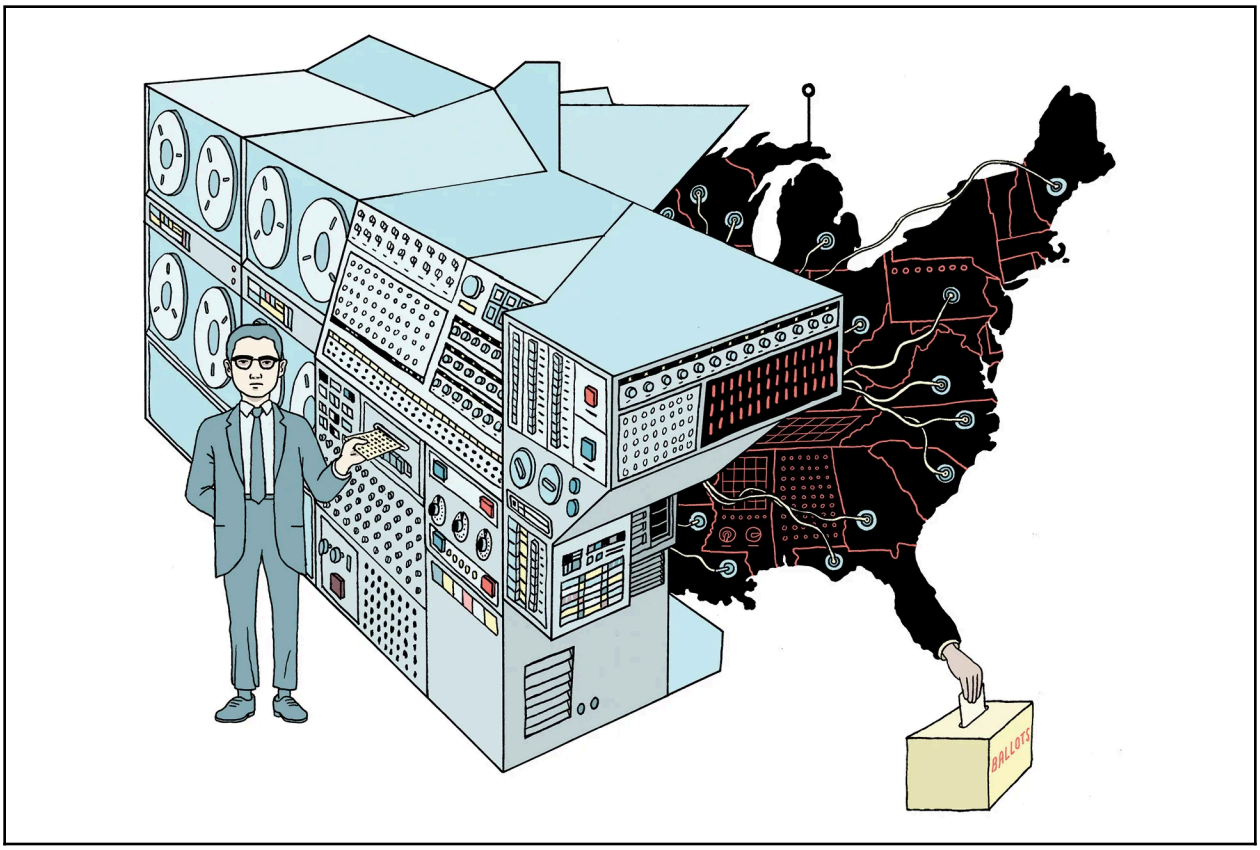
A History of Political Data Analytics: From the 1960's, IBM, and 'Simulmatics' Through the Online Attention Economy and Quantitative Political Science



Spring 25S-CLUSTER-60CW [Bruinlearn]
Day and Location: Mondays 9 - 12, Covel 218
Instructor: Graham Straus
Email: gpstraus@g.ucla.edu
Office Hours: Wednesdays 10 - 12, Bunche 4337

Course Description:

This course uses Jill Lepore's *If Then*, the story of the Simulmatics Corporation, as a starting point to trace the idea that given enough data, academics and businesses should be able to predict human behavior. This idea would explode in the social sciences with generations of political scientists tracking down as much data as possible to create theories for voters' and politicians' preferences and actions. We cover 1980's ideological scaling methods and use them to study polarization. We look at survey and observational evidence for voter turnout, gerrymandering, media bias, and the targeting of voters through micro-level data. Students are asked to bring a critical viewpoint to this history, and ultimately reflect on dataism at its zenith. The course puts a large emphasis on lively, informed class discussions and an involved writing process.

Learning Goals:

By the end of the course, students will be able to. . .

- Identify substantively interesting and analytically tractable research projects.
- Conduct a literature review in preparation for executing original research.
- Engage in writing as an iterative process that includes revision and rethinking ideas.
- Debate ideas in an academic seminar format.
- Understand the development of political data analytics in the 1960's, specifically the Simulmatics Corporation and its associated figures and ideologies. Connect this story to modern political science research.
- View the history of predictive data analytics as it has shaped the study of and practice of politics.
- Grasp how ideological scaling methods place legislators along a single left-right dimension.
- Evaluate evidence for whether or not Americans are in "echo chambers," or ideologically isolated news environments.
- Speak confidently on what gerrymandering is and what we have done to combat it, as a country and as political scientists.

