

Political Communication
POLS 418
MWF 10:00-10:50

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1 Course Description

This course deals with communication in American politics. We will begin by examining the breadth of political communication research and some of the major theories guiding political communication research. We will then move on to discuss political messages, political communications and institutions, and political communication at the individual level. In addition, this class will expose you to some of the methods used in political communication research. We are fortunate to have individual classes for media and politics (POLS 341) and campaigns and elections (POLS 318). Therefore, these subjects will not be the focus of the course.

2 Course Objectives

- To understand the theories that explain how people talk about politics
- To understand how candidates communicate
- To understand how people within government communicate
- To understand how citizens communicate
- To learn to analyze political communication phenomena

3 Class Requirements and Grading

3.1 Exams

There will be two exams, a midterm and a final. The exams will cover all material from the readings and any material presented in class. You should bring a green book to both exams. Do not mark in the green book or write your name on it prior to the exam. Everyone will turn their green book in at the beginning of the exam and they will be redistributed at random. The midterm is worth 125 points and the final exam is worth 200 points.

3.2 Class Discussion

Classroom discussion is an integral part of exploring ideas and thinking critically about the material. As such, you are expected to come to every class (see section 4.1) prepared to discuss the assigned reading. This means that you will need to read the material prior to arriving to class and take time to think about what is important, how does the reading relate to other readings in class, and how does the reading relate to real-world examples. Should I feel that the class is unprepared, I reserve the right to give the class a quiz and incorporate this quiz into your discussion grade. Your discussion grade is based on my subjective opinion of your contribution to the classroom discussion. Your discussion grade is worth 150 points in this class.

Throughout the semester we will be reading several books. Although we will discuss the books in sections, I encourage you to start on the books early. In addition, I strongly encourage you to take notes over the readings. Should I give a quiz, I will permit you to use these notes on the quiz.

3.3 Political Communication Project

One of the goals of this course is to introduce you to how political scientists research political communication. As such, you will be engaging in original research, similar to that of a political science scholar. The basis of this project is an article by Mutz and Wojcieszak (2009), "Online Groups and Political Discourse: Do Online Discussion Spaces Facilitate Exposure to Political Disagreement." In the article Mutz and Wojcieszak examine whether political discussion takes place online in ten different types of online forums:

- a trade, educational, or professional association
- a group for people who share a particular hobby, interest, or activity
- a support group, such as for a medical condition or personal situation
- a group that promotes social or political change, such as an environmental organization
- a group associated with a political party or political cause of some kind
- a fan group for a particular TV show, actor, movie, musical group, or sports team
- a group that discusses political issues and controversies
- a religious group or organization
- an ethnic group or organization
- a charitable group or civic organization

For this project you and a partner are to pick one of the topics above, with no more than one group per topic. We will select groups and topics on February 2.

Part 1 (Data Collection): To start the project you will visit online forums in your topic area and collect the data. For each forum that you visit you should record the website, the date visited, and the content of the forum dating back to August 2010. I would suggest you use Notepad or a similar text editing program and save it as a .txt file. This will save you some

work later on in the project. I strongly encourage you to get an early start on this part of this project. Successful completion of this portion of the project is worth 25 points.

Part 2 (Qualitative Analysis): For this part of the project you will be evaluating whether political discussion took place on each of the forums from which you collected data. We will talk more in class on what political discussion is and how to decide whether political discussion is taking place on your forums. In addition, if political discussion did take place, describe the tenor of the discussion. Do the discussants tend to agree or disagree? Is the tone civil or uncivil? We will talk more about these concepts in class. This will likely be the most time consuming portion of the study. Do NOT wait until the last minute to work on this portion of the project. Successful completion of the qualitative analysis is worth 25 points.

Part 3 (Inter-Coder Reliability): It is important that you code the forums correctly, but we have to realize that we are human and we do make mistakes, whether it is overlooking something or misunderstanding. Therefore it is important to have someone check your work and validate that you and your co-researcher are coding things the same way. You and your partner should exchange seven randomly selected texts of forums and code these independent of the other researcher. This means that you should not know in advance whether your partner coded the forum as containing political discussion, whether forum members tended to agree or disagree with each other, or whether the tone was civil or uncivil. Completion of the inter-coder reliability check is worth 20 points.

Part 4 (Quantitative Analysis): For this part of the project we will quantify the presence of political words. We will spend some time in a computer lab learning how to run word frequencies on the content of your forums. To prepare for the lab days, you should put the text of each forum in a text document and save it as a .txt file. Each forum should have its own file and all files, including your partners should be placed in a single folder. Completion of the quantitative analysis is worth 25 points.

