Democracy runs on numbers. Votes must be tallied before election winners are declared. Census counts determine whom Congress represents and how much representation they receive. To justify their decisions, policymakers rely on numbers like the Gross Domestic Product, the Gini Coefficient, the national debt, as well as rates of unemployment and the uninsured. Yet precisely because numbers matter, they can also be manipulated in ways that threaten democracy. Numbers themselves become a subject of a debate. Policymakers may cite dubious figures. Government’s collection of—and public access to—vital data has become a hotly contested issue. Political division, partisanship, and gridlock have also undermined trust in public statistics. In this course, students will gain a hands-on understanding of how democracy shapes (and is shaped by) how and what we count.
[Thanks to statistics] public broadsheets will be to the social world what the sensory organs are to the organic world.

Gabriel Tarde (1903)

How is one to set about the investigation of anything as multifarious as the gross-total thing that is Schenectady, Akron, Dallas, or Keokuk?

Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd (1929)

It’s not the voting that’s democracy, it’s the counting.

Tom Stoppard (1972)

**Overview**

The production of quantitative information plays an essential role in contemporary democracies. All aspects of political life—from the tallying of votes to the evaluation of government performance—are dominated by acts of counting and measuring. At the same time, political division, partisanship, and gridlock have also undermined trust in public statistics. This seminar invites undergraduate and graduate students to collaborate in the production of knowledge about how the political economy shapes and is shaped by calculative practices. We will draw on and synthesize a wide range of perspectives from political science, economics, sociology, anthropology, history, science and technology studies (STS), and law.

Throughout the course of the semester, we will investigate five sets of questions:

1. What makes quantification politically valuable? How have changes in the political economy contributed to the rise of quantification?
2. How do policy and political objectives affect the process of developing social indicators? In other words, how does what we want shape what we measure?
3. How do quantitative indicators attain political legitimacy? Why do some numbers (e.g. Gross Domestic Product) become a routine part of political life while others (e.g. the Human Development Index) are marginalized?
4. How and when does quantification alter relations of power in society? In what ways does measurement give (or deprive) political voice to individuals, groups, organizations, or institutions? How and when does measurement limit or constrain political decision-making?
5. Why do some numbers lose their legitimacy over time? How do disputes over measurement emerge? What determines who wins these disputes? How and when do movements against quantification itself gain traction?
Books

Three books are available for purchase at BookMarq:


Course Format and Expectations

The basic definition of a seminar is a small, specialized group of students engaged in advanced study under a member of the faculty and meeting regularly to exchange information and hold discussion. It serves the purpose that a studio or lab might play in other fields. Throughout the semester, students will develop a better ability to understand and interpret the role of numbers in contemporary politics. Students will also hone their skills for writing and communicating about intricate policy issues. Grades will be based on in-class participation, three in-class policy memos, a final issue-brief project, and a group presentation on social indicators. The breakdown is as follows:

**Three in-class policy memos (40% total):** During the course of the semester, students will write three policy memos. This will take place during the class period and will be “closed book.” The goal of these memos is to both sharpen your thinking about the issues raised in the readings and to hone your writing skills. There will be a writing tutorial early in the semester.

**Issue-brief project (40%):** Throughout the semester, you will prepare an issue brief that analyzes a current debate over the use of numbers in politics or public policy. This can be at the local, state, or national level. As part of the project, you must conduct at least three background interviews with individuals who are either experts on the topic or involved in the debate. Grades for the project will be determined as follows (due dates can be found in the course schedule):

- Project proposal (2%)
- Description of sources and interviewees (3%)
- Final presentation (5%)
- Final draft (30%)

**Group presentation on leading indicators (10%):** As part of the third unit of the course, two-student teams will conduct research on the political use of economic indicators and give a short presentation to the class on their findings.
Participation (10%): This course requires an extensive amount of reading and preparation prior to class. To facilitate this, weekly reading questions will be posted to D2L. You are expected to attend each class session having read and digested all assigned material, ready to engage in an informed, lively discussion with the instructor and with other students. If you do not speak at all during the semester or are absent for more than 6 class sessions, you will receive a 0 for participation.

