

PLCS 427: Political Opinion

Fall 2007

Tuesday, 6:00-9:00 268 Willard.

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Course Description

Political Opinion is an upper level course in American politics that studies the nature and development of mass attitudes and opinions and their relationship to public policy. In order to understand public opinion and its relationship to the output of government, we'll study three interrelated topics. The first of these covers a set of questions about individual opinions: What do we mean by opinion? Where do opinions come from? What characterizes the opinions that Americans hold on issues relating to politics? How informed are opinions? And how do we measure opinions? This last question will be a particularly important one and one that we spend considerable time wrangling with in readings/lectures, hands on lab time and homework assignments. You will each spend time working with survey data, the chief source of opinion data available to us as political scientists, media analysts, and consumers of opinion "facts". In this section of the course we will also consider a popular controversy about whether American opinion is deeply divided along moral and religious lines with half of our citizens "rural, Christian, religiously conservative", and the other half "socially tolerant, pro-choice, secular."

The second set of questions looks at macro or public opinion. Here we will shift our focus of attention from what do individual people think to questions about what, on balance, Americans as a whole think. We'll ask questions such as: What does mass opinion look like? How meaningful is public opinion? How and why does it move over time? Do the opinions of subgroups within the citizenry track each other over time? We'll spend some time talking about the public "mood" and about attitudes toward the president and other elected officials.

Finally we will link what we've learned in the first two sections of the course to how government performs. Just how responsive is government to the will of the people? How responsive do we want them to be?

Teaching and Grading Philosophy

While this course focuses on the analysis of political opinion, the specific design—the assignments and course plan—are designed with the goal of enhancing your problem solving skills and your ability to make effective arguments in both written and oral form, garnering evidence to make your case.

The credo for the class is to act like a professional. This means that you should attend class every week, respect others, and follow the standards of integrity expected in both academics and the work world. Weekly attendance is particularly important in a class that meets just once a week. I will take attendance.

Course Requirements and Evaluation

You will have succeeded in this course if you understand the nature of individual and public opinion, how the two relate to each other and to the output of government, and if you are a critical consumer of public

opinion survey data. Everyone should be able to describe the nature of individual and public opinion. Students should also be understand the importance of question wording, response options, sample sizes, survey design, and the like when assessing survey results. These are increasingly important skills as more and more surveys are conducted by a wider variety of organizations.

To assess your success on these fronts, I will regularly assign homework; this will serve as the basis for 20% of your final grade. There will be two short paper assignments in addition to regular homework assignments; these will each be worth 20% of your final grade. I will also evaluate your in class participation for 20% of your final grade. The remaining 20% will be based on a cumulative final exam.

Class participation. Class participation is my way to gather information about how well you have read and understood the material presented in the readings and a chance for you to pull things together with the help of your peers and me. I will regularly ask you to discuss previous homework assignments and to work with your classmates on in class assignments. Everyone should be prepared to introduce this material each week. Spend time looking at tables and figures and their surrounding write up. If they are unclear to you, bring questions to office hours, pose them to classmates before class, or bring them with you to class.

Homework. The homework assignments will involve identifying public opinion data sources available on line and both cataloging and analyzing the survey data information contained on the web. We will use this data to test hypotheses put forth by the authors of our texts and generated by you. The data weekly homework assignments will provide you with information that will serve as the basis for your short papers on these topics as well.

In the interest of saving paper, I ask you to always a)print 2 sheets of paper to a page; b)print on both sides of the paper; c)eliminate all unnecessary information from the output. In the interest of efficient grading, I ask you to mark (perhaps highlight) output so that I can always locate output referred to in an answer. I prefer output relevant to an answer be contained in the answer itself. Finally, email as well as provide a hard copy of the homework. All homework is due before the class period of its assigned due date.

Short Papers. Each student will write two short, 4-6 page, papers. Each will require students to present a hypothesis developed in the course and derive a test of the hypothesis using survey data available on the internet. The paper will present the data in a table or figure and draw conclusions about the hypothesis. More details will be made available on these assignments in the weeks before they are due.

Attendance. Attendance in this class, like at work, is required. This course meets only 14 times. If you miss class, you miss a very large portion of the material we cover. I will take attendance each class period. If you attend each class you will receive a bonus of 1.5 points on your final grade. If you miss two classes you will receive no bonus or penalty points. For each class beyond 2 that you miss, I will subtract .75 points from your final grade. *Documented* university excused absences will not result in penalties, but you cannot get bonus points for these absences.

Grading

Class Participation: 20%

Short homework assignments: 20%

Papers: 20% * 2

Final exam: 20%

Attendance: Bonus/penalty.

