POSC 3101: WRITING AND ARGUMENTATION IN POLITICAL SCIENCE: NUMBERS, POLICY, AND DEMOCRACY

Tu Th 11A–12:15P
Wehr Physics 154
Professor Philip Rocco
Office Hours: Tu We Th, 3:30–4:30 in 411 Wehr Physics
philip.rocco@marquette.edu

[Thanks to statistics] public broadsheets will be to the social world what the sensory organs are to the organic world.
   Gabriel Tarde (1903)

It’s not the voting that’s democracy, it’s the counting.
   Tom Stoppard (1972)

This writing-intensive seminar invites students to collaborate in the production of knowledge about how the political economy shapes and is shaped by calculative practices. Democracy runs on numbers. Votes must be tallied before election winners are declared. Census counts determine whom Congress represents and how much representation they receive. To justify their decisions, policymakers rely on numbers like the Gross Domestic Product, the Gini Coefficient, the national debt, as well as rates of unemployment and the uninsured. Yet precisely because numbers matter, they can also be manipulated in ways that threaten democracy. Numbers themselves become a subject of a debate. Policymakers may cite dubious figures. Government’s collection of—and public access to—vital data has become a hotly
contested issue. Political division, partisanship, and gridlock have also undermined trust in public statistics.

To better understand the politics of numbers, we will draw on and synthesize a wide range of perspectives from political science, economics, sociology, anthropology, history, science and technology studies (STS), and law. Class meetings will serve the purpose that a studio or lab might play in other fields. Throughout the semester, students will develop a better ability to understand and interpret the role of numbers in contemporary politics. Students will hone their skills for writing and communicating about intricate policy issues. Grades will be based primarily on the completion of an intensive, iterative writing project that will take place throughout the semester.

Readings

Three books are available for purchase at Book Marq or wherever fine books are sold:

• Jerry Z. Muller, The Tyranny of Metrics (Princeton, 2018)
• Gina Neff and Dawn Nafus, Self-Tracking (MIT, 2016)

All other required readings will be available on D2L.

Requirements

Issue Brief project (80%): Throughout the semester, you will prepare an issue brief that analyzes a current debate over the use of numbers in politics or public policy. This can be at the local, state, or national level. As part of the project, you must conduct at least three background interviews with individuals who are either experts on the topic or involved in the debate. Grades for the project will be determined as follows:

• Research topic (5%)
• Annotated bibliography (15%)
• Evidence write-up (15%)
• Rough draft (20%)
• Final draft (25%)

Blog Posts (10%): To develop your expository writing skills, you are expected to contribute short (250-word) blog posts to the forum on D2L at least once a week. These blog posts can pose questions or note issues or contradictions within the reading. Alternatively, they could apply a concept or topic from the reading to a current event. Your overall blog contributions will be evaluated twice during the semester according to the rubric posted on D2L.

Participation (10%): This course requires an extensive amount of reading and preparation prior to class. To facilitate this, weekly reading questions will be posted to D2L. You are expected to attend each class session having read and digested all assigned material, ready to engage in an informed, lively discussion with the instructor and with other students. If you do not speak at all during the semester or are absent for more than 6 class sessions, you will receive a 0 for participation.
Grading Scale

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Policies

**Academic Misconduct:** Information on Marquette’s Academic Misconduct Policy can be found here: [http://bulletin.marquette.edu/undergrad/academicregulations/](http://bulletin.marquette.edu/undergrad/academicregulations/) Academic misconduct includes, but is not limited to, individual violations, helping another student with any form of academic misconduct, failing to report any form of academic misconduct, or intentionally interfering with the educational process in any manner. Academic misconduct of any type is unacceptable and will result in immediate referral to Marquette’s Academic Integrity Director. If you are in doubt as to whether an action or behavior is subject to the academic misconduct policy, you should consult an appropriate member of the Academic Integrity Council, faculty or staff.

**Disabilities:** If you have a disability for which you are requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact the University’s Office of Disability Services within the first week of classes. For more information, contact the Office of Disability Services in Marquette Hall, Suite 005 or at (414) 288-1645. If you require any accommodations for exams or other assignments, you must notify me (along with all required documentation) at least one week in advance of the assignment due date.

