PSC 561: REVEALED POLITICAL PREFERENCES

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T 12:30-3:15pm
Harkness 112

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Political discourse is replete with references to individuals' and policies' relative location in some latent attribute space: Left or right wing, conservative or liberal, etc. A substantial branch of political theory and methodology relies on representations of these locations in numerical scales. These locations summarize individual or policy attributes but they are also often interpreted in cardinal terms assigning meaning to the magnitude of their differences (for example, in evaluating changes in ideological or policy polarization). This course aims to systematize theories and methods for constructing and interpreting such statistics. A fundamental premise is that notions derivative of location such as 'distance,' 'polarization,' or 'extremism' that are essential in applications of these latent constructs become meaningful or relevant only when interpreted in terms of their impact on individual welfare. As a result the course emphasizes the conception and construction of such latent attribute scales in close reference to individual preferences over political alternatives (policies, candidates, legislative bills, etc.). Conversely, the course does not cover a large and growing literature that relies solely on observable attributes of the alternatives (e.g., texts) to generate similar scales (though, of course, a combined approach is possible and even desirable).

The title Revealed Political Preferences emphasizes this individual preference-centered perspective. It also connects this course with the classic idea originating in economic theory that observed choices reveal individual preferences, although the match to that literature is only partial and the literal description in the title may be a misnomer. One difference of materials covered in this course compared to classic economic theory of revealed preferences is that in most political contexts the choice alternatives themselves are (at least partially) unobserved and common (or public choices). As a result, a lot of the focus and traction of arguments suitable for these environments arises from combining information across many individuals (whereas in many classic economic contexts results on individual choice can be applied independently across individuals). A second difference is that in some datasets of interest in politics it is the preferences that are (assumed) known (at least for a sample of the population) and it is the location of the alternatives or the population quantities that are the objects to be possibly inferred and/or revealed.

The course systematizes these ideas covering both theoretical and (statistical) methodological aspects. The theoretical component emphasizes the logical conclusions that are

(or are not warranted) in such environments under different assumptions on what data is observed and using various degrees of restrictions on the assumed individual preferences. The methodological component addresses classic and new topics on estimation, testing, and inference in close connection to these theoretical results, and covers both parametric and non-parametric approaches. While these ideas will often be illustrated using actual datasets and computer code, some methodological topics covered will be less 'hands-on.'

Prerequisites: Most of the mathematical background for the theoretical component of the course is elementary or covered in the first semester in our program (in PSCI 407). While some methodological topics on inference and estimation may be more advanced, the intention is to make both theoretical and methodological materials as self-contained as possible. In all cases necessary background for most topics will be reviewed in detail in class so that the dedicated student can supplement the required background.

Readings: The main readings for the course will be based on class notes and supplements that will be distributed over the course of the semester. These also provide a gateway to related research articles that may be a more challenging first read, but which would make an essential supplement for a complete coverage of materials. The selected bibliography at the end of this syllabus is meant to be indicative but not definitive of materials and readings covered. The more technical among those readings are only meant to be reviewed in lecture format over the course of the semester.

Outline: The first half of the semester (roughly) will focus on environments where the set of political alternatives (policies, candidates, political parties, etc.) is finite and practically fixed. We will review theoretical restrictions from classic collective choice aggregation and we will detail possible restrictions on individual preferences that are of theoretical or practical interest in such environments. We will also cover scaling techniques based on such preference restrictions as well as inference on properties of collective choice and social aggregation. In the second half, we will assume a continuous space of alternatives and discuss various forms of parametric and non-parametric restrictions on individual preferences. This is a context in which most classic estimation methods have been developed and we will compare and contrast such methods with methods relying on alternative assumptions.

The University of Rochester respects and welcomes students of all backgrounds and abilities. In the event you encounter any barrier(s) to full participation in this course due to the impact of disability, please contact the Office of Disability Resources.
Visit http://www.rochester.edu/college/disability/ for more information.

Evaluation: Your final grade is based on class participation (30%), and a final research project and presentation (70%). Regarding class participation, you are expected to have read any assigned readings ahead of time, keep up with materials covered in previous weeks to raise any clarifying questions, and/or participate in discussion. There is flexibility on the content of the final research paper, which can have a substantive focus that is methodological or applied but only broadly related to course ideas, and can have any mix of empirical and/or formal components. Depending on the scope of the project, the paper may only constitute

a detailed proposal and may contain only preliminary analysis and results. The details will be determined over the semester on a case by case basis taking into account your stage in the doctoral program. Students are expected to present their final project at the last day of class, while the final project will be due at a date (to be set) in the finals week.

Academic honesty: General University policies and guidelines regarding academic honesty apply. In addition: Course notes and materials distributed over the course of the semester often rely on ongoing original research and are proprietary. You are not allowed to make these notes available to any third parties, individual or other, without my explicit written consent.

Schedule: Below is a tentative list of topics. Naturally, this schedule may change as the semester unfolds.

Topic 0 (week 1) Overview and logistics

Topic 1 (weeks 2-7) Finite sets of alternatives: Collective and individual preference restrictions – single-peakedness and its cousins – Order restrictions – Statistical tests, estimation methods, and preference aggregation

Topic 2 (weeks 9-14) Continuous sets of alternatives: Spatial model – Shape restrictions – – (Stochastic) Order restrictions – Embeddings – Endogenous items – Classic IRT, semi-parametric, and non-parametric estimation methods

Topic 3 (week 15) Paper presentations

Selected Bibliography

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