Problems in Political Behavior: Social Media Politics

GVPT429T
T-Th 2:00-3:15
Fall 2023
TYD 2109

Professor: @Ernesto Calvo
Office Hours: Wed 1:30-2:45PM
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Introduction

This seminar focuses on the intersection of political behavior and social media. The course aims to provide both theoretical foundations and practical skills for understanding and examining the role and impact of social media in shaping political behavior and attitudes.

Course Objectives

1. Understand key theories related to political behavior and social media.
2. Design and conduct experiments that investigate user engagement and sharing behaviors on social media platforms.
3. Gain proficiency in using Qualtrics for the design and implementation of online experiments.

Students will demonstrate:

- An understanding of how users decide to create, access, disseminate, and support political content in social media;
- An understanding of mechanisms that create "echo chamber" (sorting, pruning, content activation) in social media;
- An understanding of different information biases that affect;
- An understanding of framing effects in political content sharing.

Course Methodology

The course combines lecture-based instruction with experiential learning. Students will engage in class discussions and will be responsible for designing and implementing experiments. These experiments will be conducted both in-class and in external settings.

Course Tools

Students will utilize Qualtrics as the primary platform for designing and conducting online experiments related to political behavior and social media. Succesful designs will be discussed and pre-tested in-house. Processing of the results will be conducted using your choice of statistical packages.

Grading Criteria

Grades will be allocated based on the following components:

a. Research Log: Students are required to maintain a research log that captures their experimental ideas, designs, and expectations. 20%

b. Bi-weekly Assignments: Students must implement their experiment designs in Qualtrics every three weeks, resulting in a total of 3 assignments. 30%

c. Final Paper: At the end of the course, students will submit a short paper summarizing and analyzing the results of their preferred experiment. 40%

d. Participation: Based on in-class discussion. 10%

Organization of the Seminar

i. **Students** will form work teams to solve practical problems in the design and execution of experimental designs. However, everyone will program their own Surveys.
ii. Assignments will include:

- Designing text and image content for survey experiments.
- Learning how to randomize their designs.
- Understanding the "flow" of a survey.
- Understanding and presenting your experimental results.
- Producing reports that describe your findings.

Students are expected do the assigned readings and participate in class discussion.

Honesty pledge and ChatGPT Policy

Please familiarize yourself with the academic honesty policy of the University of Maryland. The use of ChatGPT is allowed in this class. Assignments have been designed to ensure that ChatGPT may assist but not replace how you design your experiments. We will have an in-class conversation on the proper use (and misuse) of LLM technologies.

The Class

Every week we will have two different activities: First, we will have a *Seminar* day to discuss key topics in the study of political behavior in social media. On this day, students will understand theories that describe the generation and dissemination of political information. Second, we will have a lab day, where you will learn how to design and implement survey experiments. Each Lab is designed to ensure that students learn different experimental strategies and how results should be presented.

Learning Outcomes:

• **@Students** will master basic concepts, theories and methods pertaining to the comparative study of public opinion and information theory.

• **@Students** will write an original report that will describe their experimental design and results.

• **@Students** will be able to understand how the study of social media networks relates to existing theories of public opinion.

READINGS:
Book: Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Macmillan.,

https://www.amazon.com/Thinking-Fast-Slow-Daniel-Kahneman/dp/0374533555

ALL OTHER READINGS ARE AVAILABLE HERE:
https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/t1tb1n888jhur1jkz0p1c/h?rlkey=gmaawt0a1hfs70f5iz3rw7yaj&dl=0

SCHEDULE

Week 1, August 29 and August 31: Introduction

Readings

- Schaffner, B. F., & Luks, S. (2018). Misinformation or expressive responding? What an inauguration crowd can tell us about the source of political misinformation in surveys. Public Opinion Quarterly, 82(1), 135-147.

   Supplemental (optional) reading:
- Kahneman. 2011. Introduction.

Week 2, September 5 and 7: Thinking about the Click Through Rate.

September 5: Thinking about system I and system II in Politics

September 7: Laboratory: An introduction to Qualtrics.

Readings

Coenen, Anna. 2019. How The New York Times is Experimenting with Recommendation Algorithms.

Kahneman. 2011. Part I.

Recommended Movie:
- Black Mirror, "Nosedive"

Week 3, September 12 and 14: Motivated Reasoning and the Echo Chamber

September 12: Motivated Reasoning.

September 14: Laboratory: Creating Facebook Posts. Randomization.

