POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Department of Political Science
Central European University
Fall 2017
2 credits, Master Level

Classes: Tuesday
Instructor: Marina Popescu (mpope at ceu.edu)
Office hours: Wednesday 11:00-13:00 and by appointment.

Course objectives
This MA-level course provides an overview of the main topics, approaches, and methodologies in the study of political communication. It explores the range of actors involved in political communication and how the information flows between them matter for democratic politics.

We critically examine key concepts used in lay and academic discussions to identify problems, causes and consequences in the political communication domain such as democratic performance of the media, media vs. political logic, mediatization, public sphere, media system characteristics, pluralism, polarization, fragmentation, information quality, political bias, accuracy, media effects, agenda setting, priming, framing, gatekeeping.

Each week we shall disentangle the interactions between citizens, mass media, and political actors in the production, transmission, and reception of political messages with a different analytical focus, which is indicated in the topic description for the week. We look at how these interactions depend on the characteristics of each of the three, and on contextual, societal and political differences. We will reflect on how these issues travel to the digital environment and how the changes brought by the internet link up to the fundamental questions about how citizens can make sense of politics and relate to democratic political processes.

The course provides students with a postgraduate-level understanding of:
- selected concepts and research methods in political communication, political marketing, and election campaign studies;
- current techniques used by political and social actors in traditional media as well as online political communication; and
- critical perspectives on and issues in political communication, political marketing, and election campaigns.

Learning outcomes
- Appropriate level understanding and critical review of the social science literature in the field of political communication.
- Conceptual frames and research skills for the analysis of political communication; ability to assess a range of theories and methods
- Foundations to compare and contrast the role and impact of media and communication in politics and political processes in different settings
- Skills to identify and analyze media framing and agenda setting as well as campaign and information effects on public opinion
- Apply theories and methods to developments and issues not specifically covered by the course
Course format and requirements
The course will alternate short lectures, students’ presentations, and exercises, and will link big theoretical and normative questions with real world examples.

Class participation is essential as interactivity and learning from each other are at the core of what should be an enjoyable and not just useful experience. Active participation involves comments and questions based on the required literature, the lecture, and the presentations. Attendance is your responsibility but class participation is likely to be essential for the successful completion of the course not least because the final exam paper will include topics discussed in class but not covered by the mandatory readings.

Course assessment

35 % - Presentations

Students need to give a presentation on a topic to be covered in class based on background / recommended readings, internet searches, and the required readings. Clear guidelines for preparing and delivering these presentations will be discussed during the first class of the course on 31 October. Students need to prepare handouts for the presentations. Handouts will represent 50% of the grade on presentations, and final revised versions have to be submitted before the end of the term (8 December).

Late submission policy – Materials not received before the class following the deadlines announced on e-learning cannot be submitted later unless there is a compelling and documented reason.

15 % - Class participation

Grading will take into consideration the active and meaningful participation of students in class discussions. It is essential that you make your contributions in a constructive way, based on a careful and critical reading of all required materials, and facilitating that everyone in class gets involved in a civil and focused discussion.

10 % - Exercises

Individual and group exercises will be assigned for some of the classes. The frequency and content of the exercises depends on the number of students registered. The aim of the exercises is to apply key concepts from readings and cases presented in class to similar examples and real-life problems that students should be able to critically analyze. Detailed instructions for exercises will be given prior to the tasks.

40% Final exam (in-class open book)

The exam will include 1) a few questions that require very brief answers on definitions or basic concepts and 2) one question that refers to more than one concept. For the analytical question the answer is supposed to be a concise, well written essay (you can use examples in the essay that are not only based on the assigned readings). Your answer will have to incorporate a tight argument while evaluating different positions from the scholarly literature.
The final exam will take place in week 12.

**Required preliminary readings**
To ensure that we have a basic common ground in class, please make sure you understand well the topics and concepts in the following readings, which you can consult at your own pace during September and October:


**Recommended general readings for the course:**
=http://skin.issuu.com/v/light/layout.xml&showFlipBtn=true
or
http://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Books/Public%20Sentinel.htm
COURSE STRUCTURE AND MANDATORY READINGS

Note:
The mandatory readings (marked*) may be adjusted as the course goes along to touch upon specific interests among the students. At all times, the most up-to-date version of the syllabus shall be posted on the e-learning site. Further recommended readings for specific topics will be provided throughout the course, including scholarly review articles, classic and state-of-the-art research papers, and theoretically or practically relevant non-academic works when appropriate.

WEEK 1: The arenas and boundaries of politically relevant communication. What makes for ‘good’ information from various normative and empirical perspectives? The main actors, concerns, regulatory arenas and public goods at stake in shaping media systems (31 October)


or (you choose which version of the authors’ text you read):


WEEK 2: What makes it into the information flow: gatekeepers, selection mechanisms, priorities. Structural determinants of the availability of ‘good’ information in mass media (7 November)

2.1. News values. Journalistic norms, media logic and media economics.


2.2. Media system characteristics and their relevance for the emergence of an informed citizenry.

WEEK 3. Political logic vs. media logic. The changing relationship between media and political actors (parties, interest groups, political movements) Political actors fight back: Spin, open government and direct communication. (14 November)


WEEK 4: Communication effects. The place of message and recipient characteristics. The state of evidence and research methods on agenda-setting, priming, framing, learning and persuasion effects (21 and 28 November – 3 classes)

* Students will choose 6 required readings from the list below (in its incarnation in week 1) and selected to cover the range of communication effects covered by the class and readings. A per topic selection will be discussed in week 1. The list of readings below is for your information. It will be updated and readings for presentations will be discussed with the instructor.

** Presentations for this week/topic will be of two types: summaries of theories/types of effects that could work as a handbook entry on the topic and presentations of a particular interesting/imporant issue such as the contingent nature of effects on individual citizen characteristics or on political context characteristics.


Agenda-setting, priming


Framing


Cumulative effects. Uses and gratification

Choice availability, selectivity and their consequences
Bias. Selectivity. Attention. Polarization


Media malaise. Anti-politics. Anti-democratic?


Two-step flow – interpersonal


WEEKS 5 & 6. Election campaigns and their impact from normative and empirical perspectives. The complex effects of advertisements and negativity. Big data and micro-targeting (28 November and 5 December – 2 classes)

*3-4 required readings can be chosen such as to cover as wide a range of issues covered by the class and readings. Note that now the readings are ordered alphabetically and there is no mention of topic/question. A per topic selection will be discussed in week 1.


http://journalistsresource.org/studies/politics/ads-public-opinion/negative-political-ads-effects-voters-research-roundup


