POLS UN3951: Information, Media, and Political Behavior
Department of Political Science, Columbia University

Fall 2023
Class meetings: Wednesdays, 4:10pm-6:00pm
Location: 602 Lewisohn Hall

Professor: John Marshall (he/him)
Office: 705 International Affairs Building
Office hours: Thursdays, 4:30-6:30pm; signup
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COURSE OVERVIEW AND OBJECTIVES

How does political information – conveyed via broadcast, print, and social media – shape the behavior of citizens and politicians in developed and developing countries across the world? In this class, we first ask what citizens know about politics, why they become informed, and how they process political content covered by the media. We then explore the consequences of independent news and partisan content for citizens' beliefs, political preferences, and capacity to hold governments to account. We further explore the determinants and consequences of media biases, considering the nature and causes of editorial slant, political capture, and government censorship. Finally, we examine how social media and new technologies are changing the nature of modern political participation, generating misinformation, and affecting polarization and well-being. Drawing from countries across the world, this course emphasizes cutting-edge studies seeking to theorize key relationships and identify causal relationships in the context of a rapidly evolving media landscape.

The course will familiarize students with theoretical ideas and findings relating to the role of information and media in politics in addition to frontier empirical methods for identifying causal relationships and measuring key concepts. These frameworks and tools will empower students to think analytically and apply theoretical ideas and empirical techniques to answer questions relating to salient social phenomena across the world in this course and beyond.

SEMINAR STRUCTURE

The weekly seminar will start promptly at 4:10pm and typically be structured as follows:
- First ~80 minutes of the seminar:
  - Brief introduction of the topic by the instructor;
  - Class discussion of the arguments, evidence, and implications of the readings.

- Short break.
- Last ~25 minutes of the seminar (starting after the drop deadline passes):
  o Student presentation;
  o General discussion of questions raised by the presentation.

REQUIREMENTS

The final grade for this class will reflect the following assignments:
- **Class participation (25%).** Participation consists of:
  1. *Participation in class discussion every week*. You should come prepared to discuss the strengths, limitations, and broader implications of all readings! Everyone is permitted *one unexcused absence* from class, provided the instructor is informed at least one day in advance of class (and it does not conflict with a student's presentation or paper proposal week).
  2. *Every student will submit one question on a pre-assigned reading each week, by the end of the Tuesday before class, using the "Discussions" tab on CourseWorks*. Questions should relate to the readings and may regard particular issues with specific readings or broader questions about the implications or applicability of the readings. The exercise is designed to encourage you to engage with the readings and come prepared to raise questions and offer your perspectives on other people's questions in class, so you should also read others' questions before class as well.
- **Presentation (15%).** Each week after the drop deadline, one or two students (depending on enrollment) will be assigned to kick-off the discussion in the second half of the class with a 12-minute presentation *using slides*. The goal of the presentation is to apply the insights from the readings to explain or predict a recent phenomenon in the real world, such as election outcomes, policy decisions, or protests. Because this is a comparative politics class, you should *choose a phenomenon of interest to you from outside the US*. A strong presentation will develop hypotheses from at least one reading and start to evaluate whether or how these hypotheses help to explain the phenomenon of the presentation team's choice. The presentation should *conclude by raising 2 questions for the class to discuss*. Presenters are encouraged to attend office hours to discuss presentation plans ahead of time.
- **Research paper discussion memo (10%).** In the final two weeks of class, the class will collectively provide constructive feedback on students' research paper projects. Two days in advance of their presentation, each student will upload a *one-page memo* in the "Discussions" section on CourseWorks. The memo should briefly cover your motivation for the project, a clear statement of the research question, theory and hypotheses, and empirical strategies. Everyone is expected to read all memos in advance, and come prepared to provide feedback with the goal of improving the final paper.
- **Final research paper (50%).** All students will individually write an *original* 15-20 page research paper (double-spaced in 12pt Times New Roman, excluding bibliography)

examining an issue related to topics in this course. Students should aim to answer analytical or "why" questions (e.g. "how does X affect Y?" or "what X explains Y?"), rather than simply describe the world. Although students are encouraged to draw inspiration from the empirical methodologies covered in the readings, any appropriate method may be used to address your research question. *The paper must be emailed to the instructor by 11:55pm on December 17, 2023*. Given that you will have plenty of time to write this paper, extensions will only be granted under *exceptional* circumstances; extensions will not be granted due to proximate exams or papers. One third of a grade will be dropped for each unexcused day that the paper is late.

The readings about which students will submit discussion questions and the week they will present on will be assigned after class enrollment stabilizes after the drop deadline.

