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Course Description

Most studies of public opinion and political behavior focus on the individual. They typically explain what it is about a person that makes him or her participate or think a certain way as opposed to another. But studies of representation, the presidency, judicial politics, public policy, state politics, or American political history often conceive of mass behavior and opinion at the group or polity level. They focus on what conditions make groups of people respond to or create changes in policy or elite behavior across time or locale. In some cases these perspectives are complementary, but in other cases they talk past each other or even disagree. Indeed, the relationships we observe between individual attributes and political phenomena can often be the reverse at the aggregate level.

Unfortunately, scholars who seek to utilize macro measures of public opinion or behavior face multiple practical obstacles in testing, each lacking clear solutions. These obstacles include: re-conceptualization of the quantity of interest, inconsistent measurement across time or place, noisy measures with substantial sampling and question-wording error, various related yet different survey measures across time and place, and the lack of appropriate sampling frame for the group or polity of interest.

This workshop seeks to provide you with the various appropriate conceptual frameworks and methodological tools for using macro measures of mass public opinion or political behavior. The focus of the seminar is primarily substantive, but it will begin much like a methods class. I hope to discuss questions of how to conceptualize and theorize about macro public opinion and political behavior. But I think it best to do this in a workshop format. That means we will first cover tools that are available for overcoming common obstacles within the first third of the course. And then, once we are aware of these possibilities, we will consider ways they can be put toward advancing theories and tests of political phenomena.

Workshop Format

The intent of the workshop format is simple: that we all help each other become experts at using these techniques and applying them in our areas of interest. After initially introducing some of the concepts and methods, the course will regularly feature you getting your hands dirty in working with them. We will do this in two ways:

1. We will repeatedly rely on worked examples to help us understand the conceptual and methodological debates in conceptualizing, creating, and studying macro measures. I will provide
example code and data for models that we will estimate in class.

2. After this we will repeatedly be presenting and discussing each other’s progress in developing a macro measure that is theoretically meaningful, conceptually valid, and that is practical for estimating and testing purposes. You will be responsible for presenting your progress about every other week. At first these presentations might involve us discussing memos written by you or articles you selected that relate to your topic of interest. Other likely presentations to follow include: presenting available survey (or other) data and measures that could be used in making your measure for group evaluation; presenting initial estimates using simple model specifications; and then comparing these basic estimates with estimates and results from alternative specifications.

**Requirements and Grading**

My evaluations of your performance in this course will be based on two considerations:

1. The main goal for this workshop is that you finish it with a publishable new measure of mass opinion/behavior in hand. I expect the measure will either be a national-level measure of opinion/behavior across time, or a measure of opinion/behavior that is comparable across states, counties, cities, or other relevant polities for a set time period. For those taking this course for a grade, you will demonstrate completion of this task by writing a final paper that summarizes the theoretical motivation for the measure’s creation, the modeling choices and data used to create the measure, and a basic presentation of your new measure’s estimates and validity.

2. That you regularly help yourself and others (and me) in achieving this task. This means I expect that you participate each week by asking questions (especially the dumb ones), engaging in worked examples, commenting on other students’ ideas and work in class, and regularly presenting your own work.

Grading in this class follows typical graduate school conventions. A 4.0 represents very good work, a 3.5 represents adequate completion of the course, a 3.0 indicates less than adequate performance, and a 2.5 or lower indicates very poor performance.

**Note:** For your benefit, I do not favor giving out incompletes. I also do not accept late assignments.

**Suggested Books**


- For the discussion of state space models I will often consult *Time Series Analysis and Its Applications: with R Examples* (by Robert H. Shumway and David S. Stoffer. Either 2nd or 3rd edition. Springer)

- For the discussion of multilevel regression and poststratification you would likely benefit from having *Data Analysis Using Regression and Multilevel/Hierarchical Models* (by Andrew

- And, if you want to see where to go after this course, there is, of course, the masterful Finite Mixture and Markov Switching Models (by Sylvia Frühwirth-Schnatter. 2006. Springer)

Course of Study

Discussions will largely focus on the items marked with an asterisk. The other readings may be referenced at times in terms of extensions or applications.

1. What public are we talking about? Why study groups? What group to study? Ecological fallacies, ecological inference, Simpson's paradox, and the pros and cons of aggregation. Readings:


2. Survey Errors, Sampling, and What They Mean for Aggregation: Poststratification Weighting, Design Effects, Clustering, Assuming Independence, Survey Biases. **Readings:**
   • TBD, most likely I’ll just provide my notes

3. Getting Survey Data: Navigating Prominent Resources (ANES, GSS, CCES, Roper, NAES). **Optional reference:**

4. Aggregating with Marginals: Measuring and Studying Surveyed Opinion/Behavior Across Time
   (a) Constant/defined measure studies (Presidential Approval, Partisanship, and Candidate/Party Support). **Readings:**
   • *Chapter 6 (State Space Models) from Time Series Analysis and Its Applications: with R Examples* by Shumway, Robert H., and David S. Stoffer. Either 2nd or 3rd edition.
   • *Smidt, Corwin D. N.D. “Distinguishing Dynamics in Public Opinion from Survey Effects” Working Paper


(b) Latent variable studies: What is mood and/or the Stimson algorithm? How does it work? What are liberalism marginals? What are its problems? What are alternatives? Readings:


• *Chapter 6 (State Space Models) from Time Series Analysis and Its Applications: with R Examples* by Shumway, Robert H., and David S. Stoffer. Either 2nd or 3rd edition.


(c) Applications and Examples to Consider:


5. Aggregating Opinion Across States and other Polities

(a) Disaggregating and Combining National Poll Approaches. Readings:


(b) Multilevel Regression and Post-Stratification (MRP) Readings:


• Chapters 11-14 from *Data Analysis Using Regression and Multilevel/Hierarchical Models* (by Andrew Gelman and Jennifer Hill. 2007. Cambridge University Press)


(c) Applications and Examples to Consider:


6. Continue with workshop sessions on each person’s project

A Couple Last Things

Academic Misconduct

Academic misconduct will not be tolerated. Specifically, claiming ownership of ideas and or work that is not your own is considered cheating or plagiarism. It is an insult to me, your peers, and yourself; it is not to be tolerated. Instances of cheating will be handled according the school’s policy on integrity of scholarship and grades.

Electronic Submissions

As a general rule, students should always submit their work in paper form. If, under special circumstances, you are submitting a document electronically, then you need to submit it in an archival format. This means no modifiable Word/Text documents (.doc, .txt, .rtf) and instead formats where content is fixed (.pdf, .ps).