POLITICS & THE INTERNET

Professor: **Dr. Caterina Froio, Sciences Po (CEE)**
Session: **June 2026**
Language of instruction: **English**
Number of hours of class: **36h**

Objective of the Course

This course examines how information and communication technologies (ICTs) and artificial intelligence systems (AI) are serving or breaking democracy. Students will analyze whether digital technologies transform or reinforce existing patterns in citizen-government interactions, focusing on three key areas: government operations, political competition, and civil society engagement. The course aims to develop students' critical thinking skills in evaluating how digital platforms and algorithmic decision-making affect political processes, policy, participation, and representation in real-world scenarios.

Summary

How are digital technology and artificial intelligence transforming politics and democratic life? This course examines the evolving relationship between technology, government, and civic participation amid current global developments - from algorithmic decision-making and digital communication to debates over AI regulation and governance. Students will analyze how digital platforms, e-government initiatives, and data-driven systems shape political behavior, public trust, and accountability. Topics include algorithmic governance, elections and online campaigning, social movements, misinformation, populism and extremism, and the ethics of automation and surveillance. Drawing on perspectives from political science and communication, the course fosters critical reflection on how technological innovation is redefining the practice and principles of democracy today.

Organization of the course

Class 1: The nature of politics in the digital era
After having introduced the course, distributed the presentations, and discussed the evaluation criteria, this first class will consider some fundamental theories in political science and their relationship to the digital era. What is politics? When and how do people decide to take political action? These theories, many of which trace their roots to the foundational period of modern political science in the 1950s and 1960s, remain highly relevant today as a means of understanding political behavior. However, they have also been fundamentally challenged by the rise of new technologies, which are changing many of their fundamental assumptions.

Class 2: Government in the digital age
How is government changing in the digital era? Computerisation of government bureaucracies is far from new; indeed, governments were one of the main developers of original computer technology. But in the contemporary era they have turned from producer to consumer and have often seemed far behind the private sector in terms of the ways in which they interact with citizens and make decisions. As machine learning and decision support systems come to be more and more important in the fabric of society, how will government itself change in the coming decades?

Presentations and debate
– 2.1 Transforming government services: do algorithms affect individuals' access to public services?
– 2.2 Explore how E-government is utilized in electoral processes, such as online voter registration, electronic voting, and election monitoring.

Class 3: Policy- making in the digital age
Policy-making is a fundamental aspect of politics, centred on the principle of finding solutions to societal problems. The well-established policy cycle model outlines key stages, including agenda setting, policy formulation, adoption, implementation, and evaluation. In this class, we delve into a discussion on how digital technology has influenced different facets of the policy-making process.

Presentations and debate
– 3.1 Opportunities and challenges of algorithmic decision-making.
– 3.2 How digital technology enables new forms of policy implementation: blockchain for transparent government contracts or apps for public service delivery.

Class 4: Political parties and the internet
Much has been written about the supposed decline of the traditional actors exerting influence in the political process, most notably political parties during elections, and the corresponding rise of new forms of organization and campaigning. Digital technologies enable spontaneous organizing without having to depend on formal

organizations, lowering the costs for like-minded people to find each other, join networks and coordinate around a shared cause. Will the spread of the internet spell the end of formal political organizations? This section explores the role of the internet in parties, campaigns, and elections.

Presentation and debate
– 4.1 How do political parties use information technologies? Compare two different parties.

– 4.2 From party headquarters to hashtags: how digital platforms are redefining political influence.

Class 5: Data-driven campaigning
From debunking myths surrounding data-driven campaigns to understanding their potential for democratic disruption, students will gain insights into the complexities, ethical considerations, and implications of utilizing data analytics in the pursuit of political objectives. The class aims to equip participants with a comprehensive understanding of the role and challenges associated with data-driven campaigning in modern democracies.

Presentations and debate
– 5.1 Can electoral outcomes be predicted using social media data?
– 5.2 Cambridge Analytica: is it a myth or a reality?

Class 6: Social movements, collective action and the internet
Do digital tools foster or hamper protest and collective action? Ever since the protest cycle of 2010 and 2011 (the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street), and up to Fridays for Future, Last Generation, Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, the idea that digital media facilitate collective action has been a major theme in the public imagination. New communication technologies have made organizations less central to mass participation, facilitating the formation of new movements, the unfolding of a generational shift in activism, and the emergence of new issues and transmedia activists. And yet, examples from the recent past also illustrate that digital media can also be used to repress protesters, as in the case of Gezi Park in Istanbul and the Umbrella movement in Hong Kong. While some scholars argue that changes in
the available information technology might impact the character and potential of citizen collaboration, or the "Logic of Collective Action", others suggest that the internet is becoming a formidable tool for governments to repress protesters. In this class, we discuss the impact of the internet on protest mobilization.