ENROLLMENT AND PREREQUISITES

There are no prerequisites for enrolling in this course. However, it will be assumed that students can read papers using statistical methods; hence, some background in quantitative political science, econometrics, or statistics is desirable. Guidance on how to read a regression equation and table will be provided during the first week's class.

Due to the seminar format, enrollment will be strictly capped at 20 students. Priority will be given to seniors that are Columbia political science majors or concentrators needing to complete a seminar to graduate, followed by juniors that are Columbia political science majors, and then all other students (including political science concentrators, SEAS students, and Barnard students). Ties within categories will be broken by order of registration.

READINGS

This course will not use specific textbooks, but rather draw from journal articles and book chapters. The course outline below provides references for each week's readings, which will be available online on CourseWorks wherever possible. Students are encouraged to internalize the content in *Mastering 'Metrics* (see introductory week), which helps explain many of the statistical methods that we will use in this course.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Columbia University does not tolerate cheating or plagiarism in any form. Students violating the code of academic and professional conduct will be subject to disciplinary procedures. Guidelines on academic integrity are available at www.college.columbia.edu/academics/integrity, and all students are expected to be familiar with and abide by them. If you have any questions about

what needs to be cited and what does not, please talk with me.

WEEKLY TOPICS AND READINGS

Each week's readings follow a suggested reading order, typically starting with core ideas or findings that have subsequently been developed. Several general questions are suggested for you to think about as you go through the readings.

[Since my wife and I are expecting a baby to arrive in mid September, this class has been designed to incorporate one flexible week where there will be no class. All classes will then be pushed back by one week around the baby's birth.]

Week 1, 9/6 – Introduction and logistics

[Recommended background methodological refresher] Angrist, Joshua D., and Jörn-Steffen Pischke. 2014. *Mastering 'metrics: The Path from Cause to Effect*. Princeton University Press. Chapter 1.

Week 2, 9/13 – What do people (need to) know about politics? Why do individuals become politically informed?

Barabas, Jason, Jennifer Jerit, William Pollock, and Carlisle Rainey. 2014. "The question(s) of political knowledge." *American Political Science Review* 108(4):840-855.

Lazarsfeld, Paul F., Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet. 1944. *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign*. Columbia University Press. Pages 13-18.

Prior, Markus. 2005. "News vs. Entertainment: How Increasing Media Choice Widens Gaps in Political Knowledge and Turnout." *American Journal of Political Science* 49(3):577-592.

Baum, Matthew A., and Angela S. Jamison. 2006. "The Oprah effect: How soft news helps inattentive citizens vote consistently." *Journal of Politics* 68(4):946-959.

Marshall, John. 2019. "Signaling sophistication: How social expectations can increase political information acquisition." *Journal of Politics* 81(1):167-186. [You can skip the technical "Model" and "Equilibrium and comparative statics" subsections.]

Questions to consider ahead of class:

- *What does it mean to be politically knowledgeable?*
- *How knowledgeable/what knowledge do people need to make sensible political choices? Are citizens sufficiently informed?*
- *What active and passive factors best explain why different types of people become politically knowledgeable (or not)?*
- *What could be done to increase citizen demand for political information? Does it depend on whether motivations come from intrinsic interest or strategic incentives?*
- *What are the consequences of citizens obtaining information "second hand" through a two-step communication flow?*

Week 3, 9/20 – No class: instructor's estimated baby arrival

Week 4, 9/27 – How do individuals process information and form beliefs?

Zaller, John. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Cambridge University Press. Chapter 3.

Taber, Charles S., and Milton Lodge. 2006. "Motivated skepticism in the evaluation of political beliefs." *American Journal of Political Science* 50(3):755-769.

Hill, Seth J. 2017. "Learning together slowly: Bayesian learning about political facts." *Journal of Politics* 79(4):1403-1418.

Alt, James E., David D. Lassen, and John Marshall. 2016. "Credible sources and sophisticated voters: When does new information induce economic voting?" *Journal of Politics* 78(2):327-343.

Questions to consider ahead of class:
- *When, if ever, do citizens rationally process political information? Is it possible to differentiate between rational and behavioral model of information processing?*
- *When do individuals accept new information as reliable and incorporate it into their perspective on politics? Has this changed in a more polarized world?*
- *If citizens are subject to behavioral biases, such as motivated reasoning, how could this be counteracted and what are the implications for political choices?*

Week 5, 10/4 – Non-partisan information and accountability

Fearon, James D. 1999. "Electoral accountability and the control of politicians: selecting good types versus sanctioning poor performance." In *Democracy, Accountability, and*

Representation, edited by Adam Przeworski, Susan C. Stokes, and Bernard Manin, Cambridge University Press. Chapter 2.

