Digital Era Government and Politics

Academic Year: 2014-15, Hilary Term
Day and Time: Weeks 1-9, Day and time to be determined
Location: TBC

Course Providers
Dr Victoria Nash, Oxford Internet Institute, victoria.nash@oii.ox.ac.uk
Dr Jonathan Bright, Oxford Internet Institute, jonathan.bright@oii.ox.ac.uk

Background
In the digital era, political institutions, activities and relationships are increasingly mediated and shaped by the technologies of information and communication. This paper examines the impact of the Internet and related technologies on the core activities and institutions of government and politics and considers whether the developing use of these technologies serves to reinforce, undermine or otherwise alter traditional political models or patterns of behaviour.

Commentators have disagreed about the effect and importance of the internet and related technologies for politics and government. Utopian accounts predict the transformation of political life through Internet-based mediation, with ‘peer production’ and on-line networks enhancing political participation and technological innovation driving policy innovation. In contrast, dystopian arguments emphasise the risks and dangers of technologically strengthened government and the ‘database state’. A number of ‘politics-as-usual’ accounts underplay the likelihood of technology-driven change and the importance of the internet for politics and political theory, stressing that technologies reinforce existing relationships and inequalities. Meanwhile, mainstream political science has tended to ignore the phenomenon, appearing to view technological development as policy neutral with no profound implications for contemporary government and politics; many interesting questions remain consequently under-explored, for example, regarding the changing viability of pluralist, elitist, market liberal and cosmopolitan models of democracy.

This course aims to equip students with the theoretical tools and empirical evidence necessary to identify, evaluate and critique these various positions and debates. It will enable students to investigate the implications of the Internet and related technologies for political participation and government, reviewing available evidence and new methodological approaches to the study of politics in the digital-era. Students will be asked to question and in some cases re-assess traditional approaches to the study of government and democracy in the light of such evidence. The course thereby provides students with the toolkit of concepts, theories, methods and principles to carry out ‘e-literate’ analysis of politics and policy and to conduct further postgraduate research in this field.
Course Objectives
By the end of the course, students should have an in-depth understanding of the changing nature of digital-era governance and politics and the theoretical, practical and ethical questions surrounding the role of the Internet and related technologies in political life. Specifically, students will:

- Be able to understand and critically review theoretical approaches to digital-era governance and politics and be aware of the key arguments and debates surrounding its implications for political participation, policy-making and the shape of the contemporary state.

- Have a sophisticated understanding of the potential for the Internet and other ICTs to shape political relationships, activities and outcomes.

- Be aware of the empirical evidence available to assess the role of the internet and related technologies in politics and policy-making and to use it to question key micro-foundations of mainstream theoretical approaches.

- Be familiar with the methodological tools necessary to research digital-era governance and politics nationally and internationally, and be in a position to embark on further research in this field.

This paper does not assume prior knowledge or study of politics and government. Students will thus be introduced to core concepts, theories and texts and will be expected to develop a significant degree of political fluency. In addition, students will be required to read emerging approaches to digital-era governance and politics and will be expected to critically assess this literature in the light of available empirical evidence. Reading lists and teaching will be organized in such a way that students are exposed to traditional texts and new and emerging studies in relation to each topic.

The course is international in scope. Due to the focus on democratic institutions and politics, the main countries covered in readings and discussions will be liberal democratic states; however, students are welcome to bring in examples from other states where appropriate. The last session (week 8) will have a particular focus on authoritarian states, and how they compare to changes in democratic systems.

Teaching Arrangements
The course is taught in eight weekly classes, each consisting of a lecture followed by student presentations and seminar discussion. The classes will meet in weeks 1-4 and 6-9 of Hilary term. Each student will be required to give one ten minute presentation on a specific aspect of the session topic or to review the argument of one or more of the books under the additional readings for each session topic. Details of these presentations will be agreed in Week 1.

From Week 2 onwards, core reading is indicated for each session of the course. In addition, we have listed some introductory or classic texts for each of the topics covered. We ask students who have not previously studied politics at postgraduate level to read at least one of these texts each week.

Note
Students should note that over the course of the year, small changes may be made to the content, dates or teaching arrangements set out in this reading list, at the course provider's discretion. These changes will be communicated to students directly and will be noted on the internal course information website.
Assessment
Students will be assessed through a final essay that is no longer than 5000 words which must be submitted to the Examinations School by 12 noon of Monday of Week 1 of Trinity term.

