Introduction to Political Communication

Gabor Simonovits, Winter 2021

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Logistics

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Class meetings:

• Mondays, 13:30-15:10
• The course will be conducted on Zoom.

Course Description

This is an introductory course to political communication that explores the role of information and persuasion in political phenomena. The readings we will discuss will be primarily descriptive in the sense that they will seek to explain rather than to evaluate political processes. In our discussions we will rely on these pieces of evidence to discuss the normative implications of the patterns we find.

The course will be organized around three broad topics. First, we will consider citizens and explore how they acquire, process and discuss political information. Second, we will consider the media and discuss the various ways in which it shapes the attitudes and behaviors of citizens. Finally, we will describe political elites in both democratic and autocratic countries and assess how they communicate with their citizens.

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) and research methodology (focusing almost entirely on large N quantitative analysis). 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.
Learning Outcomes and Assessment

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 research articles should provide participants with tools to critically read contemporary 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, students are graded on the following activities.

Presence and Participation

Students are expected to be actively present at all lectures and seminars. In case you are unable to attend, you need to inform the instructor via email prior to the meeting you are going to miss or in the case of a medical emergency provide the appropriate proof.

During the seminars you are expected to reflect critically on the mandatory readings and to engage in discussions with your fellow students and the instructor. Questions and stimulating interaction during the lectures will be positively evaluated as well. As some might be more shy than others and because our class might be bigger than average, everybody is encouraged to send questions, suggestions, and comments via Perusall where all the mandatory readings are available. Activity on Perusall counts towards the participation grade.

Reflection papers

Throughout the course students will write two reflection papers. The position papers should briefly summarize the content of the mandatory readings for a particular session and then critically reflect on them. The length of the position papers should not exceed two pages (double-spaced).

The reflection papers should briefly summarize the papers at hand and mostly focus on developing your own thoughts. Papers originality of evaluative comments. For full credits, students should reflect on readings in light of additional material they read on the subject (i.e. read some of the recommended readings too). Students writing position papers for a class are asked to share their evaluative comments/questions in the seminar.

Assignments/presentations

Course participants will be required to give presentations and lead the following discussion in pairs (or groups of three) in one of the class meetings. These presentations will cover either recommended readings for a given topic or applying the readings on real world political phenomena. See the available topics below (topics will be assigned at the first class meeting). Recommended readings available for presentation are denoted with *.
Research design

Students are asked to submit a research design in which they propose an empirical approach to answer a question related to course. The submitted paper should pose a research question of interest, summarize the relevant literature and describe a research design that could be deployed to answer that question. In effect, paper should resemble a short journal article in its structure, without the actual findings. The final essay must not exceed 10 pages (double-spaced) including references. During the course students will submit a 1 page long memo describing their research question, and a 4 page long literature review that provides some context to their proposed design. The instructor will provide feedback to these materials and they should form the basis of the eventual research design.

Grade composition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation (in-class and Perusall)</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group presentation and class lead</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two reflection papers</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research question</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Literature review</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research design</td>
<td>30%</td>
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</tbody>
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The grading follows the standard scale adopted by the Department of Political Science:

A: 100-94; A-: 93-87; B+: 86-80; B: 79-73; B-: 72-66; C+: 65-59; F: 58-0

Students who audit the class are expected to be present at all sessions, to do the mandatory readings, and to actively participate in class discussions. Auditing students do not have to submit any written assignment, nor take part in the group presentation.
Course outline

Week 1: Introduction

In the first week of the course we will discuss what the subject and the brief intellectual history of political communication, as a discipline.

Mandatory reading/Audio:


Ezra Klein and Jay Rosen

Part 1 – Citizens

In this first part, we focus on members of the mass public as the consume, process and disseminate politically relevant information.

Week 2: Searching and processing information

We consider the determinants of citizen’s demand for information. In particular, we assess how motivation and opportunity to learn interacts in the learning process. We also discuss how pre-existing beliefs shape the search and processing of information and explore the trade-off between the – often competing goals of learning the truth and reinforcing one’s beliefs.

Assignment:

Mandatory readings:


Recommended readings:


Andrew M Guess, Michael Lerner, Benjamin Lyons, Jacob M Montgomery, Brendan Nyhan,
Week 3: Ideological segregation and echo-chambers

“Echo-chambers” have become a buzzword in contemporary analyses of the news media. The unprecedented proliferation of news-sources on the internet and social media has made it possible for citizens to expose themselves to an extremely large array of viewpoints. At the same time it has also give rise to closed ecosystems of groups with homogeneous views – often sealed off from one another.