Dunning, Thad, Guy Grossman, Macartan Humphreys, Susan Hyde, Craig McIntosh, Gareth Nellis, Claire L. Adida, Eric Arias, Clara Bicalho, Taylor C. Boas, Mark T. Buntaine, Simon Chauchard, Anirvan Chowdhury, Jessica Gottlieb, F. Daniel Hidalgo, Marcus Holmlund, Ryan Jablonski, Eric Kramon, Horacio Larreguy, Malte Lierl, John Marshall, Gwyneth McClendon, Marcus A. Melo, Daniel L. Nielson, Paula M. Pickering, Melina R. Platas, Pablo Querubín, Pia Raffler, and Neelanjan Sircar. 2019. "Voter information campaigns and political accountability: Cumulative findings from a preregistered meta-analysis of coordinated trials." *Science Advances* 5(7):eaaw2612.

Snyder Jr., James M., and David Strömberg. 2010. "Press Coverage and Political Accountability." *Journal of Political Economy* 118(2):355-408.

Durante, Ruben, and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya. 2018. "Attack when the world is not watching? US news and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict." *Journal of Political Economy* 126(3):1085-1133.

Questions to consider ahead of class:
- *Are voters capable of using information to hold politicians to account/select politicians who match their interests?*
- *How does the information environment shape how politicians act in office?*
- *In what situations does accountability work well? How can we make it work better?*

Week 6, 10/11 – Does partisan media move citizens?

Broockman, David, and Joshua Kalla. 2023. "Consuming cross-cutting media causes learning and moderates attitudes: A field experiment with Fox News viewers." Working paper.

Adena, Maja, Ruben Enikolopov, Maria Petrova, Veronica Santarosa, and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya. 2015. "Radio and the Rise of the Nazis in Prewar Germany." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 130(4):1885-1939.

Conroy-Krutz, Jeffrey, and Devra C. Moehler. 2015. "Moderation from Bias: A Field Experiment on Partisan Media in a New Democracy." *Journal of Politics* 77(2):575-587.

Chen, Yuyu, and David Y. Yang. 2019. "The impact of media censorship: 1984 or brave new world?" *American Economic Review* 109(6):2294-2332.

Questions to consider ahead of class:
- *How much does slanted news content and censorship affect political beliefs and behaviors?*
- *What types of people (in what types of context) can be persuaded by partisan media, and are these persuadable types important for broader outcomes?*
- *When does counter-attitudinal content persuade rather than induce backlash?*
- *Does the rise of online content, which has lowered barriers to news production and facilitated interaction between consumers, help counteract media power?*
- *If media outlets wield great control over the information environment, how should they be regulated?*

Week 7, 10/18 – Digital media technologies and political action

Tucker, Joshua A., Yannis Theocharis, Margaret E. Roberts, and Pablo Barberá. 2017. "From liberation to turmoil: social media and democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 28(4):46-59.

Pierskalla, Jan H., and Florian M. Hollenbach. 2013. "Technology and collective action: The effect of cell phone coverage on political violence in Africa." *American Political Science Review* 107(2):207-224.

Bond, Robert M., Christopher J. Fariss, Jason J. Jones, Adam D.I. Kramer, Cameron Marlow, Jaime E. Settle, and James H. Fowler. 2012. "A 61-million-person experiment in social influence and political mobilization." *Nature* 489(7415):295-298.

Guriev, Sergei, Nikita Melnikov, and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya. 2021. "3G Internet and Confidence in Government." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 136(4):2533-2613.

Questions to consider ahead of class:
- *How is digital media distinctive from its predecessors?*
- *Are new media technologies a catalyst or a facilitator? If facilitator, what else needs to be present to activate protest – i.e. why at a particular moment? Does it complement or displace other forms of leadership? Must it capitalize on events?*
- *To what extent does the form of recent protests event like the Arab Spring or the BLM protests rely on new communication technologies?*
- *Do you believe new technologies (and access to them) ultimately benefit governments or political organizers more?*

Week 8, 10/25 – The production of news

Hamilton, James. 2004. *All the News That's Fit to Print*. Princeton University Press. Pages 7-13 and chapter 3.

Martin, Gregory J., and Joshua McCrain. 2019. "Local news and national politics." *American Political Science Review* 113(2):372-384.

Hatte, Sophie, Etienne Madinier, and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya. 2021. "Reading Twitter in the Newsroom: How Social Media Affects Traditional-Media Reporting." CEPR working paper.