To Read in class discussion piece:

- Nossiter et.al. 2018. "Hackers Came, but the French Were Prepared", NYT.

Required reading:

- Kraft, P. W., Lodge, M., & Taber, C. S. (2015). Why People "Don't Trust the Evidence" Motivated Reasoning and Scientific Beliefs. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 658*(1), 121-133.

  Supplemental (optional) reading:

- Verhulst, B., Lodge, M., & Lavine, H. (2010). The attractiveness halo: Why some candidates are perceived more favorably than others. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior, 34*(2), 111-117.

Week 4, September 19 and 21: Availability and Polarization

September 19: Availability and Sorting.

September 21: Laboratory: Completing your first experiment. Testing for usability.

To Read in class discussion piece:

- Bakshy, E., Messing, S., & Adamic, L. (2015). Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook. *science, 348*(6239), 1130-1132.

Required reading:
- Kahneman. 2011. Part II.

Week 5, September 26 and 28: My party, my democratic institution

September 26: Laboratory. Treatment and control groups using the flow.

September 28: Priming, negative affect, and Democratic Recession.

Required reading:

- Batista, F., Batista, C., Calvo, E. 2023. Affective Polarization and Support for Democratic Institutions: Evidence from Survey Experiments in Brazil, Chile, and Colombia

Week 6, October 3 and 5: Not just sorting

October 3: Why are we only polarized on some issues?

October 5: Laboratory: In-class exercise for your second experimental design

To Read in class discussion piece:

- Fernbach, Sloman. 2018. "Why We Believe Obvious Untruths", The New York Times.

Required reading:

- Barberá, Pablo, et al. "Tweeting from Left to Right Is Online Political Communication More Than an Echo Chamber?" Psychological Science (2015): 0956797615594620.

Week 7, October 10 and 12: The friendship paradox

October 10: What does it "feel" to be in a bubble?

October 12: Laboratory: Thinking about the subjective experience in our survey design.

Required reading:

- Feld, S. L. (1991). "Why your friends have more friends than you do." American journal of sociology: 1464-1477.

- Backstrom, L., Bakshy, E., Kleinberg, J. M., Lento, T. M., & Rosenn, I. (2011). Center of attention: How facebook users allocate attention across friends. *ICWSM, 11*, 23.

Week 8, October 17 and 19: Assimilation and Contrast

October 17: Shaping (or shocking) ideology.

October 19: Laboratory: modulating bias with treatments.

Required reading:

- Banks, Calvo, Karol, and Telhami. #PolarizedFeeds: Two experiments on polarization and social media

Week 9, October 24 and 26:

October 24: Conjoint experiments to understand activation.

October 26: Laboratory: Conjoints are hard!

Required reading:

- Aruguete, N., Calvo, E., & Ventura, T. (2023). Network activated frames: content sharing and perceived polarization in social media. Journal of Communication, 73(1), 14-24.

- Aruguete, N., Calvo, E., & Ventura, T. (2023). News by popular demand: Ideological congruence, issue salience, and media reputation in news sharing. The International Journal of Press/Politics, 28(3), 558-579.

Week 10, October 31 and November 2: The "Asian Flu" experiment

October 31: Expert Intuition and Prospect Theory.

November 2: Laboratory: Three specifications of the "Asian Flu" experiment.

Required reading:

- Kahneman. 2011. Part III.

Week 11, November 7 and 9: Refutations and Confirmations

November 7: Why is FALSE different from NOT TRUE?

November 9: Laboratory: The Vaccines Experiment.

Required reading:

- Aruguete, N., Batista, F., Calvo, E., Altube, M. G., Scartascini, C., & Ventura, T. (2023). Reducing Misinformation: The Role of Confirmation Frames in Fact-Checking Interventions.

Week 12, November 7 and 9: Framing

November 7: Frame equivalences (a comprehensive view).

November 9: Laboratory: *Think Frame Equivalency!*

Required reading:

- Druckman, J. N. (2011). What's it all about? Framing in political science. Perspectives on framing, 279, 282-296.

Week 13, November 21 and 23: Thanks Giving

Week 14, November 28 and 30: Survey Development.

November 28: Fine tuning the theory of your surveys (in-class).

November 30: Fine tuning the analysis of your results (in-class).
Required reading:

- Kahneman. 2011. Part IV.

Week 15, December 5-7: Presentations of Preliminary Findings (group reports)

EXAMS WEEK: Turn in Final Reports