Books

There are three texts for the course. Erikson and Tedin's *American Public Opinion* text is a basic reader in public opinion, covering each of the topics we will address. *Culture Wars*, by Morris Fiorina, is a provocative book with a simple thesis: Americans are *not* deeply divided along religious and moral grounds but are quite moderate and pragmatic on most issues. It is the political elite that have polarized along these lines. We will

identify some of Fiorina's hypotheses and test them with recent survey data and assess the inferences Fiorina has drawn in the context of additional time and data. You will find that the book reports lots of survey data and figures, but the analysis is generally at a fairly simple level. *Tides of Consent* by Jim Stimson will challenge you a bit more. This book focuses on public opinion as it changes over time. According to Stimson we care about mass opinion—it is what determines election outcomes and public policy. And so we want to understand it, what it looks like, how reasonable its movement is. Stimson brings considerable survey data collected over years and years to inform us about over time change and to test hypotheses about the nature of over time change. We will look at similar time series of public opinion in our homework assignments. As you read the texts, take notes and come to class knowing the research questions, the authors' goals, theory, and hypotheses.

- Erikson, Robert S., and Kent L. Tedin. 2007. *American Public Opinion: Its Origins, Content, and Impact, Updated 7th edition*. New York: Pearson Longman.
- Stimson, James A. 2004. *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Fiorina, Morris P. 2004. *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*. New York: Pearson Longman.

Course Calendar

Part I: Individual Opinions

Week 1 August 28: Why do we care about public opinion? What is public opinion?

- I will be out of town Wednesday-Sunday this week.

Week 2 September 4: A Model of Individual Opinions

- Read *American Public Opinion*, chapters 1 and 5.

Week 3 September 11: A Model of Individual Opinions continued and How We Gauge Opinion

- Read *American Public Opinion*, chapters 5 and 2.
- Homework Assignment One Due Monday 8:00am, September 10.

Week 4 September 18: How We Gauge Opinion (continued)

- Reread chapter 2, *American Public Opinion*.
- Homework Assignment Two Due Monday 8:00am, September 17.

Week 5 September 25: What People Know and Think

- Read chapters 3 and 7, *American Public Opinion*.
- Homework Assignment Three Due Monday 8:00am, September 24.

Week 6 October 2: Culture Wars?

- Read chapters 1-5, *Culture Wars?*.
- Homework Assignment Four Due Monday 8:00am, October 1.

Week 7 October 9: Culture Wars? (continued)

- Read chapters 6-10, *Culture Wars?*.
- Pew Research Center for People and the Press's report *Beyond Red versus Blue* sections 1-4, available for download at <http://people-press.org/reports/>

Part II: Macro (aggregate) opinion

Week 8 October 16: From individual to aggregate: ignorant and calculating

- Read chapters preface - 1, *Tides of Consent*.
- Paper One Due Friday 8:00am, October 19.

Week 9 October 23:

- Read chapters 2-3, *Tides of Consent*.
- Homework Assignment Five Due Monday 8:00am, October 22.

Week 10 October 30:

- Read chapters 4, *Tides of Consent*.
- Homework Assignment Six Due Monday 8:00am, October 29.

Week 11 November 6:

- Read chapters 5-6, *Tides of Consent*.
- Homework Assignment Seven Due Monday 8:00am, November 5.

Week 12 November 13: Wrap up *Tides of Consent* and Lab class

- Paper Two Due Friday 8:00am, November 16.

Week 13 November 20, No class, Thanksgiving break

Week 14 November 27:

- Read chapter 9-10, *American Public Opinion*.

Part III Linking opinion to outputs

Week 15 December 4: Public opinion and democracy

- Read chapter 11, *American Public Opinion*. Homework
- Homework Assignment Eight Due Monday 8:00am, December 3.

Week 16 December 11: Public opinion and democracy (continued) and reviews for final

- Study review sheet.

Part VI

Academic Dishonesty

The Department of Political Science, along with the College of the Liberal Arts and the University, takes violations of academic dishonesty seriously. Observing basic honesty in one's work, words, ideas, and actions is a principle to which all members of the community are required to subscribe.

All course work by students is to be done on an individual basis unless an instructor clearly states that an alternative is acceptable. Any reference materials used in the preparation of any assignment must be

explicitly cited. IN an examination setting, unless the instructor gives explicitly prior instruction to the contrary, whether the examination is in-class or take-home, violations of academic integrity shall consist of any attempt to receive assistance from written or printed aids, or from any person or papers or electronic devices, or of any attempt to give assistance, whether the one so doing has completed his or her own work or not.

Other violations include, but are not limited to, any attempt to gain an unfair advantage in regard to an examination, such as tampering with a graded exam or claiming another's work to be one's own. Violations shall also consist of obtaining or attempting to obtain, previous to any examinations, copies of the examination papers or the questions to appear thereon, or to obtain any illegal knowledge of these questions. Lying to the instructor or purposely misleading any Penn State administrator shall also constitute a violation of academic integrity.

In cases of a violation of academic integrity it is the policy of the Department of Political Science to impose appropriate penalties that are consistent with University guidelines.

Disabilities

The Pennsylvania State University encourages qualified people with disabilities to participate in its programs and activities and is committed to the policy that all people shall have equal access to programs, facilities, and admissions without regard to personal characteristics not related to ability, performance, or qualifications as determined by University policy or by state or federal authorities. If you anticipate needing any type of accommodation in this course or have questions about physical access, please tell the instructor as soon as possible. Reasonable accommodations will be made for all students with disabilities, but it is the student's responsibility to inform the instructor early in the term. Do not wait until just before an exam to decide you want to inform the instructor of a learning disability; any accommodations for disabilities must be arranged well in advance.