Formative Assessment
All students will have to complete one short essay on any of the 8 topics covered (advised length: 1500-3000 words) for the purposes of formative assessment. This essay must be submitted via Plato by the end of Week 6 (Friday by 5pm). This essay will provide a means for students to obtain feedback on their progress before they submit the final essay. Students will also be given feedback on their oral presentations.

Submission of Summative Assignments
All coursework should be submitted in person to the Examinations School by the stated deadline. All coursework should be put in an envelope and must be addressed to ‘The Chairman of Examiners for the MSc in Social Science of the Internet C/o The Clerk of Examination Schools, High Street. Students should also ensure they add the OII coversheet at the top of the coursework and that two copies of the coursework are submitted. Please note that all work must be single sided. An electronic copy will also need to be submitted to the department. Please note that all coursework will be marked anonymously and therefore only your candidate number is required on the coversheet.

Please note that work submitted after the deadline will be processed in the standard manner and, in addition, the late submission will be reported to the Proctors’ Office. If a student is concerned that they will not meet the deadline they must contact their college office or examinations school for advice. For further information on submission of assessments to the examinations school please refer to http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/schools/oxonly/submissions/index.shtml. For details on the regulations for late and non-submissions please refer to the Proctors website at http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/proctors/info/pam/section9.shtml.

Any student failing this assessment will need to follow the rules set out in the OII Examining Conventions regarding re-submitting failed work.

Topics

1. Public goods, the nature of politics and democracy
2. Elections, political parties and campaigns
3. Legislative politics in the Internet era
4. Political communication, agenda setting and public opinion
5. Democratic engagement and civil society
6. Digital citizenship and political inequality
7. Digital-era government and bureaucracy
8. The changing nature of politics: the end of the nation state?

Key to Readings

A reading list is given below for each class. Weekly items marked with an asterisk (*) are essential reading and MUST be read by all students in preparation for the class. Items which are not marked with an asterisk are additional readings which need only be consulted in the preparation of student presentations or for essays.
General Readings

Chadwick, Andrew

Bimber, Bruce

Hindman, Matthew

Chadwick, Andrew
Howard, Philip N.

Hood, Christopher C.
Margetts, Helen Z.

1. The nature of politics and democracy in the digital era
Instructors: Vicki Nash and Jonathan Bright

In this session we will introduce and discuss key concepts which will be used throughout the course. We will look at politics, public goods and democracy in particular, exploring democratic principles of popular control and political equality of that control, as well as alternative models of democracy (pluralism, elitism, market liberalism). Democratic institutions: the role of elections, legislatures, elected representatives, parties, bureaucracy and the media in a democracy. Finally, we will discuss the general dimensions of an internet ‘effect’, in terms of the way the appearance of new communications technology affects previously settled social practices.

*Question:* How might we start to assess the influence of the Internet on the extent to which a state may be regarded as democratic?

Introductory texts to political science and democracy

Beetham, David
- Especially Chapter 2 by David Beetham

Dahl, Robert A.

Dryzek, John
Dunleavy, Patrick
Colomer, Joseph M.

Core Reading

*Chadwick, Andrew
Internet Politics (2006) Chapter 1

*Farrell, Henry

*Schmitter, P. C. & Karl, T.L.

2. Participation in the Digital Era: Elections and campaigns
Instructor: Jonathan Bright

The question of when and why people participate in the democratic process is one of the most vexed in all of political science. Economic theory suggests that, as the potential pay-offs from voting are very small, rationally speaking, no-one should vote; but people always have done, often in dangerous and difficult circumstances. Yet participation has also declined substantially, especially in established democracies, with younger members of the electorate decreasingly likely to vote.

This session considers the nature of participation in contemporary democracy, looking specifically how the rise of ICTs have affected this process. We will look at the extent to which electronic technology facilitates voting, and why electronic voting has failed to really catch on in most countries. We will then examine the impact of these technologies on campaigning, both in terms of providing a new media of communication and changing the fate of existing media.

Question: How do new communication technologies change the process of participating in democratic politics?