**Courtesy:** Your participation is essential to this course. As such, you are expected to behave with courtesy towards your classmates and professor. Phones should be silenced and out of sight. While laptops are appropriate for taking notes, numerous studies suggest that taking notes by hand greatly improves one’s ability to retain information and sustain focus. I strongly advise heeding the results of this research.

**Schedule of Course Readings**

1. Introduction


1/17:  No class – Dr. Rocco is giving a talk in DC. Get started on readings for 1/22


2. The Micropolitics of Numbers: Metrics, Self-Tracking, and Valuation

1/24: Jerry Muller, *The Tyranny of Metrics*, pp. 17–66


2/5: Gina Neff and Dawn Nafus, *Self-Tracking*, pp. 37–104. **Research topics due to Dropbox by beginning of class**


3. The Macropolitics of Numbers: The Census, Redistricting, and Statistical Citizenship


Optional: explore the FiveThirtyEight Atlas of Redistricting
https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/redistricting-maps/

**Annotated bibliographies due to Dropbox by the beginning of class.**

3/5: Nicholas Stephanopoulos, “The research that convinced SCOTUS to take the Wisconsin gerrymandering case, explained,” *Vox*, July 11, 2017 [D2L]

*Gill v. Whitford* (218 F. Supp. 3d 837), selections from majority opinion and concurrence [D2L]


David Wasserman, “Hating Gerrymandering is Easy; Fixing It Is Harder,” *FiveThirtyEight*, January 25, 2018 [D2L]

Alexis Farmer and Annie Lo, “Citizen and Legislative Efforts to Reform Redistricting in 2018,” Brennan Center, October 12, 2018 [D2L]

Optional: listen to FiveThirtyEight Gerrymandering Podcast episode
https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/even-a-gerrymandering-ban-cant-keep-politicians-from-trying-to-shape-their-districts/

**Spring Break—No Class March 12–14**

### 4. Counting and Accountability


4/4: No readings – bring your draft evidence write-up to class with you

**Evidence write-up due to Dropbox by 5 PM on Monday April 8th**


Nishant Kishore, Domingo Marqués, Ayesha Mahmud, Mathew V. Kiang, Irmary


4/16 Michelle Murphy, Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty (Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 57–80 [D2L]

4/18: No Class – Easter Break
**Rough draft due to Dropbox by 5 PM on April 18th**

5. Numbers and Democracy in Troubled Times


6. Symposium

4/30: Student presentations

5/2: Student presentations

**Final papers due to Dropbox by 5 PM on Friday, May 3rd.**
Selected Bibliography


Potential Research Topics

- Issues of “algorithmic justice” / “algorithmic inequality”
- Credit Ratings
- Algorithmic Policing / Incarceration
- Social Credit System (China)
- Deployment of self-tracking in health- and life-insurance plans
- Data privacy controversies
- Bias in testing instruments (e.g. SAT)
- Detecting and addressing gender pay gaps
- Controversy over management of 2020 Census
- Conflict over measurement of prices (CPI)
- Continuing controversy over efficiency gap as measure of partisan gerrymandering
- Implementation of expert-led anti-gerrymandering reforms in MO, MI
- Standards of scientific evidence in court [recent cases include Biestek v. Berryhill; Gill v. Whitford; Whole Women’s Health v. Hellerstedt]
- Measuring effects of natural disasters (e.g. Hurricane Maria)
- Controversy over metrics-based reforms (e.g. pay-for-performance)
- Efforts to establish alternatives to Gross Domestic Product (GDP)
- Use of social indicators in global governance (e.g. tracking human rights violations, rating/ranking democracies)
- Projecting costs / benefits of major policy reforms (e.g. tax cuts, health reform)
- Calculating the social cost of carbon
- Evaluating effects of policy ‘experiments’ (e.g. minimum-wage increase, UBI)
- Challenges of property tax assessment
- Declining public trust in official statistics
- Use / misuse of official statistics
- Measuring and reducing segregation in metropolitan areas