Political Sophistication

This course is about cognitive engagement in politics—a dimension on which individual citizens vary enormously, from those who are walking New Republics or National Reviews or Guardians or Figaros to those who don't know who the President or Prime Minister is. (There are some.) And this variation matters, in ways we shall explore.

Perhaps the broadest variable under this heading is political sophistication (a.k.a. awareness, cognitive complexity, and expertise): a matter of both the quantity and the organization of political cognition (regardless of accuracy). Closely related variables include political information (a matter simply of quantity, regardless of organization or accuracy), knowledge (the quantity of accurate cognition), and misinformation (the quantity of inaccurate cognition).

We consider this whole family of variables: how best to measure them, who has how much of them and why, and to what extent and how they flavor political attitudes and behaviors. Many of the readings and much of the discussion will focus on these variables’ effects—on the recognition and efficient pursuit of one’s interests; policy and electoral preferences; attitude extremity; persuadability and the kinds of appeals most likely to be persuasive; political tolerance; the extent and direction of political participation; the weights given to candidate versus policy factors in voting; etc.

Deliberation, in the conventional sense of serious, open-minded discussion, is also, if a shade more distantly, related, since many of its effects operate through political sophistication. Thus we shall also read about and discuss the Deliberative Polling project, which can be viewed as a quasi-experiment gauging political sophistication’s effects on policy and electoral preferences.

While many of the best data and much of the best work are on the U.S., it should be clear that these variables are at play, and their consequences felt, in every democratic polity. The course thus straddles American and Comparative Politics (and is listed in both fields). It also draws a great deal from psychology, relevant to both.

Prerequisites

There are no specific prerequisites. It is not important to have taken the core or any other previous course in Political Behavior, Comparative Politics, or American politics, nor to have taken graduate statistics courses (although I do encourage you to do so). First-year students are
specifically welcome, and have usually done well. Ad hoc tutoring in the rudiments of both software and statistics—enough to do and interpret some simple analyses—will be provided as needed.

Format

This is a research seminar. Students will be expected to research, write, and present substantial papers, consulting as much as necessary with me individually in the process. My hope is that many will form the bases of publishable articles or dissertation chapters.

Readings

We shall read all or most of the following three books and a large number of articles, listed in the outline below.


Outline

I Organizational (August 30)

II Political Sophistication, Knowledge, Misinformation, et al.

A. Definition, Measurement, Distribution (September 6)


Delli Carpini and Keeter, ch. 2.


B. Hidden Knowledge? Veiled Ignorance? (September 13)


C. Misinformation (September 20)


Sides, John. 2011. What’s So Amazing about Really Deep Thoughts? Cognitive Style and Po-
Political Misperceptions. Ms., Department of Political Science, George Washington University.

Jerit, Jennifer and Jason Barabas. 2010. Partisan Perceptual Bias and the Information Environment. Department of Political Science, Florida State University, Ms.


D. Cross-National and Longitudinal Variations (September 27)

Delli Carpini and Keeter, ch. 3.


E. Individual Differences (including the Gender Gap) (October 4)

Delli Carpini and Keeter, ch. 4.


### III Antecedents

**A. Education, Cognitive Ability, and Interest (October 11)**

Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry, entire.

Delli Carpini and Keeter, ch. 5.


**B. Media Consumption (October 18)**


C. Discussion and Deliberation (October 25)


IV Effects

A. Does It Matter? (November 1)


B. Policy Preferences (November 8)

Delli Carpini and Keeter, chs. 1, 6.


C. **Reasoning and Information-Processing (November 15)**

Zaller, chs. 6-11.


D. Extremity and Ideology (November 22)


E. Voting and Elections (November 29)


Barker, David C. and Susan B. Hansen. All Things Considered: Systematic Cognitive Pro-


Luskin, Robert C. and Suzanne Globetti. 1997. “Candidate versus Policy Considerations in the Voting Decision: The Role of Political Sophistication,” unpublished manuscript, Department of Government, University of Texas, Austin, TX 78712.


**Assignments and Evaluation**

**Paper.** The primary written assignment will be the paper, which should in most cases be empirical, though it need not be statistically imposing. Non-empirical—theoretical or methodological—papers are possible but should be cleared with me in advance. Your topic may concern the U.S., specific other countries, comparisons across countries, or general psychological mechanisms, as suits your interests. Most of you will presumably draw on one or more archived datasets available from the ICPSR or other archives around the world.

I encourage you to consult with me about your choice of topic and data and about other questions relating to your paper as necessary. I shall also arrange for statistical computing tutorials as necessary.

The papers should be emailed to me as Word attachments by 9:00 a.m., Friday, November 2.

**Short Essays.** Students will also compose weekly short essays of no more than two single-spaced typed pages apiece. These should center on the week's readings and culminate in a question suitable for class discussion. (Veterans of my courses will be familiar with the device.) The questions and their preambles should express some interesting criticism, extrapolation, speculation, or juxtaposition. They may be genuinely interrogatory, but may as usefully be rhetorical or argumentative. Among other possibilities, you may wish to call attention to internal contradictions or to inconsistencies with other authors or other evidence, challenge the adequacy of measurement, question whether the results support the interpretation, indicate ways in which
the results may not generalize to other settings or circumstances, point to variables that may have been omitted, or suggest ways in which the argument or results have implications for other, perhaps broader questions. The ideal question might be the germ of an eventual paper or perhaps even a dissertation. The essays should be emailed as Word attachments by class day at 10:00 a.m.

**Final Grade.** The short essays will count for 30% combined, class participation for 20%, and the paper for 50%. The penalty for lateness, on both the short essays and the term paper, is 3 points (on the customary 100-point scale) per twenty-four hours.

**NOTE:** Students with disabilities may request appropriate academic accommodations from the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, Services for Students with Disabilities, 471-6259, [http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/ssd/](http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/ssd/).