Introductory texts on the contemporary democratic crisis

Franklin, Mark N. ‘The Parlous State of Democracy in Europe: A Comment’,
http://www.eui.eu/Personal/Franklin/Democracy%20in%20Europe.pdf

Katz, Richard and Peter Mair

Mair, Peter

Mair, Peter
http://newleftreview.org/II/42/peter-mair-ruling-the-void

Bellamy, Richards
Core Reading

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<th>Author(s)</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>Margetts, Helen, Yasseri, Taha and Hale, Scott</em></td>
<td>Chaotic Pluralism (draft article to be circulated by email before class)</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Wagner, Markus and Outi Ruusuvirta</em></td>
<td>Matching voters to parties: Voting advice applications and models of party choice, 2012, Acta Politica, 47, 400-422</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alvarez, Michael and Alexander Trechsel</td>
<td>“Internet Voting in Comparative Perspective: The Case of Estonia”, PS: Political Science and Politics”, 42(3), 497-505</td>
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3. Representation

Instructor: Jonathan Bright

Democracy is about connecting popular will to the process of national government. The size of nations, and the complexity of government, has meant that this connection has typically made through representation: appointing individuals to make governing decisions on our behalf. Many of democracy's fundamental problems result from the challenges that representation throws up: how can we appoint experts to act on our behalf, whilst nevertheless retaining control over government? And many of the core institutions of democracy (such as parliaments) are designed as ways of making representation work.
This session will discuss the process of representation in the internet era. We will discuss general theory of how representation should work, before moving on to look at the use of innovations such as open data and social media, critically assessing the extent to which they improve representation.

Question: Does the internet increase or decrease the need for representation in political processes?

**Introductory texts on the role, functions and types of legislature**

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<tr>
<td>Kreppel, Amie</td>
<td>Looking 'Up', 'Down' and 'Sideways': Understanding EU Institutions in Context, West European Politics 34 (1), 167-179</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jane Mansbridge</td>
<td><em>Rethinking Representation</em></td>
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**Core reading**

- Jackson, Nigel and Lilleker, Darren: Microblogging, Constituency Service and Impression Management: UK MPs and the Use of Twitter, 2011, *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 17(1), 86-105
- Ostling, Alina: Parliamentary Informatics Projects: Who are their users and what is their impact?, *JeDEM* 2012, 4(2), 279-300

4. Political communication, agenda setting and public opinion

Instructor: Jonathan Bright

The way we receive political information has long been a vital part of the process of democracy. Communication from the news media, from friends or colleagues, or from politicians themselves, helps shape what we think are the important political issues of the day ("agenda setting"), and how we think about them.
The rise of the internet has had a variety of effects on this process. The business model of traditional media actors, especially print newspapers, is under increasing threat, with print sales declining rapidly and revenue from online advertising not filling the gap. At the same time, a variety of ‘new media’ actors are also emerging, under various rubrics: bloggers, citizen journalists, news aggregators, etc. At the same time, social media is problematizing the way we receive news. In this session, we will discuss the consequences of these changes for democracy.

Question: Does the internet challenge the notion of an “informed citizen”?

Introductory texts on political communication, agenda setting, and the crisis of the news media

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<th>Author(s)</th>
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Core reading

- Bright, Jonathan and Nicholls, Tom The Life and Death of Political News: Measuring the Impact of the Audience Agenda Using Online Data, 2014, Social Science Computer Review, 32(2), 170-181
5. BREAK

6. Digital citizenship and political inequality

The expression of social differences as forms of political inequality have long been studied in political science. With the advent of digital era government, the question arises whether traditional sources of inequality are reproduced in digital form, or whether new patterns of political inequality have emerged. This question can be addressed at a variety of levels, including longstanding debates about the persistence of digital divides and access to political debate or services, as well as more nuanced consideration of how the voices of different groups are received in online civic spaces, thus raising policy-relevant questions about how best to support equality in both formal and informal opportunities for political engagement. This session will consider both examples of the available empirical evidence as well as the potential policy implications of inequality in an era where government services and political debate are increasingly ‘digital by default’.

