

INTRODUCTION TO POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

- Department of Political Science, Central European University
- Winter 2020 2 credits, Master Level
- Class meetings: Monday 13:50-15:20 N13 303
- Instructor: Gabor Simonovits (simonovitsg@ceu.edu)
- Office hours: Monday 15:30-17:10 AND /Wednesday 13:50-15:20 (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 key ideas about the role of media in democratic and non-democratic politics (2) engage with empirical research on the effect of communication on individual behavior and (3) discuss the transformative changes that the media and its relationship with politics undergoes as a result of the internet and social media.

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.

Pre-requisites

The substantive content of the seminar will be self-contained though some interest/experience in micro-level research in politics would be 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 – or at least an affinity - 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 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, the following requirements are expected (with respective weights in the final grade in parentheses):

1. **Group 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 additional readings or applying the readings on real world political phenomena (see schedule for details). (15%)
2. **Research question:** By week 4, participants are expected to identify and submit a research question on which their term paper will be based upon. The questions should be specific and pertaining to one of the topics covered in the class. The submission should not exceed 1 page and should include: the statement of the question, the universe of possible answers and its normative significance. (5%)
3. **Literature review:** By week 8, participants are expected to submit a literature review that summarizes scholarly work on their research question. The literature review should be based on at least 4 research papers published in peer-reviewed journal OR one monograph (20%).
4. **Research design:** 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. (20%)
5. **Closed book exam:** A closed book examination will take place at the last class meeting. The exam will include 4 short essay questions covering theoretical concepts and empirical findings covered through the course. (40%)

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 interests of 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.

Attendance, participation and manners

Given that a large part of the classes will be interactive, attendance of the class is mandatory and will be enforced. Students may skip one class meeting unless hard evidence of some vis-major is provided (e.g. a note from the doctor rather than an “I don’ t feel well today” kind of email). Missing more than one class meeting will lead to an automatic Fail grade for the class.

I will not grade participation in the class but please consider that your active participation, ideas and exchanges could make a big difference in making this course interesting, fun and enjoyable.

Finally, as a sign of respect please come to classes on time, refrain from using your laptops or phones and as a rule, devote your full attention to the person speaking be it the instructor, or other students.

Readings

The readings for the class will predominantly be selected from peer-reviewed political science journals with some occasional book-chapters and some podcasts/videos. 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

1. Introduction

- McNair, B., 2017. *An introduction to political communication*. Routledge. (Chapters 1-2)
- [The Ezra Klein Show](#): Jay Rosen is pessimistic about the media. So am I.

2. Economics and technology

- Prior, M. (2007). *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (Chapter 1-3)

Assignment/Presentation: Presentation on a chosen technological breakthrough - e.g. TV, Radio, Newspaper. (2-3 students)

3. Media systems in democracies

- Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, (2003). *Comparing Media Systems, Three Models of Media and Politics*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 21-45, 66-86

Assignment/Presentation: Debate on public ownership in media (2+2 students)

4. Information search and selective exposure

- Flynn, D.J., Nyhan, B. and Reifler, J., 2017. The nature and origins of misperceptions: Understanding false and unsupported beliefs about politics. *Political Psychology*, 38, pp.127-150.

Assignment/Presentation: Design a proposal to counter false news (2 students)

5. Framing

- Iyengar, S., 1996. Framing responsibility for political issues. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 546(1), pp.59-70.

Assignment/Presentation: Select an issue and collect frames from two online news portal from opposing sides (2 students)

6. Agenda setting and priming

- Iyengar, S., Peters, M. D., and Kinder, D. R. (1982) Experimental demonstrations of the not-so-minimal consequences of television news programs. *American Political Science Review*

Assignment/Presentation: Presentation of the papers below [2-2 students each]

- King, Gary, Benjamin Schneer, and Ariel White. (2017): How the news media activate public expression and influence national agendas." *Science*
- Lenz, G. S. (2009). Learning and opinion change, not priming: Reconsidering the priming hypothesis. *American Journal of Political Science*

7. Media and elections

- Ladd, Jonathan McDonald, and Gabriel S. Lenz. "Exploiting a rare communication shift to document the persuasive power of the news media." *American Journal of Political Science* 53.2 (2009): 394-410.
- Peisakhin, Leonid and Arturas Rozenas. 2018. "Electoral Effects of Biased Media: Russian Television in Ukraine." *American Journal of Political Science* 62(3): 535–550.

Assignment/Presentation: Present a case study on a successful election campaign [2+2 students]

8. Politics and media in authoritarian regimes

- Gurri, Martin. 2018. *The Revolt of the Public: And the Crisis of Authority in the New Millennium* [selected chapters]

Assignment/Presentation: Presentation of the papers below [2-2 students each]

- King, Gary, Benjamin Schneer, and Ariel White. (2017): "How the news media activate public expression and influence national agendas." *Science*
- Rozenas and Strukal (Froethcoming) "How Autocrats Manipulate Economic News: Evidence from Russia's State-Controlled Television" *Journal of Politics*

9. The logic of contemporary media

- Munger, Kevin. "All the News That's Fit to Click: The Economics of Clickbait Media." *Political Communication* (2019): 1-22.

Assignment/Presentation: Present a case study on the business model of an online news portal using interviews with employees. [2 students]

10. Echo chambers and polarization

- Tucker, J.A et al 2018. "Social media, political polarization, and political disinformation: A review of the scientific literature."
- Settle, Jaime. 2018. *Frenemies* chapter 1-
- Bail et al. 2018. "Exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115(37): 9216–9221.

Assignment/Presentation: TBA

11. Freedom of speech and moral outrage

- Canceling | ContraPoints [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjMPjVmxV8>]
- Nagle, A., 2017. *Kill all normies: Online culture wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the alt-right*. John Hunt Publishing. [selected chapters]

Assignment/Presentation: Design a proposal to moderate FB [2-3 students]