Public Opinion

Dr. Andrew Garner

POLS4520/5520 - Spring 2017
“Unless mass views have some place in the shaping of policy, all the talk about democracy is nonsense.”

V.O. Key (1961)

Public opinion is widely believed to be a central and vital aspect of democracy. Classic views of democracy assumes that citizens engage their government through deliberation and discussion about the major issues and policy debates of the day. The citizens are supposed to send a clear signal to government to ensure that public policy represents those interests and beliefs.

Against this classic conception of democracy is the reality of public opinion - very few people are broadly informed about politics and even fewer engage one another (or themselves) in substantial deliberation about government policy. How can democracy survive with such a disinterested and uninformed citizenry? Why do some citizens develop strong and substantial opinions about politics while others do not? And more importantly, what does it mean for the average person to hold an opinion about politics? Where do their opinions come from and how do they develop? What are the implications of this empirical reality on classic (and modern) ideas about democracy and the role of citizens in shaping government policy?

Throughout this semester, we will answer these questions by exploring comprehensive political science theories and considering the ways in which this knowledge can be applied to real-life politics. We will conclude the semester by considering political polarization in American politics, including many of the myths and misconceptions about polarization among citizens in America.
We will be reading several important scholarly works published in both journal articles as well as books. There are four books you will need to purchase or otherwise obtain:

The internet has fundamentally changed the ways in which people shop for books. Online stores such as Amazon.com and Half.com provide used copies of these books that are significantly less expensive than you would pay in a bookstore. In addition, there is an ebook version for at least one of these texts and likely by now there are ebook editions for several of them. You are encouraged to explore your options and shop around for the best deals. Also, purchasing a previous edition for the Herbert Asher and/or Erikson and Tedin books is fine as long as the edition is not more than a few years old.
The grading scale used for this class is the standard letter system with the table below giving the ranges associated with each letter grade:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Numeric Grade</th>
<th>Letter Grade</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>90 - 100%</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80 - 89%</td>
<td>B</td>
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<tr>
<td>70 - 79%</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>60 - 69%</td>
<td>D</td>
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<tr>
<td>&gt; 60%</td>
<td>F</td>
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The course is structured around three large projects (and one smaller essay) that are completed in lieu of traditional exams or writing assignments.

- Project I: Polling Analysis and P.R. Message - 15%
- Project II: Content Analysis and News Coverage - 25%
- Project III: Considerations and Popular Culture - 25%
- Reflective Essay: 5%

The course readings and classroom activities are designed to help you successful complete these projects. There will be weekly, open-note quizzes on the course readings and in-class projects and activities designed to help you develop the skills and experience needed to complete the projects:

- Quizzes: 15%
- Participation/Activities: 15%
One of the overarching goals of this course is to learn the basic facts and scholarly literature about public opinion in American politics. Such learning can only occur in a setting of trust and academic integrity where everyone does his or her own work.

This cannot be stated emphatically enough—an academic setting of trust and integrity has zero tolerance for any form of academic dishonesty. Any act of academic dishonesty will result in an “F” grade for the course. In addition, academic dishonesty can also result in the loss of scholarships and suspension or expulsion from the university. You should consult the University Regulation 805 (www.uwyo.edu/legal/Uniregs/ur802.htm) and also the Political Science Department’s policy statement (www.uwyo.edu/Pols/Academic_dishonesty.doc) for more information about academic dishonesty.

By joining this class, you are making a commitment to one another to attend every class session, to complete the readings, and to contribute your efforts and insights during the class activities and discussions. This commitment means taking the readings and the material seriously. Failing to live up to this commitment makes it harder on your classmates during the discussions and activities during the Friday discussion sections and will make it more difficult for you to do well on the exams.

Having said that, life happens. Sometimes unexpected problems arise that may prevent you from making it to a one or two classes or that might require you to come a bit late. Please try to enter the room as quietly as possible.

Attendance is required and expected for all classes. If you miss class, you will need to get notes from one of your friends. If it is a university excused absence then bring documentation with you to the next class so that you are not marked off for those points. Make-up quizzes are only allowed for university excused absences.
Class participation is a vital part of this course, and I will be grading on quality as well as quantity of contributions during the discussions. I prefer not to call on people during these discussions, but I do reserve the right to do so if it becomes necessary.

In setting high expectations for you, I am also making a commitment to each of you that I will make classes worth attending. You will quickly find that I like to have fun during the class discussions and activities, for example. But I am also making a commitment to eliminate busy work and to avoid wasting your time with meaningless, superficial course material. I have tried to include only the most relevant and important theories, concepts, and material in the discussions and activities.

All of the discussions and activities during class time are intended to help you successfully complete the four projects. In some instances, I may end class early or cancel a class if we have covered all of the relevant material ahead of time.

Do not be hesitant to ask for help if you are struggling with the material. Some of the readings are very abstract and dense. I expect everyone will have difficulty fully understanding the material at some point during the semester. So long as you put in an honest effort, there is nothing wrong with asking for help or getting some clarification on something that is not clear. I am here to help you learn and apply this material any way that I can. Feel free to drop by my office, email me, see me after class, or call whenever you feel that you do not fully understand something.

In addition, students who have a physical, learning, sensory, or psychological disability and require accommodations need simply contact me after class as soon as possible. All I need is confirmation from the University Disability Support Services (UDSS), and you may register with UDSS in the Student Educational Opportunity offices, Room 330 Knight Hall to provide them with documentation of your disability.
Class Schedule

January 23-27
Week 1: Introduction and Polling Methods
Readings:
Handout on Central Limit Theorem
Erikson and Tedin: Chapter 2

January 30 - February 3
Week 2: Polling and Context
Readings:
Asher Chapters 1-4

February 6-10
Week 3: Analyzing Polls
Readings:
Asher Chapters 6-9

Project I Due - Monday, February 20th
February 13-17
Week 4: Socialization: The Origins of Public Opinion

Readings:
Erikson and Tedin: Chapter 5
Jennings and Niemi (1968)

February 20-24
Week 5: Stupid Is As Stupid Does: Information and Ideology

Readings:
Erikson and Tedin: Chapter 3

February 27 - March 3
Week 6: Party Identification: Cognitive Filter or Running Tally?

Readings:
Erikson and Tedin: Chapter 3

March 6-10
Week 7: Tides of Consent I

Readings:
Stimson Chapters 1-3

Project II Due - Monday, March 27th
March 13-17
Week 8: Spring Break
Readings:
Inside of Your Eyelids

March 20-24
Week 9: Tides of Consent II
Readings:
Stimson Chapters 4-6

March 27-31
Week 10: Opinion Formation I
Readings:
Zaller Chapters 1-5

April 3-7
Week 11: Opinion Formation II
Readings:
Zaller Chapters 6-9

April 10-14
Week 12: Opinion Formation III
Readings:
Zaller Chapters 10-12
April 17-21
Week 13: Project Week

Readings:
None

Project III Due - Monday, May 1st

April 24-28
Week 14: Media and Polarization

Readings:
Marcus Prior excerpt

May 1-5
Week 15: Assessing the Damage

Readings:
Erikson and Tedin: Chapters 10-11

Reflective Essay Due - Friday, May 12th

The end