Course Structure:

The course is a seminar and so relies heavily on your preparation and engagement every week. The length and quantity of assignments is such that you should be able to do them in a 2-3 hour window outside class every week. Please come to class prepared to discuss. Three hours is a long stretch. Our class will generally have a lecture component, a longer discussion component, and an activity component. This will either be an activity to help you complete your final project or an activity related to the given week's content.

Class Grade Components:

- Final Project Assignment (link to assignment document) (45%)
- Weekly Journal (10%)
    - Write 2-3 paragraphs (think a half a page to a page, bullet points are fine) on each week's assigned readings/podcasts/movies. These are thoughts you want to remember during our discussion, or takeaways relevant to your final project.
- Attendance + Participation (45%)
    - Attendance in class and participation in discussion is mandatory. I understand that things come up. Please reach out as far in advance as possible if you must miss class.

Required Texts:

- Lepore, Jill. *If Then: How the Simulmatics Corporation Invented the Future.* Liveright Publishing, 2020.

Course Overview:

Day	**Topic and schedule**	**Assigned before class for discussion**
Week 1: March 31	Getting started - Syllabus overview; getting to know each other - Why study political data analytics? - Jill Lepore video - Activity: Data viz writing exercise	
Week 2: April 7	Midcentury developments - Lecture: *The American Voter* by Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, and *Voting* by Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee. - Discussion: *If Then* - Activity: Pitch as if you were working for Simulmatics	- *If Then*, ch. 1 - 3
Week 3: April 14	Spatial models and polarization - Lecture: Ideal point estimation, median voter theory, and the story of Congressional polarization from Dewey and Truman to Trump and Biden - Discussion: Not Another Politics Podcast, Poole & Rosenthal - Activity: Brainstorming final projects	- Not Another Politics Podcast: How Much Should We Believe Surveys? (46 min) - *Ideology & Congress*, Poole & Rosenthal ch. 1
Week 4: April 21	Studies of voter turnout: - Lecture: Rational choice models of voter turnout, modern work on SES and voter turnout - Discussion: Social pressure and turnout - Activity: Personal writing exercise, thoughts on Gerber et al.	- Social Pressure and Voter Turnout: Evidence from a Large Scale Field Experiment

Week 5: April 28	Appealing to voters: - Lecture: Can political campaigns persuade? - Discussion: Microtargeting voters - Activity: Working on one page memos for final project - One page memo due by end of class	- Targeted Campaign Appeals and the Value of Ambiguity - The Persuasive Effects of Political Microtargeting in the Age of Generative Artificial Intelligence
Week 6: May 5	News media: - Lecture: Does the media facilitate democratic accountability? Are we living in partisan news bubbles? - Discussion: News diets - Activity: Annotated bibliography peer review workshop	- (Almost) Everything in Moderation: New Evidence on Americans' Online Media Diets - Not Another Politics Podcast: When Fox Viewers Watch CNN Instead (48 min)
Week 7: May 12	Public opinion and polling: - Lecture: What is public opinion and why is it important? - Discussion: Strength In Numbers - Activity: Measuring opinion among ourselves - Activity: Counterargument exercise - Annotated bibliography first draft due before class	- *Strength In Numbers: How Polls Work and Why We Need Them,* Introduction, Ch. 1, 6, 7
Week 8: May 19	Surveillance capitalism: - Lecture: Surveillance capitalism - Discussion: Surveillance capitalism - Activity: Final presentation rehearsal - Annotated bibliography with revisions due before class	- *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, ch. 8, 9, 14 - Computational Social Science
Week 9: May 26	Memorial day; no class	Memorial day; no class
Week 10: June 2	Winding down: - Discussion: The Great Hack - Activity: Final Presentations	- The Great Hack - *If Then,* ch. 14 & epilogue

Office Hours:
My office hours are Wednesday 10 - 12 in Bunche 4337. If zoom is more convenient for you, I'm happy to do that. Here is the zoom link where we'll meet if you opt for zoom office hours.

Email:
I will respond to emails within 48 hours. Please put something like "cluster" or "political data analytics class" in the subject line. Please be professional in your email correspondence.

AI and Academic Honesty:
ChatGPT, Claude, and many other LLM/AI tools are changing education and the world before our eyes. I've assigned only the critical readings that you need to do to be ready for class, and have kept things under 2-3 hours per week. Please do the readings and don't kick the reading to AI to summarize. In this course we'll be writing weekly journals, a one page memo, and going through a revision process with annotated bibliographies for the final project. Using AI to help you brainstorm or to clean up grammar is understandable, however, you need to revise your own writing based on feedback. You need to have read through your work and edited it before you turn it in, it cannot be only AI. Additionally AI is still hallucinating citations, so for the annotated bibliography, please use AI extremely sparingly. You're responsible for your work. Good old fashioned Googling for outside references will do just fine. More broadly, you're expected to act in line with UCLA's policy on academic honesty and plagiarism will be reported to the dean of students. The undergraduate writing center is another resource that may be helpful.

Other Resrouces:
- CAPS
- Academic Counseling