



Nordamerikastudienprogramm
Institut für Anglistik, Amerikanistik und Keltologie



Lecture Series

"Current Issues in North American Studies and Cultural Studies"
Summer Term 2013

Dr. Justin Sully

North American Studies Program
University of Bonn

"Wonks, Pundits and Statistical Panic in Contemporary US Political Culture: The Case of Nate Silver"

Tuesday • 28 May 2013 • 6:00-8:00 p.m.

Room A • Institut für Anglistik, Amerikanistik und Keltologie • Regina-Pacis-Weg 5

The debate over statistical forecasting in the months leading up to the 2012 election in the United States elevated Nate Silver as a figurehead of quantitative political journalism and as a champion of statistical truth in American political culture. While Silver's forecasting is, in fact, not clearly distinguished among competing poll aggregators in either its methodology or the accuracy of its forecast, Silver's fivethirtyeight blog and its now famous author were quickly targeted by attacks from both news media and political party representatives. While this debate certainly had its partisan aspect, not all of Silver's critics were disgruntled republicans; some were well respected journalists with apparently serious concerns about this trend in political journalism and its effects on civic life in the US. Indeed, this public exchange suggests numerous urgent questions about the shape of political life in the United States today. To what extent does the controversial appeal of, and desire for quantitative explanations represent a break with, or continuity in American political culture? Can we read the rise of poll "wonkery" as symptomatic of a new alignment or emphasis in American politics?

Before arriving in the North American Studies Program, Justin Sully completed his PhD at McMaster University (Canada) and worked as a lecturer at the University of Alberta. His broad field of expertise is in critical theories of film and popular culture. His research has explored the popular articulation of "population crisis" during the latter half of the twentieth century and the figuration of demographic alarm in visual media. His writing has been published in *Canadian Literature*, *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Literary and Cultural Theory* and the *Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*.