Public Opinion and Political Participation

Marta Fraile
EUI and CSIC (IPP)
(https://sites.google.com/site/martafrailemaldonado/home)

MA Programme in Political Science (1 and 2 years)

Spring semester 2016-17 (2 credits)
Class meetings: Room N13-308 (10-1140/14-1540/16-1740)
Office hours: By appointment

Introduction

This course presents and assesses some of the recent debates on the field of public opinion and political participation. We will survey the literature in political science with an emphasis on empirical approaches to examining the origins, determinants, and consequences of different types of political actions and attitudes. The degree to which it is possible to empirically demonstrate causes and effects in public opinion studies will be a common theme that we return to throughout the course.

Apart from the first introductory sessions, each meeting proposes a topic for debate. All students take on the obligation to do the compulsory reading (at least 1 article per session) for each of the sessions before class, so as to be able to understand and discuss the debate critically. This is a one-week concentrated course, so each day we will have at least two sessions.

The course will cover a variety of methodological approaches for studying citizens’ attitudes and political participation, although the focus will be in observational data, given the predominance of this type of evidence in the literature. So previous knowledge about survey research will help. We will also cover recent developments in the field with the use of alternative research designs to approach the experimental benchmark using observational data. Previous knowledge of quantitative and experimental techniques will also be of help.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this course, participants should be able to identify the main debates in the discipline of public opinion and political behaviour, understanding the concepts (and critically assessing its measurement), arguments, research design, and implications of the main findings of the articles proposed. They should distinguish between interpretive, causal and normative arguments. They will also acquire skills to discuss about the identification and measurement of causal links, familiarizing with the logic of causal inference.

Participants will also learn to formulate an informed opinion about each of the studies reviewed, identifying both their strong and weak points. Students should also be able to communicate effectively their opinion. In-class participation and presentations will contribute to increase the skills of expressing informative opinions and to decrease potential fears of speaking in front of others. Students will also learn to debate within a friendly atmosphere. Cooperation among the students in the group will be promoted.
Course requirements and assessment

Besides their active participation in class, students are expected to write three short response papers (400 words) and to make one presentation about one of the debates that will be covered. Since this course is concentrated in one week, participants can contact the professor by email before the course starts to agree on the topic chosen to make the presentation. The distribution of the topics will be based on “first-come first choice”. The three short response papers (400 words) will be sent to prof. Fraile prior to the corresponding session. Note that this is a concentrated course, which requires an intense dedication in the previous days (to choose the topics and prepare your three response papers and your presentation), and during the week of the course. Then by the end you will need to write a short position paper (1200 words) discussing one of the debates more in depth.

Course grading will depend on class participation (10%), the three short response papers (400 words) (15% each of it: total of 45%), the quality of the presentation (15%) and the final short discussion paper (30%) that should be submitted not later than the 25th of April. No extensions will be granted.

All students must read the mandatory article before each session (2 per day at least!). Attendance is mandatory. In order to get a grade, participants need to attend at least 90% of the classes. The use of electronic devices during classes is kindly discouraged.

Course programme

Description:

Each session will include a presentation by the instructor, students’ presentations, and discussion with all participants. Students need to engage in the required readings, which cover the main arguments to be discussed and make it possible to participate in the debate critically, being able to distinguish between interpretive, normative and causal arguments. The additional readings are optional and provide detailed material so that students will be able to prepare the presentations and their response papers (400 words). Additional references can be provided when required to the instructor.

Session 1 – Introduction

The study of public opinion: types of research question and research design
Organization of the course: An overview of the presentations

Session 2/3 – Are people really ignorant? What people know about politics

Topics to debate: Is there a rational basis to public opinion?
How much do people need to know about politics for democracies to properly work?

Required reading:

Additional Readings (optional)


**Session 4/5 – The determinants of what people know about politics**

Topics to debate:
Which are the main sources of inequalities in the political abilities of citizens?
Do media provide useful information to citizens? The informative effects of the media and its main conditioners
Which are the contexts driving higher levels of political knowledge?

**Required reading:**


**Additional (optional)**


**Session 6/7 – The gender gap in political abilities**

Topic to debate: Do women really have lower political abilities than men?
Is it the quantity or is it the quality? What topics interest women in comparison to men?
Which are the psychological mechanisms behind women’s political disengagement?
Which type of contexts can contribute to decrease the gender gap in political abilities?
Session 8 – What is politics?

Topic to debate: How do regular people define politics? What are the main specific objects that they consider when referring to the world of politics? In spite of the polysemy of the concept of politics, survey research on how ‘politics’ is interpreted by the average citizen is rare.

Required reading:

Additional (optional)


Note: given the lack of current empirical evidence and the novelty of this theme, we will do some exploratory exercises about this topic. The main aim of this session will be to end up with a proposal to measure what does politics mean to regular people nowadays. And the same with political participation.
Session 9/10- Electoral Participation

Topic to debate: Can we speak of a general turnout decline in the world? Do inequalities in electoral participation matters? Is really electoral participation the most equalitarian type of political engagement? Are poor people more likely to stay at home? What are the consequences of those inequalities for democracy?

Required reading:

Blais, André and Daniel Rubenson 2013. The Source of Turnout Decline: new values or new contexts? Comparative Political Studies 46, 1: 95-117.


Additional (optional)


Session 11/12 –Non electoral Participation: the emergence of Protest in times of economic adversity

Topics to debate: Which are the sources of inequalities in diverse type of political participation? Is protest the most popular channel of political engagement nowadays? Why? Which are the main contextual factors bringing citizens to the streets?

Required reading:


Additional (optional)

