MEJO 890
Fault Lines: The Big Debates in Political Communication Research
Monday, 9:30am-12:15pm
Carroll 338

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Overview

Heading into the 2020 US presidential election, the field of political communication is deeply unsettled, as are many democracies around the world. During the past decade, many of the things we thought we knew – from the relationship between the internet and democracy, the importance of political campaigns, and the ways that voters make up their minds to the central role of the press in the political process – have been seemingly upended. Today, scholars are revisiting not only foundational debates over the history and nature of US democracy, and democracies around the world, but also normative questions about what democracy should entail. Meanwhile, the rise of partisanship, polarization, and right-wing movements has provided scholars with new questions about political identities, institutions, norms, and values.

This course will engage students in an interdisciplinary and mixed methods set of readings that broadly offer perspectives on a range of foundational debates in political communication research. The goal of this course is to move beyond the well-established paradigms of the field to consider the big questions of our time and emerging models about the organization, production, and effects of political communication and their democratic consequences. In addition, we will explore new frontiers of research that expand our conceptions and understandings of political communication from scholars of many other disciplines. Indeed, for the purposes of this course, the borders around ‘political communication’ are deliberately ill-defined - at its broadest, it is the study of the institutional (campaigns, legislative bodies, the presidency, the press, civil society organizations) and extra-institutional (movements) actors, events, processes, cultures, and technologies that constitute democratic life.

Readings

The readings for this course are meant to be thought provoking and push the boundaries of what we consider to be ‘political communication.’ Accordingly, the reading list for this class is, admittedly, eclectic. Rather than provide a deep dive into one recognized area of the literature, you will read things that come at similar problems from many different theoretical and methodological orientations. Above all, I find these readings interesting. The orientation in this course is also to newer work. A previous version of this course taught all the classics, so to
speak, the syllabus for which can be found here:
https://danielkreiss.files.wordpress.com/2010/05/historystudypolcommunication1.pdf

The full books that you are required to read are:


All selected excerpts from books, journal articles, and chapters are easily accessible through the UNC libraries or available on Sakai.

**Grades**

Graduate grades are H, P, L, F. I determine your grade by active participation in class, the quality of your assignments, and your work in relation to others.

The following is a general description of graduate grades:

- **H** means a truly outstanding performance in the class and on assignments.
- **P** is a solid performance overall in the class and on assignments.
- **L** is a performance in the class and on assignments that is below the acceptable level for graduate students. It means the student does not understand the course material very well, does not have a grasp of what is required in this area at the graduate level, is not participating in the class, is not handing in assignments on time, or is not participating in research basics or in-class exercises.
- **F** is failing. It means a student occasionally misses class, fails to read the required material, and consistently fails to hand in assignments on time.
Grading Percentages

Participation: 20%
Assignments: 30%
Final Paper: 50%

Course Requirements

Participation

Your participation grade will be assessed based on class attendance, contributions to class discussion, and the quality of your discussion comments.

Attendance and Discussion

This course is a seminar, and as such it is premised on active discussion. You are expected to come to class having completed the readings and ready to discuss them. Critical interpretations of the literature encountered in the course are particularly valued.

Sakai Discussion

You are responsible for posting a long-form discussion comment (about 500 words) each week about the readings on the course Sakai forum. These comments are due by 10pm the night before class. Late comments will be marked F. These comments should be reasoned and developed starting points for group discussion, and they should end with the posing of at least one question that we will take up in class. You are responsible for reading the comments of your peers in advance of class.

Assignments

Assignment grades (H, P, L, F) are based on the thoroughness of your class presentation in opening the text and facilitating class discussion and the quality of your field observation. Late assignments will not be accepted.