Part 5 (Paper): You and your partner should write a paper that begins by outlining why it is important to examine whether political discussion takes place online, what political discussion is, how you collected and analyzed your data, and what you found in doing your analysis (Are people just talking or is there a real discussion?). In addition, if your findings are different from Mutz and Wojcieszak's (2009) you should speculate why your results are different from their results. The paper is due May 2. This portion of the project is worth 100 points.

Part 6 (Class Presentation): You and your partner will present your findings to the class at the end of the semester. Your presentation should clearly answer whether political discussion was taking place in your type of online forum, whether discussants tended to agree or disagree, whether the tone was civil or uncivil, and whether your findings are consistent

with Mutz and Wojcieszak's (2009) findings. For your presentation, you may wish to include examples of conversations, the percentage of sites that contained political discussion, and/or the frequency of the number of political words found in your forum. Keep in mind that for presentations graphs and visuals are much more interesting than text. This portion of the project is worth 55 points.

Memos: You and your partner will receive independent grades. As such, I want a memo from each individual every two weeks detailing where you are at in the project and who is doing what work. This helps to ensure that no one group member is slacking off or causing problems for the other group member. If at any time you are having problems with your partner you should see me during office hours to discuss how I can help the situation. Failure to turn in a memo will result in a 10 point reduction from your final grade on this project for each memo that you fail to turn in.

We will take time in class, starting February 2, to discuss this project in further detail, including expectations and grading. As the project progresses, questions will inevitably arise. Do not hesitate to send me an email (see section 4.7 about contacting the instructor) or ask questions in class.

3.4 Micro-Papers

Throughout the semester you will be asked to write several (probably four) micro-papers. These are meant to be short papers, approximately one to two pages, single-spaced in length. The goal is to get you to think critically. Some of the papers may require some additional reading beyond what is assigned on the syllabus. These micro-papers will be announced in class. Each micro-paper is worth 50 points.

3.5 Due Dates

Political Communication Project

Project Updates: Every Other Monday

Presentations: May 2-6

Paper: May 2

Participation: Weekly

Midterm Exam: March 7

Final Exam: Friday, May 13, 7:50 AM-09:50 AM

3.6 Grades

Political Communication Project: 250 points

Participation: 150 points

Micro-Papers: 50 points (each)

Midterm Exam: 125 points

Final Exam: 200 points

3.7 Grading Scale

- A 90-100%
- B 80-89%
- C 70-79%
- D 60-69%
- F 59 and below

4 Class Policies

4.1 Attendance

You are expected to attend every class. Attendance will be taken at least one per week at some point during the class. If you are not in the classroom when attendance is taken, it is your responsibility to make sure you are marked as present for that day. If you must miss a class you may receive an excused absence by contacting the instructor in advance. I reserve the right to ask for documentation of your absence and decide what constitutes an excused absence. It is your responsibility to figure out what you missed on any days that you are absent. I strongly encourage you to exchange contact information with one of your classmates. *In addition, for every absence beyond your third absence, you will be dropped one letter grade on your final grade.*

4.2 Late Work

Late assignments will not be accepted in this class, except as university policy applies. I encourage you to plan ahead and start assignments early. Unless instructed otherwise, all assignments must be turned in as a hard copy at the beginning of the class period in which they are due.

4.3 Classroom Decorum

In order for this to be a productive learning environment, we need to keep basic classroom decorum. Classroom behavior that disrupts class will not be tolerated. This includes, but is not limited to:

- Talking while others are speaking;
- Crossing the civility line;
- Texting, surfing the internet, or answering a call on a cell phone (Please put your phone on silent or vibrate prior to arriving to class. If you must take a call, you should let the instructor know prior to class);
- Reading the newspaper;
- Working on assignments for another class;
- Leaving early or arriving late;

Engaging in any of the above behaviors will weigh heavily on your discussion grade.

4.4 Make-Up Exams

There are no make-up exams, except as university policy applies. If you miss an exam, you will receive a zero for that exam. If you are late to an exam, you must take it in the time remaining. If you must miss an exam, you should contact the professor prior to class.

4.5 Academic Dishonesty and Cheating

I will not tolerate any cheating or academic dishonesty. Anyone engaging in cheating or academic dishonesty will receive an F in the course and be reported to the Dean of Liberal Arts for further disciplinary action outlined in the University Code of Student Conduct. It is your responsibility to familiarize yourself with university policies and codes. If you have any questions about what constitutes academic dishonesty or cheating, you should contact the instructor prior to submitting any work.

4.6 Problems and Emergencies

If a problem or emergency arises that prevents you from coming to class, taking a test, or turning in an assignment, you should contact the instructor as soon as possible. The best way to contact me is via email (seibjd@siu.edu). Students contacting me prior to missing an assignment will receive greater leniency. Examples of excuses that do not qualify as problems and emergencies include, but are not limited to, the following: oversleeping, taking too much medication, being incarcerated, or having a cold. You are welcome to clarify what I consider to be an acceptable excuse to me at any point in the semester.

