6SSPP357 – The Political Sociology of Social Networks

Fall Semester 2017

Lecturer: Dr Florian Foos (florian.foos@kcl.ac.uk)
Twitter: @florianfoos

Office Hour: Tuesday, 11.00-12.00; Wednesday, 12.00-13.00
S2.21, Strand Building

Lectures: Mondays, 10.00-11.00, K0.20 KINGS BLDG

Seminars:
Group 1: Mondays, 12.00-13.00 CHESHAM -1.04
Group 2: Tuesdays, 09.00-10.00 STRAND BLDG S2.31

Overview

This module introduces second year students to the study of political influence within social networks, both real-live networks and networks that connect citizens online. It starts by questioning the assumption underlying classical rational choice theory that citizens take political decisions in isolation. Instead, we will look at how citizens’ social environment, family, friends, neighbours, and colleagues, influence their political decisions. While citizens often choose to be close to others that are similar to them, a mechanism, which is known as sorting or selection, citizens also change their attitudes and behaviours because they interact with other citizens. But how can we be confident that citizens really influence each other’s decisions? Moreover, which are the mechanisms through which influence takes place? During the semester, students will read some of the foundational works that define the social citizen from a theoretical perspective, learn about the different theoretical mechanisms through which social influence may be exerted, and gain knowledge about different methods that can be applied to identify causal effects within various types of social networks.

Assessment

The module is assessed based on two essays:

Essay 1 (1500 words) – 30%
Essay 2 (3500 words) – 70%

Essay Question 1 (30%):

1. Compare and contrast Zuckerman’s (2005) “social logic of politics” with
   a) Sartori’s (1969) political sociology
or
b) Downs’ (1957) economic theory of democracy.

How is the “social logic of politics” different?

Deadline: 17.00, Friday, 27 October 2017

Essay Question 2 (70%):

2. Answer the following question, drawing on both theory and empirical evidence:

Is influence mightier than selection? Discuss with reference to political attitudes and behaviour in online and/or offline social networks.

Deadline: 17.00, Tuesday, 12 December 2017

Lecture Outline

1. Introduction
2. Individualistic versus social decision-making
3. Causality in social networks
4. Which networks matter?
5. Real-life networks: The household
6. Online networks: Social media
7. Mechanism I: Information
8. Mechanism II: Social norms and social pressure
9. Political Talk and Political Disagreement
10. Persuasion and Participation
11. Conclusion

Learning outcomes
On successful completion of this course students will be able to:

- Identify different types of social networks that are relevant for political behavior
- Critically compare and evaluate different theoretical mechanisms that can explain social influence.
- Name the key causal identification challenges within social networks and assess published work on how it addresses these challenges.
- Formulate relevant research questions about political influence in social networks and be able to embark on BA thesis work on the topic.

Reading
Texts that are marked with an asterisk (*) are compulsory reading for each week. I expect that everyone has read these texts before coming to the seminar. The short questions at the start of each week are meant to guide your reading.
Recommended Books


1. Introduction

- What is Political Sociology?
- What are social networks?
- How can we define influence?
- Why are social networks important to the study of political behaviour?


2. Individualistic versus social decision-making

- What are the limitations of the rational choice theory of political behavior?
- Is the social citizen rational?
- What is conditional choice?
6SSPP357 – The Political Sociology of Social Networks


3. **Causality in social networks**

- What is the reflection problem?
- How can selection and sorting be distinguished from influence?
- How can we identify causal effects in social networks?


**Context of social influence**

4. **Which networks matter?**

- Does personal proximity condition social influence?

5. **Real-life networks: The household**

- Why is the household the most important context in which social influence happens?
- Do couples influence each other?


6SSPP357 – The Political Sociology of Social Networks


6. Online networks: Social media

- Are social media echo chambers?
- Do social media help in overcoming the collective action problem?
- How important is social media in election campaigns


Mechanisms

7. Information

- Do we learn more from close or from weak ties?
- How can we distinguish mechanisms?
- Is our model of how legislators make decisions outdated?


8. Social norms and social pressure

- What are social norms?
- Is social pressure good or bad for political engagement?


6SSPP357 – The Political Sociology of Social Networks


Mann, Christopher B. "Is there backlash to social pressure? A large-scale field experiment on voter mobilization." *Political Behavior* 32.3 (2010): 387-407.


9. Political Talk and Political Disagreement

- Does political talk lead to political engagement?
- Does exposure to disagreement make citizens more tolerant?
- Does political conflict lead to withdrawal from civic life or to engagement?


10. Persuasion and Participation

- Is inter-personal persuasion possible?
- Is voting contagious?


11. Conclusion