parentheses):

1. **Participation**: This seminar will be based almost entirely on discussions of readings. Thus, active participation is absolutely necessary. (10%)

2. **One-page memo about readings**: Each participant is expected to write a memo for each class, based on the readings. These memos are not meant to be summaries of the readings (since everyone is expected to read all assigned material). Instead, they should include the following:
   a. How do the readings advance our knowledge (if at all)?
   b. What are the key limitations and scope conditions?
   c. What are the key normative implications?
   d. 3 questions that you would like to discuss in class

   [Note that these memos will not be graded but will count towards the participation grade.]

3. **Short presentations of two research articles**: Over the course, each participant is expected to give two short (10-15 minutes) presentation on one of the readings assigned for that week. These presentations should be supported by a slides and should (1) explain the argument, method, results of the paper (2) place it in a broader context (3) criticize its methods or inferences (4) facilitate a discussion of the arguments in the paper. (2 X 15%)

4. **Group assignments**: Course participants will be required to complete two assignment in pairs. These assignments will entail work beyond reading scholarly articles (see schedule for details). For each assignment, participants will submit a short report not exceeding 4 pages (with tables/figures when necessary) and also present these memos in class. (2X 15%)
5. **Research design/closed book exam**: At the end of the seminar, participants are expected to submit a research design that could (and hopefully will) serve as an eventual paper. The submitted paper should include (1) a research question that is grounded in the literature covered during the seminar (2) the description of a possible approach to study this question. The design should be realistic though the paper itself is not expected to report results. The submitted paper should not exceed 6 pages.

Students who do not wish to submit a research design, may ‘test-out” by taking a closed book examination in the 12th week. The exam will include 4 short essay questions covering theoretical concepts and empirical findings covered through the course. (30%)

**The course format**

The class will take the form of a seminar in which we discuss articles and book chapters. In some cases, I may prepare a short lecture to contextualize the readings (for instance, summarizing earlier debates on the topic). Otherwise, the topics discussed will be determined by the one-page memos prepared by the students. As such, the quality of these discussions will be highly dependent on the willingness of participants to (1) make an effort to carefully read the assigned material (2) critically engage with the texts before class meetings and most importantly (3) participate in the discussions in class.

For some classes part of the meetings will be allocated to presentations and discussions of assignments. These activities are meant to illustrate how he concepts and methods covered in the readings can be applied to particular cases or employed for solving practical problems. Similarly to the discussion of research articles active participation is expected.

**Readings**

The readings for the class will predominantly be selected from peer-reviewed political science journals with some occasional book-chapters and some podcasts. Because some of the classes will require large amounts of reading I strongly encourage participants to develop their own strategy to read empirical research effectively. This means that (1) you do not have to understand everything the article says but (2) you should make an effort to get your head around the key arguments (where effort includes looking up things online as well as skimming additional papers cited in the article). All readings will be shared in a PDF form on the e-learning site. See weekly breakdown below.
SCHEDULE

Week 1: Introduction & history

[What should the media be doing for democracy? Does it do it? How economics and technology shapes these roles?]

A: Introduction

- Watch The Post (Spielberg 2017) before class
- The Ezra Klein Show: Jay Rosen is pessimistic about the media. So am I.

B: Economics and technology


Week 2. Comparing media regimes

[How can we conceptualize and measure variation across media systems? How do they matter?]

Assignment 1: Build a case for or against public ownership in the media

A: Media regimes in democracies


B: Private vs. public media

Week 3: Media effects: Overview and methods

[How does the media shape public opinion? We start by discussing key theoretical accounts and methodological challenges in estimating media effects.]

A: Accounts of media effects


B: Methods for identifying media effects

- Green, Donald P., Brian R. Calfano, and Peter M. Aronow. (2014): Field experimental designs for the study of media effects. *Political Communication*

Week 4: Evidence on media effects 1

[We first zoom in on two accounts of media effect. Framing, or the different presentation of issues to influence attitudes, and priming, to raise the salience of issues when evaluating governments.]

Assignment 2: Select an issue and collect frames from two online news portal from opposing sides

A: Evidence on framing

- Iyengar, Shanto. (1990) Framing responsibility for political issues: The case of poverty *Political Behavior*
B: Priming


**Week 5: Evidence on media effects 2**

[We continue by looking at how the media can influence the public agenda, with an attention to how things changed with the internet. Then we go on and look at aggregate political impact of media.]

**Assignment 3: Read two online news portal and make notes on topics on domestic/foreign policy**

A: Agenda setting

- McCombs, Maxwell E., and Donald L. Shaw. (1972): The agenda-setting function of mass media." *Public opinion quarterly*

B: Persuasion


**Week 6: Evidence on media effects 3**
[We close by examining the effect of news media on political knowledge and misinformation]

Assignment 4: Design a proposal to counter false news.

A: Learning

B: Misinformation

Week 7: Communication between politicians and citizens
[How politicians engage with citizens directly]

A: Interviews, press releases and going public
B: Targeted communication

- Hersh, Eitan D (2018): Hearing before the United States Senate Committee on the judiciary. Written Testimony of Eitan Hersh

Week 8: Campaigns and elections

[Experiments almost surely overstates media effects. So, how big are they really?]

Assignment 5: **Presentation on a proposed campaign strategy**

A: The effect of campaigns

- Kalla, Joshua L., and David E. Broockman. The minimal persuasive effects of campaign contact in general elections: Evidence from 49 field experiments *American Political Science Review*
- Gerber, Alan S., et al. (2011) How large and long-lasting are the persuasive effects of televised campaign ads? Results from a randomized field experiment. *American Political Science Review*

B: Campaign strategies

- Nickerson, David W., and Todd Rogers. 2 (2014): Political campaigns and big data. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*
- Broockman, David E., and Donald P. Green. 2 (2014): Do online advertisements increase political candidates’ name recognition or favorability? Evidence from randomized field experiments. *Political Behavior*
Week 9: Selective exposure and polarization

A: Selective exposure


B: (Social) media and polarization

- Barberá, P. (2014) How social media reduces mass political polarization. Evidence from Germany, Spain, and the US. Working paper

Week 10: Communication between citizens

Assignment 6: Design a proposal to moderate FB

[Leaving the media for a week, we explore direct communication between citizens online and offline.]

A: Cross-cutting networks and deliberation


B: Incivility and bullying

- Listen to Post no evil by Radio lab https://www.wnycstudios.org/story/post-no-evil
- Angela Nagle (2018): Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4Chan And Tumblr To Trump And the Alt-Right (selected chapters)
Week 11: Media in non-competitive regimes 1

[We take a departure from democratic politics and explore the role of media in autocratic systems. We first discuss possible typologies of media freedom and then discuss the effect of censorship]

A: Media freedom

- Burgess, J. (2010). Evaluating the evaluators: Media freedom indexes and what they measure., working paper

B: Censorship


Week 12: Media in non-competitive regimes 2

[We further explore how autocratic/hybrid regimes can use the media to manipulate citizens]

A: Media capture

- Szeidl A., and F. Szucs (2017) Media Capture through Favor Exchange working paper

B: Propaganda