Comparative Public Opinion

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This research theme allows students to develop an original research project that addresses questions of public opinion formation, change, and/or measurement in comparative perspective. In other words, students will compare these or other features of public opinion in two or more countries or contexts. While the study of public opinion in some countries, such as the United States and European democracies, is quite advanced, much of the rest of the world receives far less attention. What is more, the arrival of the internet and social media have irrevocably changed public opinion and the study of public opinion in all countries. Students can choose to compare any set of two or more countries—advanced democracies, Western or non-Western, authoritarian, developed or developing.

In this module, we will focus on extending existing public opinion research into new areas. Projects can take any of a variety of approaches: focusing on public opinion in non-democratic contexts, comparing less-studied countries, or exploring dimensions of public opinion that have been opened up by the growth of new communication methods. A quantitative approach will often be fitting, since good, international polling data is often easily accessible. But qualitative exploration, normative discussion, descriptive work, and other approaches are welcomed as well.

Students will need to define an original research question that contributes to our understanding of public opinion in a comparative, cross-national sense. Creative questions and inventive approaches are particularly welcomed. The theme instructor will offer some suggestions and possible directions for research, but students are encouraged to devise their own topic of student from a broad set of questions that are relevant to understanding how public opinion fits into our understanding of comparative politics. The cutting edge of comparative public opinion research in political science includes such topics as: the meddling of Russian Twitter bots, China’s “50 cent party” of pro-regime internet commenters, examination of polarization in social networks, unique web-scraped data from Google Trends to Nextdoor, and the low-cost implementation of surveys and survey experiments on Amazon Mechanical Turk. Students can engage with topics such as how and why public opinion is important to non-democratic regimes, how social media and the internet have made some groups’ voices stronger or weaker in how we view public opinion, and different ways that publics in various countries perceive opinion polls.