Classic texts on citizenship, participation and (in)equality

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<th>Author(s)</th>
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<tr>
<td>S. Verba et al</td>
<td>Participation and Political Equality (1978)</td>
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<th>Author(s)</th>
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<tr>
<td>*M. Xenos, A. Vromen &amp; B. D. Loader (2014)</td>
<td>The great equalizer? Patterns of social media use and youth political engagement in three advanced democracies, Information, Communication &amp; Society, 17:2, 151-167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Levmore &amp; M.C. Nussbaum</td>
<td>The Offensive Internet: Speech, Privacy and Reputation 2012. Chapter by Nussbaum</td>
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7. Democratic engagement and civil society
Instructor: Vicki Nash

Early theorists of democracy such as Mill and de Tocqueville recognised that healthy democratic political institutions depended upon the existence of a vigorous civil society in which the habits of participation might be developed and the dangers of political and social dogmas challenged. Modern democratic theory has continued to embrace this idea, and many proponents of the Internet have claimed that the new communication tools and networks it supports have the potential to invigorate civil society. Other theorists have countered such optimism with fears that online engagement will lead to a narrowing of personal interests and connections or that it is a shallow substitute for more effective forms of offline activism. This session will consider the theoretical underpinnings of both hypotheses and will ask what empirical evidence might be required to support or reject either view.

Question: What reason, if any, do we have to believe that the Internet might strengthen civil society?

Classic texts on the relationship between democracy and civil society

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<td>Bimber, B. &amp; Hindman, M.</td>
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8. Digital-era government and bureaucracy
Instructor: Helen Margetts

Digital technologies have been regarded by many as the key to the modernization of government, from a radical strengthening of Weberian rationality and bureaucracy, to the facilitation of decentralized power and alternative forms of state organization resting on crowdsourcing and digital ‘co-production’. Some claim that a model of ‘essentially digital governance’ has replaced ‘new public management’ (NPM) as the dominant paradigm for public management reform, where digital technologies take centre stage and digital channels become the default. In practice, all governments in the industrialised world and beyond are reliant for their operations on a large digital presence and complex network of large-scale information systems which go beyond being critical for policy implementation to shaping the whole context within which policy and service delivery choices are made. But governments can struggle to negotiate the rapidly changing digital world and to capitalize on the potential of internet-related technologies to deliver innovative public policy solutions and efficient, effective and equitable public services.

In many departments, the organizational and cultural legacies of Weberian and NPM models co-exist uneasily or clash with internet-based cultures and failed or stalled attempts to introduce digital government. This session will explore the key approaches in practice and scholarship to digital era change in government and also the implicit approach of mainstream public administration and public policy – that digital technology is policy neutral with little importance for the fundamentals of policy and administration.

Question: ‘The history of digital government is littered with failures, disasters and disappointed expectations in terms of efficiency and innovation.’ Discuss.

Introductory texts on government and bureaucracy


Core reading


* Dunleavy, Patrick, Margetts, Helen Z. (2013). Essentially Digital Governance: Designing the Information State (draft article to be circulated by email before class).

9. The changing nature of politics: the end of the nation state?
Instructors: Vicki Nash and Jonathan Bright

From the early days of the Internet, commentators speculated on its contribution to the phenomenon of globalization, forecasting ‘the death of distance’, the increasing irrelevance of space and place, the incapability of governments to control the flow of information and capital across national boundaries and the evolution of a global information society or ‘regime’. Hyper-modernists have predicted the end of hierarchy and the nation state, through the simultaneous trends of global networks and ‘cyberculture’ and new forms of virtual local community and pluralist politics. In contrast, anti-modernists see information systems and databases leading almost inexorably to the ‘control’ or ‘surveillance’ state and have predicted the rise of a technologically strengthened bureaucracy with greater capacity to control citizens.

In practice, the recent spread of global social unrest and the role of international social movements in its diffusion has highlighted the tensions between both accounts, as governments employ legal and technical means of restricting online debate, organization and action. This session therefore asks whether and how the nation state is changing in the digital era.

*Question:* ‘Claims that the Internet and digital technologies would lead to the end of the nation state were fatally flawed; rather, such technologies have allowed national governments to strengthen power and control over their jurisdictions.’ Discuss.

Introductory texts on globalization

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**Core reading**

*Cull, Nicholas*  

*Sing, J. P.*  

*Milton Mueller, Andreas Schmidt and Brenden Kuerbis*  

Grewal, D. S.  
- Chapter 7

Beniger, J.  

Brenner, Susan W.  

Halpin, E. et al (eds. 2006)  
*Cyberwar, Netwar and the Revolution in Military Affairs* (Palgrave Macmillan).

Morozov, E.  

Please note: Option papers will only run if selected by at least four students.