Radsch, Courtney. 2022. "Making Big Tech Pay for the News They Use." Center for International Media Assistance.

Questions to consider ahead of class:
- *Is the content of independent media outlets driven more by audience demand, owner preferences, or journalists and editors themselves?*
- *How is the rise of social media changing journalism?*
- *How problematic is the decline of traditional media outlets? Could this be reversed?*

Week 9, 11/1 – Control of the media and censorship

Guriev, Sergei, and Daniel Treisman. 2022. *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century*. Princeton University Press. Chapter 4.

Rozenas, Arturas, and Denis Stukal. 2019. "How Autocrats Manipulate Economic News: Evidence from Russia's State-Controlled Television." *Journal of Politics* 81(3):982-996.

Roberts, Margaret E. 2020. *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall*. Princeton University Press. Chapter 2.

King, Gary, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts. 2014. "Reverse-engineering censorship in China: Randomized experimentation and participant observation." *Science* 6199(345):1-10.

Questions to consider ahead of class:
- *To what extent are autocrats limited in their capacity to influence shape what their citizens believe and do? When will autocrats allow for truthful news reporting?*

- *How and why do autocrats differ in their restrictions on the media?*
- *Has the rise of social media made it easier to harder to control media in autocratic contexts?*
- *What, if anything, could restrict autocratic control of the media?*

Week 10, 11/8 – Social media, citizen welfare, and political polarization

Sunstein, Cass R. 2017. *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*. Princeton University Press. Chapter 3.

Nyhan, Brendan, Jaime Settle, Emily Thorson, Magdalena Wojcieszak, Pablo Barberá, Annie Y. Chen, Hunt Allcott, Taylor Brown, Adriana Crespo-Tenorio, Drew Dimmery, Deen Freelon, Matthew Gentzkow, Sandra González-Bailón, Andrew M. Guess, Edward Kennedy, Young Mie Kim, David Lazer, Neil Malhotra, Devra Moehler, Jennifer Pan, Daniel Robert Thomas, Rebekah Tromble, Carlos Velasco Rivera, Arjun Wilkins, Beixian Xiong, Chad Kiewiet de Jonge, Annie Franco, Winter Mason, Natalie Jomini Stroud & Joshua A. Tucker. 2023. "Like-minded sources on Facebook are prevalent but not polarizing." *Nature* 620:137-144.

Allcott, Hunt, Luca Braghieri, Sarah Eichmeyer, and Matthew Gentzkow. 2020. "The Welfare Effects of Social Media." *American Economic Review* 110(3):629-676.

Bessone Tepedino, Pedro, Filipe Campante, Claudio Ferraz, and Pedro Souza. 2022. "Social Media and the Behavior of Politicians: Evidence from Facebook in Brazil." Working paper.

Questions to consider ahead of class:
- *Is social media good for individuals or society? Does it vary by society?*
- *Is social media special in terms of creating "echo chambers" to facilitating political polarization and hate? Do they really make a difference?*
- *How are the communication strategies of politicians altered by social media?*
- *What policy solutions might be viable to harness good outcomes and limit bad?*

Week 11, 11/15 – Misinformation and fact-checking

Jerit, Jennifer, and Yangzi Zhao. 2020. "Political misinformation." *Annual Review of Political Science* 23:77-94.

Porter, Ethan, and Thomas J. Wood. 2021. "The global effectiveness of fact-checking: Evidence from simultaneous experiments in Argentina, Nigeria, South Africa, and the

United Kingdom." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118(37):e2104235118.

Guess, Andrew M., Michael Lerner, Benjamin Lyons, Jacob M. Montgomery, Brendan Nyhan, Jason Reifler, and Neelanjan Sircar. 2020. "A digital media literacy intervention increases discernment between mainstream and false news in the United States and India." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117(27):15536-15545.

Pennycook, Gordon, Ziv Epstein, Mohsen Mosleh, Antonio A. Arechar, Dean Eckles, and David G. Rand. 2021. "Shifting attention to accuracy can reduce misinformation online." *Nature* 592(7855):590-595.

Questions to consider ahead of class:
- *What is misinformation, and how prevalent is it?*
- *Does misinformation produce real harms or is harmless fun?*
- *How, if at all, can the prevalence of misinformation be combated? What types of interventions would be most effective? Which could be scaled?*
- *If the prevalence of misinformation cannot easily be combated, how can its damage be mitigated? What other types of interventions are needed?*

No class, 11/22 – Thanksgiving break

Week 12, 11/29 – Student presentation session I

Week 13, 12/6 – Student presentation session II