

Political Science 427: Political Opinion

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Tuesday and Thursday 9:45-11:00
171N Burrowes
863-9402

Political Opinion is an upper level undergraduate course designed primarily for political science majors. The class will study the development and nature of *individual* opinions, as well as how to measure opinions. Then we will consider the content of *public* opinion in recent U.S. history, how and why public opinion changes, and the consequences of public opinion for American government and democracy.

The semester will be divided into 5 main sections. First we will discuss the definition of beliefs and attitudes as the basis of individual opinion formation and the different theoretical approaches for understanding attitude formation and change. Second we will focus on the nature of individual opinions, asking: How much do Americans know about politics? In the third section of the course we will talk about how we measure opinions using public opinion polls. You will learn to recognize the hallmarks of good and poor opinion polling and to critically review the inferences the media, politicians, interest groups, and others make from the results reported in opinion polls. This section of the course will set the stage for in-class analysis of opinions during the 1996 presidential election. We will be asking questions about the data and learning about the practical issues of analyzing public opinion as well as the relationship of opinions to partisanship, education, income, and etc... In the fourth section, we will discuss the content, ebb, and flow of American public opinion in the last 30 years, how it has behaved and why, as well as the consequences for American politics. Finally, in the last section, we will discuss the linkages between public opinion and government.

Throughout the course there will be an emphasis on models of public opinion. We will be discussing the meaning of dependent and independent variables in a model. In so doing we must understand causality and how we find evidence that the media influence our opinions, for example. It might be beneficial for you to think about the course in these terms. We will talk first about opinions as dependent variables, asking about the causes of individual opinion formation within the context of a model of individual opinion. Then we will ask what affect do individual opinions have on other political behavior. Later in the course we will develop models of public opinion, discussing which variables influence public opinion and how they do so. Finally, we will treat public opinion as an independent variable and ask how public opinion influences political behavior.

Evaluation.

Your final grade for the course will reflect your performance on the computer/writing project (25%), the public opinion project (25%), participation and group work (25%), and a comprehensive final exam (25%).

Participation.

In addition to general assessments of your participation in class discussions and regular class attendance, your participation grade will reflect your role in periodic small group projects in class. These projects will be turned in and your performance will be recorded. Students who fail to turn in any of these assignments will not receive any points for participation. Class participation will be worth 25% of your final grade. I should be notified of any and all University excused absences before they occur unless it is an emergency. Failure to inform me may hurt your grade.

Computer Assignment/Paper.

The computer assignments will require students to answer a series of broad questions with public opinion survey data using microcomputers. The computer project will focus on the relationships between

various types of opinions -- from candidate evaluations to issue positions -- and partisanship, political interest and knowledge, for example. In addition, you will be asked to assess the questions/answers in the survey questionnaire and to consider the total survey in light of lectures and readings on surveys and the measurement of opinions. The project will be completed with a series of essay style responses to the assignment questions considering class notes and readings. The project will be worth 25% of your final grade. I will pass out a more detailed assignment sheet as we get closer to the computer assignments.

Public Opinion Project/Paper.

The public opinion project will require students to work in groups to gather data on American opinions toward either a candidate for political office or a set of issues. This data collection will take place over the first half of the semester and will be the basis for small group projects in class as well as be part of the public opinion project. The final product will culminate in a paper. Detailed assignment sheets will be passed out in the next couple of weeks. The papers will each be worth 25% of your final grade and must be typed, double-spaced with 1-inch margins all around.

Final Exam.

The final exam will be a comprehensive in-class essay exam worth 25% of your grade. The final exam is scheduled for Wednesday, May 3, from 10:10-Noon.

Special Circumstances

The Pennsylvania State University encourages qualified persons with disabilities to participate in its programs and activities. If you anticipate needing any type of accommodation in this course or have questions about physical access, please see me as soon as possible. I will do my best to make special arrangements for students with any special needs or conflicts as far as course lectures or test-taking circumstances require. However, if you anticipate a particular requirement, let me know as soon as possible. I will always accommodate legitimate needs, but I am unlikely to accommodate last minute requests. Special circumstances include disabilities and any scheduled activities that you have that conflict with this class, including academic or athletic competitions. If you do not notify me of conflicts early on, I am under no obligation to allow you a make-up exam or assignment extensions.

Texts

There are 2 required texts for the course. In addition, students may be asked to read selections from journal articles in the library.

Asher, Herbert. 1998. *Polling and the Public: What Every Citizen Should Know*. Fourth Edition. Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press.

Glynn, Carroll J. (Editor), Susan Herbst, Robert Shapiro (Contributor), and Bruce A. Williams (Contributor). 1999. *Public Opinion*. New York: Harper Collins.

Tentative Class Schedule--subject to change.

INTRODUCTION

- January 11: Introduction: Course Objectives and Policies.
- January 13: Why we study public opinion.
The Meaning of Public Opinion.
Public Opinion, Chapter 1.
- January 18: The History of Public Opinion.
Public Opinion, Chapter 2.

THEORIES AND MODELS OF ATTITUDE FORMATION AND CHANGE:

- January 20 and 25: Psychological Theories.
Public Opinion, Chapter 4 (skip the section on Judgmental Theories, 124-125).
- January 27 and February 1: Social Group Theories.
Public Opinion, Chapter 5 and pages 203 – end in Chapter 6.
- February 3: A Model of Individual Opinions.

THE NATURE OF INDIVIDUAL OPINIONS:

- February 8: Basic Beliefs.
Public Opinion, Chapter 7.
- February 10 and 15: What Americans Know about Politics.
Public Opinion, Chapter 8 through page 276.

Analyzing Survey Data

- February 17, 22 and 24: Measuring Public Opinion.
Public Opinion, Chapter 3.
Asher, all.
- February 29 and March 2: Working with the National Election Study surveys.
- March 6-10: Spring Break
- March 14, 16, 21, and 23: LAB
- March 28: Individual Opinions, An Epilogue

Public Opinion

March 30, April 4: Public Attitudes.
Public Opinion, Chapter 8 pages 276 through end.

April 6 and 11: Explaining Changes in Public Opinion.
Public Opinion, Chapter 11.

Public Opinion and Democracy

April 13: Public Opinion and Public Policy.
Public Opinion, Chapter 9.

April 18 and 20: Public Opinions and Elections.
Public Opinion, Chapter 12.

April 25: Concluding Remarks/Review.

April 27: NO CLASS

May 3: Final Exam.