Mandatory readings:

Christopher A Bail, Lisa P Argyle, Taylor W Brown, John P Bumpus, Haohan Chen, MB Fallin Hunzaker, Jaemin Lee, Marcus Mann, Friedolin Merhout, and Alexander Volfovsky. Exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 115(37):9216–9221, 2018

Andrew M. Guess. (almost) everything in moderation: New evidence on americans’ online media diets. Forthcoming

Recommended readings:


Jaime E Settle. Frenemies: How social media polarizes America. Cambridge University Press, 2018

Week 4: Freedom of speech and canceling

One of the key intellectual debates of our time concerns the tension between the values of free of speech on one hand and the right to emotional safety on the other. We will consider the arguments on each side of the debate.

Mandatory audio/video:

A Letter on Justice and Open Debate

Ezra Klein v. Yacha Mounk: Free speech, safety, and the letter
Part 2 – The media

In the second part of the course we consider media outlets as producers of information and interpretation.

Week 5: Independence and bias

In this session we will consider some basic normative issues pertaining to the media. First, we will discuss what independence of media outlets mean. Then we will dwell on how media bias can be conceptualized and measured.

Mandatory readings:


James Hamilton. *All the news that’s fit to sell: How the market transforms information into news*. Princeton University Press, 2004 Selected chapters


Recommended readings:


Week 6: Frames and framing

Framing refers to the process by which facts are given meaning by the context. This week we will study the production of frames by the media and the impact of these frames on mass opinion.

Mandatory readings:


Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman. The framing of decisions and the psychology of choice.

Recommended readings:


Week 7: Agenda setting

Agenda setting refers to the power of media outlets to choose which topics to cover and keep them on the public agenda. This week we will consider evidence on the idea that the media can indeed influence the priorities of the public and consider how recent developments have shaped this ability.

Mandatory readings:


Recommended readings:


Week 8: Priming

A more subtle impact of the news media is that it can possibly alter the importance individuals place on an issue when evaluating politicians, an effect called priming. This week we consider the empirical evidence on this phenomenon.

Mandatory readings:


Recommended readings:


Part 3 - Elites

In the last part of the course we consider research on political elites. In particular, we explore the ways political elites in democracies and autocracies can use communication to change public opinion and win elections.

Week 9: Position taking and persuasion

To what extent can politicians “lead the public” on issues? On one hand, we would expect politicians to incur penalties for making unpopular positions. On the other hand, politicians could lead the public on issues. This week we consider the evidence for these two perspectives.

Mandatory readings:


Recommended readings:


Week 10: Campaigns

Parties and candidates around the world spend a fortune on election campaigns. To what extent does it make a difference? This week we consider the available evidence for campaign effects.
**Mandatory readings:**


David E Broockman and Donald P Green. Do online advertisements increase political candidates’ name recognition or favorability? evidence from randomized field experiments. *Political Behavior, 36*(2):263–289, 2014


Zeynep Tufekci. Engineering the public: Big data, surveillance and computational politics. *First Monday, 2014*

**Recommended readings:**

Kosuke Imai and Aaron Strauss. Estimation of heterogeneous treatment effects from randomized experiments, with application to the optimal planning of the get-out-the-vote campaign. *Political Analysis, 19*(1):1–19, 2011


Anna Harvey and Taylor Mattia. Does money have a conservative bias? estimating the causal impact of citizens united on state legislative preferences. *Public Choice, pages 1–25, 2019*

**Week 11: The media in hybrid and authoritarian regimes**

Censorship and propaganda is still ubiquitous in authoritarian countries. This last session we will study the nature and consequences of these tools in helping autocrats stay in power. We also consider more subtle ways in which dominant elites can manipulate the informational environment.

**Mandatory readings:**


**Recommended readings:**

Holger Lutz Kern and Jens Hainmueller. Opium for the masses: How foreign media can stabilize authoritarian regimes. *Political Analysis, pages 377–399, 2009*

Yuyu Chen and David Y Yang. The impact of media censorship: 1984 or brave new world?

Andrea De Angelis and Alessandro Vecchiato. Panem et circenses: The persuasive effect of soft news in berlusconi’s italy. Available at SSRN 3245572, 2018

Adam Szeidl and Ferenc Szucs. Media capture through favor exchange. 2017

**Week 12: The big picture and wrap-up**

In the last class we share our conjectures on current trends and how they will shape political communication in the near future.

*Mandatory readings:*

Martin Gurri. *The Revolt of the Public and the Crisis of Authority in the New Millennium.* Stripe Press, 2018