Presentations and debate
– 6.1 The use of digital media for social change: the Umbrella movement and the Fridays for Future compared.
– 6.2 The use of social media in the Iranian Woman, Life, Freedom movement.

Class 7: Control and surveillance

While censoring the Internet has long been considered impossible, repressive governments have learnt how to prevent individuals from using it and minimize dissent, whereas democratic governments have tried to use technology to restrain unwanted information. Today, the Internet can be viewed as a battleground
over technical, social, and political control, opposing governments to one another, to their citizens, and to competing commercial groups. This class examines the challenges of the increasingly widespread control of the Internet, it overviews the motivations to censor content and users, and discusses the types and tools of censorship that are currently deployed.

Presentations and debate
– 7.1 Social media and government reaction in Iran's Women, Life, Freedom movement.
– 7.2 The Great firewall in China.

Class 8: Digital media and populism

Populism and political radicalism are undeniable features of the contemporary political landscape. Donald Trump in the US, Marine Le Pen in France, Narendra Modi in India, and the Brothers of Italy: radicals are being drawn from all ends of the spectrum into the heart of contemporary politics. Some fear this may presage the end of liberal democracy as we know it, with citizens increasingly willing to countenance politicians with strong authoritarian tendencies. Others see this as a healthy way of the system releasing popular anger, and argue that, once in touch with power, populists frequently adopt more moderate positions. Behind all of this lurks the question of the impact of the internet, with its ability to foster connections between people of radical views.

Presentations and debate
– 8.1 Select a prominent figure from a far-right and far-left party and compare their use of a social media platform of your choice.
– 8.2 Elon Musk's ownership and use of Twitter.

Class 9: Misinformation, disinformation and manipulation

The use of social media has prompted inquiries into their influence on the dissemination of misinformation, disinformation, and various types of fake news. This section delves into the mechanisms through which emerging digital platforms and social media foster the acceptance of unverified conspiracy theories, enable the proliferation of false information, and contribute to the restructuring of the public arena.

Presentation and debate
– 9.1 What is fake news? Discuss with reference to anti-vax mobilization.

Class 10: In-class paper or podcast work: discussion and open questions

This session will focus on your research paper or podcast. You should come prepared with a topic of interest, an academic paper that has inspired you, and questions about the essay. Following the collective discussion, you will be required to create an outline for your essay or podcast. Additionally, we will critically analyze the strengths and weaknesses of using Large Language Models for this task with a focus on the most diffused one, Chat GPT. We will explore how to effectively utilize Chat GPT's capabilities, assess its potential advantages, and recognize any limitations it may have. What potential advantages and disadvantages does Chat GPT offer? How can we make informed decisions regarding the utilization of Chat GPT for writing? What are the strengths and weaknesses of Chat GPT that enhance or undermine our work?

Collective discussion

Presentations and debate (refer to the readings for session 12)
– 12.1 Can artificial intelligence redirect public opinion?
– 12.2 Can machines think?

Class 11: Polarization
Through an exploration of key readings, the course examines how digital media platforms, such as social media, influence the formation of echo chambers and contribute to political polarization. The discussions will encompass the dynamics of audience fragmentation in the age of digital media, shedding light on the ways individuals engage with political information online. By critically analyzing the impact of digital media on political discourse and ideological divisions, students will gain insights into the complex interplay between technology and polarization in contemporary political landscapes.

Presentations and debate
– 11.1 The measurement of online polarization: approaches and indicators.
– 11.2 Is polarization primarily driven by user choice (people actively seeking like-minded content) or platform design (algorithmic recommendations)?

Class 12: Artificial intelligence and democracy, visit to the exhibition "The World according to AI"
When : Meeting at 10.00
Where: Jeu de Paume 1 Place de la Concorde 75008

This class explores the intersection of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and democracy. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a field of computer science focused on creating systems that can perform tasks that typically require human intelligence. It encompasses machine learning, where algorithms improve their performance over time through experience, and deep learning, inspired by the structure and function of the human brain. We delve into AI's definition and its impactful role in shaping politics, particularly in elections and individuals' access to information. From machine learning to ethical considerations, we navigate the complexities of AI's influence on democracy, recognizing its critical importance in our evolving political and societal structures.

Presentations and debate
– 12.1 Can artificial intelligence redirect public opinion?
– 12.2 Can machines think?