Grading Scale

- ≥ 93  A
- ≥ 90  A-
- ≥ 87  B+
- ≥ 83  B
- ≥ 80  B-
- ≥ 78  C+
- ≥ 73  C
- ≥ 70  C-
- ≥ 67  D+
- ≥ 60.0  D
- < 60.0  F

Policies

Academic Misconduct: Information on Marquette’s Academic Misconduct Policy can be found here: [http://bulletin.marquette.edu/undergrad/academicregulations/](http://bulletin.marquette.edu/undergrad/academicregulations/) Academic misconduct includes, but is not limited to, individual violations, helping another student with any form of academic misconduct, failing to report any form of academic misconduct, or intentionally interfering with the educational process in any manner. Academic misconduct of any type is unacceptable and will result in immediate referral to Marquette’s Academic Integrity Director. If you are in doubt as to whether an action or behavior is subject to the academic misconduct policy, you should consult an appropriate member of the Academic Integrity Council, faculty or staff.

Disabilities: If you have a disability for which you are requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact the University's Office of Disability Services within the first week of classes. For more information, contact the Office of Disability Services in Marquette Hall, Suite 005 or at (414) 288-1645. If you require any accommodations for exams or other assignments, you must notify me (along with all required documentation) at least one week in advance of the assignment due date.

Courtesy: Your participation is essential to this course. As such, you are expected to behave with courtesy towards your classmates and professor. Phones should be silenced and out of
sight. While laptops are appropriate for taking notes, numerous studies suggest that taking notes by hand greatly improves one’s ability to retain information and sustain focus. I strongly advise heeding the results of this research.

Schedule of Course Readings (* = supplemental reading)

1. An Introduction to Political Arithmetic

Course Overview


Sep 1    Virtual class exercise due to American Political Science Association Meeting
          No readings

The Political Roots of Quantification

Sep 4    No Class – Labor Day


          In-class: policy memo tutorial

2. Power in Numbers / Numbers in Power

What is Life Worth?

Sep 13   Binyamin Appelbaum, “As U.S. Agencies Put More Value on a Life, Businesses


The Political Economy of Big Data

Sep 18 O’Neil, Chapter 1, 3
Project Proposal Due

Sep 20 O’Neil, Chapters 5–6

Sep 22 O’Neil, Chapters 8–9


Social Science, the Courts, and the Ballot Box

Sep 25 Nicholas Stephanopoulos, “The research that convinced SCOTUS to take the Wisconsin gerrymandering case, explained,” Vox, July 11, 2017


Sep 27 Declaration of Sean P. Trende, Sections II, III, V, VI.

Kenneth Mayer, Rebuttal Report, Sections IIA, IIC, III, IV.

Sep 29 Excerpts from Whitford v. Gill (15-cv-421-bbc).

Oct 2 In-class policy memo #1

3. The Political Construction of Economic Life

Economic Indicators and the Invention of Postwar Capitalism
Oct 4  **Coyle**, Introduction, Chapter 1.


Oct 9  **Coyle**, Chapters 2–3.

Oct 11  **Coyle**, Chapter 5.

  **Coyle**, Chapter 6.


Oct 16  Group project on leading indicators – no readings

Oct 18  Group project on leading indicators – no readings

Oct 20  No Class – Semester Break

Budgeting is Governing: Counting Costs on Capitol Hill

Oct 23  **Saldin**, pp. 1-7; Chapter 2.


  **Description of sources due**


  Peter Suderman, “The CBO'S Health Care Score Shows Economists Shouldn’t


Nov 3  **In-class policy memo #2**

4. **Statistical Citizenship**

The Census and American State Formation


Counting, Undercounting, and the Politics of Racial Classification


Nov 20  In-class policy memo #3
Nov 22–24  No Class – Thanksgiving

5. Data, Activism, and Democracy

Standard Humans, Social Movements, and Medical Research


Dec 1  Steven Epstein, *Inclusion* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), Chapter 5.

Data as Activism and Data Activism


Dec 11-15  Final presentations and course wrap-up

Final draft of issue briefs due Dec 15
Selected Bibliography


Rocco, Philip, Andrew S. Kelly, Daniel Béland, and Michael Kinane. “The New Politics of

