Course description

This course introduces students to the study of political behaviour in a comparative perspective. Scholars of political behaviour conduct research on many different topics, including, but not limited to, public opinion, vote choice, participation, communication, tolerance, and many others. This course focuses on two important topics of interest to scholars of political behaviour, namely, civic competence and racial prejudice and stereotyping.

Civic competence refers to the ability of citizens to meaningfully participate in democratic life. We will focus on one particular aspect of civic competence: political knowledge. What constitutes political knowledge? How to measure political knowledge? And, how does political knowledge affect people’s policy preferences, vote choices, and ability to process new information? In this section, we will also discuss misinformation, that is, false or inaccurate information and explore how people come to hold either accurate or inaccurate political information and beliefs. Finally, special attention will be given to conspiracy beliefs and thinking.

Racial prejudice and stereotyping concerns the study of how race shapes how we view and interact with the world. In particular, it is concerned with how people form images or perceptions about out-group members—members that do not belong to one’s racial group—and how those perceptions affect their attitudes and behaviours.

The first two weeks of the course will brush a broad overview of political behaviour and present the tools commonly used by political behaviour scholars to conduct their research. Next, we will delve into the study of civic competence and racial prejudice and stereotyping.

Student responsibilities and assessment

There will be 5-7 assigned readings per week. Students are expected to read all assigned material and turn in five 2-page, single-spaced discussion papers on weekly readings of their choosing (5% each, total 25%). Discussion papers should address theoretical or methodological aspects or both of the assigned readings. Discussion papers have to be printed (preferably double-sided) and turned in at the beginning of class. Students will also be responsible to lead class discussions (25%). Class responsibilities will be assigned at the beginning of the semester depending on the number of registered students. Finally, students will be required to produce a research paper (50%) due at the end of the semester (April 17). The research paper is expected to have an empirical component, no matter how sophisticated. Students should discuss with the instructor what they intend to do for their research paper at some point during the semester.

Topics and readings

Week #1 (January 9): Course Introduction

Review of syllabus and class organization.

Week #2 (January 16): Introduction to the study of political behaviour


Week #3 (January 23): Methods primer


Week #4 (January 30): Political knowledge: definition, measurement, and distribution


Week #5 (February 6): Political knowledge and its effects


Week #6 (February 13): Misinformation I

Week #7 (February 27): Misinformation II

Week #8 (March 5): Conspiracy beliefs and thinking I

Week #9 (March 12): Conspiracy beliefs and thinking II


Week #10 (March 19): Race, race relations, and group identity


Week #11 (March 26): Racial priming

Week #12 (April 2): Racial prejudice, stereotyping, and inequality