📚 Bibliography

Class 1
– Farrell, H. (2012). The consequences of the internet for politics. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 15, 35-52.
–Ruess, C. et al. (2023) Online political participation: the evolution of a concept, *Information, Communication & Society*, 26:8, 1495-1512.

Class 2
– Song, Y. et al. (2024) Tracing the evolution of e-government: a visual bibliometric analysis from 2000 to 2023. *Administrative Sciences*, 14(7), 133-152.
– Anshari, M., & Lim, S. A. (2017). E-government with big data enabled through smartphone for public services: Possibilities and challenges. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 40(13), 1143-1158.

Class 3
– Gilardi, F., Gessler, T., Kubli, M., & M¨uller, S. (2022b). Social media and political agenda setting. *Political Communication*, 39(1), 39–60.
– Busuioc, M. (2021). Accountable artificial intelligence: Holding algorithms to account. *Public Administration Review*, 81(5), 825–836.

Class 4
– Dommett, K., Fitzpatrick, J., Mosca, L., & Gerbaudo, P. (2021). "Are digital parties the future of party organization? A symposium on The Digital Party: Political Organisation and Online Democracy by Paolo Gerbaudo." *Italian Political Science Review*, 51(1), 136-149.
– Guess, A. M., et al. (2023). How do social media feed algorithms affect attitudes and behavior in an election campaign? *Science*, 381(6656), 398-404.

Class 5
– Kefford, G., et al. (2023). Data-driven campaigning and democratic disruption: Evidence from six advanced democracies. *Party Politics*, 29(3), 448-462.
– Dommett, K., Barclay, A., & Gibson, R. (2024). Just what is data-driven campaigning? A systematic review. Information, Communication & Society, 27(1), 1-22.

Class 6
– Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2012). The Logic of Connective Action. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(5), 739-768.
– Shahin, S., & Ng, Y. M. M. (2022). Connective action or collective inertia? Emotion, cognition, and the limits of digitally networked resistance. *Social Movement Studies*, 21(4), 530-548.

Class 7
– Ververis, V., Marguel, S., & Fabian, B. (2020). Cross-Country comparison of Internet censorship: A literature review. *Policy & Internet*, 12(4), 450-473.
– Master, A., & Garman, C. (2023). A worldwide view of nation-state internet censorship. *Free and Open Communications on the Internet*.

Class 8
– Mudde, C., & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2012). *Populism and (liberal) democracy: A framework for analysis*. In Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or corrective for democracy? (Vol. 1,p. 5).
– Stier, S., Kirkizh, N., Froio, C., & Schroeder, R. (2020). Populist attitudes and selective exposure to online news: A cross-country analysis combining web tracking and surveys. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 25(3), 426-446.

Class 9
– Jungherr, A., & Schroeder, R. (2021). Disinformation and the structural transformations of the public arena: Addressing the actual challenges to democracy. *Social Media+ Society*, 7(1), 2056305121988928.
– Jungherr, A., & Rauchfleisch, A. (2024). Negative Downstream Effects of Alarmist Disinformation Discourse: Evidence from the United States. *Political Behavior*, 1-21.

Class 10
– Turing, A. M. (1950). Computing Machinery and Intelligence. *Mind* 49,433-460.
– Fuchs, K. (2023). Exploring the opportunities and challenges of NLP models in higher education: Is Chat GPT a blessing or a curse? *Frontiers in Education*, 8.

Collective discussion

Class 11
– Barberá, P. (2020). *Social media, echo chambers, and political polarization*. In Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform, 34.
– Kreiss, D. and McGregor, S.C. (2024). A review and provocation: On polarization and platforms. *New Media & Society*, 26(1), pp.556-579.

Class 12

– Schippers, B. (2020). Artificial intelligence and democratic politics. *Political Insight*, 11(1), 32-35. Crawford, K. (2021). Chapter 1- Earth, In Atlas of AI: power, politics, and the planetary costs of AI, Yale University Press.
–Jungherr, A. (2023). Artificial intelligence and democracy: A conceptual framework. *Social media+ society*, *9*(3), 20563051231186353.

Optional readings are available upon request.

Requirements for validation

The course evaluation consists of three components:

- Class Participation (10%): Active engagement in discussions and debates

- Student Presentation (40%): 15-minute individual presentation based on the required readings

- Final Exam (50%): Choice between:

a) Research paper (6,000 words maximum, excluding references and appendix)
b) Podcast (30 minutes maximum)

Students will receive detailed instructions for the final exam during Class 1.

Professor's Biography

Dr. Caterina Froio is Associate Professor of Political Science/E-politics at Sciences Po, Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics. Her research focuses on far-right politics and illiberalism, (digital) media, and political participation. She is Editor in Chief of the European Journal of Political Research.