

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

Spring 2025

Class meetings: Wednesdays, 10:10am-12:00pm

Location: 711 International Affairs Building

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Office hours: Wednesdays, 2-4pm; [signup](#)

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COURSE OVERVIEW AND OBJECTIVES

How does political information – conveyed via broadcast, print, and digital 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 theorizing key relationships and identifying 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 estimating causal effects 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 10:10am and typically be structured as follows:

- First ~90 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 ~15 minutes of the seminar (starting after the drop deadline passes):
 - Student presentation;
 - 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. *Engaging 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 (if it does not conflict with a student's presentation or paper proposal week), provided the instructor is informed at least one day in advance of class.
 2. *Every student will submit one question on a pre-assigned reading by the end of the Tuesday before each class, using the "Discussions" tab on CourseWorks.* Questions should relate to the assigned reading and may regard particular issues within the specific reading or broader questions about the implications or applicability of the reading. The exercise encourages students to engage with the readings and come prepared to raise questions and offer their perspectives on other people's questions in class.
- **Presentation (15%).** Each week after the drop deadline, one or two students (depending on enrollment) will give 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, the presentation *must cover a phenomenon of interest from outside the US*. A strong presentation will develop hypotheses from at least one reading and start to evaluate if 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%).** Two days in advance of their (randomly assigned) presentation week, each student will upload a *one-page memo* in the corresponding "Discussions" section on CourseWorks. The memo should briefly cover the motivation for the project, a clear statement of the research question, theory and hypotheses, and empirical strategies, and any initial results. Everyone is expected to read *all* memos in advance of each class, and come prepared to provide constructive feedback to improve others' final papers. Students may not take an unexcused absence in these weeks.

- **Final research paper (50%).** All students will individually write an *original* research paper (15-20 pages, 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 purely descriptive questions. 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 May 16, 2025.* Given that you will have until the end of the exam period to write this paper, extensions will only be granted in exceptional circumstances; students are encouraged to start working on their papers early and 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 the drop deadline.

ENROLLMENT AND PREREQUISITES

Students should have taken “Introduction to Comparative Politics” (POLS UN1501) and a research methods class, at least at the level of “Research Design: Scope and Methods” (POLS UN3720) or “Introduction to Econometrics” (ECON UN3414). It will be assumed that students can read assigned papers using statistical methods, although a refresher on how to read regression equations and tables will be provided in the first week of class. Students are encouraged to internalize the content in *Mastering Metrics* (see introductory week), which fairly simply explains many of the statistical methods encountered in this course.

Due to the seminar format, enrollment will be strictly capped at 20 students. Priority will be given to seniors who 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 draw from journal articles and book chapters, not specific textbooks. The course outline below provides references for each week’s readings, which will be available online on CourseWorks.

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.

Students are permitted to use AI tools to enhance their learning as they see fit. It is strongly advised not to use AI to summarize readings, particularly because AI summaries can be quite inaccurate and struggle to decipher core emphases. In terms of writing, students assume full responsibility for the accuracy and quality of their work; heavy reliance on AI-generated content could lead to inaccuracies or unintentional plagiarism, in addition to limiting the development of research skills.

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.

Week 1, 1/22 – Introduction and logistics

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

Week 2, 1/29 – What do people know, and 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.

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.

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.

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?*
- *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 are the consequences of citizens obtaining information "second hand" through a "two-step communication"?*
- *What could be done to increase citizens' demand for political information? Does it depend on whether motivations come from intrinsic interest or strategic incentives?*

Week 3, 2/5 – How do individuals process information and form beliefs and attitudes?

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 4, 2/12 – 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.

Bhandari, Abhit, Horacio Larreguy, and John Marshall. 2023. “Able and mostly willing: An empirical anatomy of information’s effect on voter-driven accountability in Senegal.” *American Journal of Political Science* 67(4):1040-1066.

Marshall, John. 2023. “Political information cycles: When do voters sanction incumbent parties for high homicide rates?” Working paper.

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

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 5, 2/19 – Does partisan media persuade citizens?

Druckman, James N. 2022. “A framework for the study of persuasion.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 25(1):65-88.

Broockman, David, and Joshua Kalla. Forthcoming. “Consuming Cross-Cutting Media Causes Learning and Moderates Attitudes: A Field Experiment with Fox News Viewers.” *Journal of Politics*.

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.

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?*
- *If media outlets wield great control over the information environment, how should they be regulated?*

Week 6, 2/26 – The production of news by independent media outlets

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.

Cagé, Julia, Nicolas Hervé, and Marie-Luce Viaud. 2020. "The Production of Information in an Online World." *Review of Economic Studies* 87(5):2126-2164.

Hatte, Sophie, Etienne Madinier, and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya. 2023. "Reading Twitter in the Newsroom: Web 2.0 and Traditional-Media Reporting of Conflicts." CEPR working paper.

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?*

- *Does the rise of online content, which has lowered barriers to news production and facilitated interaction between consumers, help counteract media power or weaken struggling media outlets?*

Week 7, 3/5 – Control of the media and censorship

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

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

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.

Rahmani, Bardia. 2024. “Propaganda by Proxy: How Autocrats Use Surrogates to Conceal Their Control of the Media.” Working paper.

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 8, 3/12 – Digital media technologies and political action

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.

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.

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

Bowles, Jeremy, John Marshall, and Pia Raffler. 2024. "Access to social media and support for elected autocrats: Field experimental and observational evidence from Uganda." Working paper.

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?*

No class, 3/19 – Spring recess

Week 9, 3/26 – 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, and 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 10, 4/2 – Misinformation and fact-checking

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

Badrinathan, Sumitra, Simon Chauchard, and Niloufer Siddiqui. Forthcoming. "Misinformation and support for vigilantism: An experiment in India and Pakistan." *American Political Science Review*.

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.

Arechar, Antonio A., Jennifer Allen, Adam J. Berinsky, Rocky Cole, Ziv Epstein, Kiran Garimella, Andrew Gully, Jackson G. Lu, Robert M. Ross, Michael N. Stagnaro, Yunhao Zhang, Gordon Pennycook, and David G. Rand. 2023. "Understanding and combatting misinformation across 16 countries on six continents." *Nature Human Behaviour* 7:1502–1513.

Questions to consider ahead of class:

- *What is misinformation, and how prevalent is it?*
- *Does misinformation produce real harms or does it lack credibility and become 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, 4/9 – Final paper preparation

Week 11, 4/16 – Future of media and implications for policy

Schiffrin, Anya, Hannah Clifford, and Theodora Dame Adjin-Tettey. 2022. “Saving Journalism 2: Global Strategies and a Look at Investigative.” Konrad Adenauer Foundation. Pages 2-21, 43-44.

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

Deane, James. 2021. “Is independent media a public good and is public subsidy to support it realistic?” BBC Media Action/PRIMED Working Paper.

Caswell, David, and Shuwei Fang. 2024. “AI in Journalism Futures.” Open Society Foundation report.

General questions to consider:

- *Which models of supporting journalism would be most effective at improving the media environment?*
- *Which models are most economically and politically viable?*
- *How can and should “big tech” be regulated?*

Week 12, 4/23 – Student presentation session I

Week 13, 4/30 – Student presentation session II