4.7 Contacting the Instructor

I am happy to help you in any way that I can. If you have any questions please feel free to send me an email and I will reply back as soon as possible. If the question requires a lengthy explanation, please stop by my office during office hours or make an appointment. Correspondence should be professional. If you send an email to the instructor, it should:

- respectfully address the instructor;

- identify the student's name and class;
- use proper grammar, including capital letters, complete sentences, and periods;
- include information on where I can best reply with an answer to your question;

4.8 Syllabus Change Policy

This syllabus is meant to be a guide for the course and can be changed with advanced notice.

5 Required Texts and Reading

Kaid, L.L. 2004. Handbook of Political Communication Research. Lawrence Erlbaum.

Kumar, M.J. 2007. Managing the Presidents Message: The White House Communications Operation. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Simon, A.F. 2002. The Winning Message: Candidate Behavior, Campaign Discourse, and Democracy. Cambridge University Press.

Walsh, K.C. 2004. Talking About Politics: Informal Groups and Social Identity in American Life. University of Chicago Press.

Other readings are available via the course website.

6 Tentative Course Schedule

Week 1

1/19 Introduction to the Course

1/21 Theoretical Diversity in Political Communication (Kaid Ch 1)

Week 2

1/24 Political Marketing: Theory, Research, and Applications (Kaid Ch 2)

1/26 State of the Union Address

1/28 State of the Union Address

Week 3

1/31 Methodological Developments in Political Communication Research (Kaid Ch 3)

2/2 Discuss Political Communication Project (Mutz and Wojcieszak, 2009)

2/4 Content Analysis (Johnson et al., 2008 AND Delli Carpini et al., 2004)

Week 4

- 2/7 Fragmentation of the Structure of Political Research: Diversification or Isolation (Kaid Ch 4)
- 2/9 The Psychology of Emotion in Politics (Marcus, 2003)
- 2/11 Rhetoric and Politics (Kaid Ch 6)

Week 5

- 2/14 Political Advertising (Kaid Ch 7)
- 2/16 Political Campaign Debates (Kaid Ch 8)
- 2/18 The Winning Message (Simon Ch 1-3)

Week 6

- 2/21 The Winning Message (Simon Ch 4-6)
- 2/23 News Coverage of Political Campaigns (Kaid Ch 9)
- 2/25 The Oprah Effect (Baum and Jamison, 2006)

Week 7

- 2/28 Agenda-Setting Research: Issues Attributes, and Influences (Kaid Ch 10)
- 3/2 Framing Effects on Tolerance (Nelson et al., 1997)
- 3/4 Gate-Keeping and Press-Government Relations: A Multigated Model of News Construction (Kaid Ch 11)

Week 8

- 3/7 Midterm Exam-Covers all material up to 3/4
- 3/9 The Presidency and the Media (Kaid Ch 12)
- 3/11 Managing the Presidents Message (Kumar Ch 1-2)

Spring Break

Week 9

- 3/21 Managing the Presidents Message (Kumar Ch 3-4)
- 3/23 Managing the Presidents Message (Kumar Ch 5-6)
- 3/25 Managing the Presidents Message (Kumar Ch 7-8)

Week 10

- 3/28 The Spiral of Science and the Social Nature of Man (Kaid Ch 13)
- 3/30 Knowledge as Understanding: The Information Processing Approach to Learning (Kaid Ch 14)
- 3/31 No Class

Week 11

- 4/4 Misinformation and the Currency of Democratic Citizenship (Kuklinski et al., 2000)
- 4/6 Mediating Democratic Engagement: The Impact of Communications on Citizens Involvement in Political and Civic Life (Kaid Ch 15)
- 4/8 Disagreement and Deliberative Opinions (Price et al., 2002).

Week 12

- 4/11 Talking About Politics (Walsh Ch 1-2)
- 4/13 Talking About Politics (Walsh Ch 3-4)
- 4/15 Talking About Politics (Walsh Ch 5-6)

Week 13

- 4/18 Talking About Politics (Walsh Ch 7-8)
- 4/20 Women as Political Communication Sources and Audiences (Kaid Ch 16)
- 4/22 Changing the Channel: Using the Internet to Communicate About Politics (Kaid Ch 19)

Week 14

- 4/25 Lab-Introduction to Quantitative Analysis
- 4/27 Lab-Analysis Continued
- 4/29 Lab-Analysis Continued

Week 15

- 5/2 Presentations
- 5/4 Presentations
- 5/6 Presentations and Revisit Mutz and Wojcieszak (2009)

Final Exam Friday, May 13, 7:50 AM-09:50 AM