“Opening” a Text(s) for Class Discussion: Due Date TBA

At some point in the course you will “open” a text(s) for class discussion. This entails a formal presentation that 1) summarizes the key arguments of the text, 2) details the location of the work in terms of the field of communication and related disciplines, 3) presents and assesses the theoretical and methodological approach(es) of the author(s), 4) and commences class discussion. Your presentation should focus on the relationship between theory, method, and evidence. You are also responsible for facilitating the discussion of the text.
Field Observation

Over the course of the semester, you will conduct at least one field observation of an election-related event that you will write up in the style of ethnographic field notes and also document through photographs. This field observation can be conducted at any election-related event. Obviously, candidate rallies count, but also field canvasses, voter registration drives, party activities, or the work of various civil society organizations or movements that have some electoral dimension (i.e.: a protest event or a canvass), etc. I define ‘election-related’ broadly, but if you are in doubt, let me know.

Field observations must be presented in written form, should run between 15-20 pages, and you will present it in class (approximately 10 minutes). This is rolling a deadline, but the field observation must be completed and handed in by the final.

Final Paper

In the hope that this class will further your research, you can pursue one of two options for your class paper.

Option 1: Research Project

Students pursuing this option will conduct original political communication research during the course of the semester and write a paper based on it. The goal is that this could potentially become a journal article or a chapter of a thesis or dissertation. You may choose any methodological approach. Students pursuing this option should also complete the Collaborative IRB Certification training online (if necessary or you have not already) at: https://research.unc.edu/offices/human-research-ethics/researchers/training/index.htm. If you are planning on carrying this work outside of class, you should also complete an IRB proposal (I am happy to guide you in this).

Option 2: Your Choice

I am open to other approaches to the final paper given the diversity of student interest in the class. If you want to pursue a different project, submit your plan in writing.

For both options, you will present your preliminary work midway through the semester and deliver a 15 minute presentation of your final paper to the class during the scheduled final exam period. The completed final project will be assessed based on the a) conceptualization of the project, b) its contribution, or potential contribution, to the literature, c) the fit between theory and method, d) execution of the project, and e) clarity in writing.

Special Accommodations:

If you require special accommodations to attend or participate in this course, please let the instructor know as soon as possible. If you need information about disabilities visit the Accessibility Services website at https://accessibility.unc.edu/
Honor Code:

I expect that each student will conduct himself or herself within the guidelines of the University honor system (http://honor.unc.edu). All academic work should be done with the high levels of honesty and integrity that this University demands. You are expected to produce your own work in this class. If you have any questions about your responsibility or your instructor’s responsibility as a faculty member under the Honor Code, please see the course instructor or Senior Associate Dean Charlie Tuggle, or you may speak with a representative of the Student Attorney Office or the Office of the Dean of Students.

Seeking Help:

If you need individual assistance, it’s your responsibility to meet with the instructor. If you are serious about wanting to improve your performance in the course, the time to seek help is as soon as you are aware of the problem – whether the problem is difficulty with course material, a disability, or an illness.

Diversity:

The University’s policy on Prohibiting Harassment and Discrimination is outlined in the 2011-2012 Undergraduate Bulletin http://www.unc.edu/ugradbulletin/. UNC is committed to providing an inclusive and welcoming environment for all members of our community and does not discriminate in offering access to its educational programs and activities on the basis of age, gender, race, color, national origin, religion, creed, disability, veteran’s status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

Laptops

You are free to use laptops or tablets for note taking purposes, or to access electronic readings. Otherwise, I ask that your devices be off the internet during class.

Course Schedule

Monday, January 13th


**Monday, January 20**

No Class, Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday

**Part One: Democracy**

**Monday, January 27**


**Monday, February 3**

No Class because of the Iowa Caucuses – we will reschedule this during Dannagal Young’s visit to meet with her. For this meeting, read:


**Monday, February 10**


**Part Two: Social Identity**

**Monday, February 17th**


**Monday, March 2nd**


Monday, February 24th


Monday, March 9th

No Class, Spring Break

Part Three: Epistemology

Monday, March 16th


**Monday, March 23**


Part Four: Technology and Media

Monday, March 30th


Monday, April 6th


Monday, April 13th


**Monday, April 20th**


**Final Exam:**

Mon. May 4 at 8:00am