

PSC 327
PUBLIC OPINION
Winter 2020

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Class Number: 25899
Class Hours: MW 1:00-2:30pm
Class Location: Levan Center Room 508, Lincoln Park Campus

Office Hours: T 10:00 to 11:30 AM; W 2:30 to 4:00 PM & by appointment
Office Location: 990 W. Fullerton Room 2208

Welcome to *Public Opinion*. This course provides an introduction to the study of public opinion and its value in a democratic system. We focus our attention on both practical questions (*how* is public opinion studied?) and theoretical ones (*what* is the nature of public opinion?). The course proceeds in three phases. First, we begin with a survey of principles and practices in the study of public opinion. Questions for inquiry include: what does public opinion mean? What is its value in a democratic society? What are the best practices for gathering and interpreting public opinion data? Second, we move to micro-foundations of opinion to explore the formation of attitudes in the minds of individuals. Do Americans have strong ideological beliefs? Are they self-interested? Do they divide people into “us” (in-groups) and “them” (out-groups) when they look at the political world? Third, we situate our knowledge in the world of politics. How does public opinion move in the aggregate? Does the media hold sway over opinion? Do elites? What value do opinion polls have in a democratic society?

Your engagement with this course material - both inside and outside the classroom - is essential to this course. Because the study of public opinion can be a fascinating, frustrating, complex task, I welcome any suggestions about personal topics of interest relevant to the course (broadly construed) that we can explore together as a class. I will do my best to facilitate your learning in any way I can. Please do not hesitate to attend my office hours or contact me to arrange an appointment.

COURSE & LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the quarter, students should have a good understanding of what Americans think, how they form their views and the impact of these attitudes, and opinions on their involvement in the political system. Students will be able to critically evaluate both the mechanisms for measuring public opinion and the role that instruments and reports play in American society today.

This course will focus on three of the Political Science Department's Learning Objectives:

- (1) *Mastery of Content*: "Students can define and discuss core concepts within the field of political science." We will discuss the role of public opinion in our democracy as well as foundational and contemporary debates over measurement and interpretation.
- (2) *Critical Thinking*: "Students can view a given political issues from a multiplicity of perspectives. They can also identify, evaluate and draw upon a variety of theoretical perspectives to explain particular political phenomena." We will develop these skills by discussing policy issues, representation by the political system of public demands, and responsiveness by the public for what government does. Students are expected to use theory and evidence in classroom discussions, exams, and the research paper assignment to evaluate particular issues in the field of public opinion.
- (3) *Articulate Expression*: "A key goal of the program is the improvement of student writing and verbal skills. Students can offer clear and well-organized explanations of political phenomena and support these explanations with evidence." Expression is a priority of this class and we will develop and hone our skills in writing and discussion in group settings and presentation throughout the quarter.

REQUIRED TEXT

There is one required book that you may purchase at the DePaul bookstore or order anywhere.

- (1) Erikson, Robert S. and Kent L. Tedin. 2019. *American Public Opinion: Its Origins, Content, and Impact*. Routledge; 10th Edition. ISBN: 1138490709

In addition, there are many readings from scholarly journals and online resources that may be accessed through the DePaul library.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Course grades are a weighted average of grades on the following factors totaling 100%:

- (1) **Attendance and Participation, including classroom debate - 20%**: Participation in the classroom constitutes a major portion of your grade. It is essential that you attend every class ready to learn, having completed the assigned readings in advance, paying attention to and engaging in discussion, and offering your perspective regularly. Student contributions to classroom discussion should be about reactions to the readings, asking questions, and adding viewpoints to an issue.
 - (a) Attendance is required. Each student is allowed one missed class with no penalty and subsequent missed classes result in a lower grade. I make exceptions for religious observances and university approved absences.
 - (b) I understand that not all students are comfortable speaking up in class, particularly if they feel confused by course material or they feel they do not know enough about a topic. That is OK, students can still participate (and will be expected to). Simply ask a question and answer questions using information from the readings. Your relevant personal experience or "gut feeling" is often a good point of departure.

(c) Throughout the quarter, students will be divided into groups and given a set of questions to respond to for a classroom debate. Each group will, with feedback from the instructor, formulate a position on a controversial issue in the public opinion literature. Three debates will take place, focusing on (1) how political knowledge affects attitudes toward the political system, (2) the existence of racial prejudice in modern society, and (3) the degree of sway that elites hold over the opinions held by ordinary Americans. Groups will be expected to provide opening and closing statements, engage with opponents, the audience & the instructor, and demonstrate knowledge of the relevant research on the topic.

(2) **Research Project - 40%**: The study of public opinion can cover almost any policy topic that students might be interested in. During the quarter, students will choose one topic and be expected to become an expert on its public opinion. Gaining expertise requires (1) developing a sophisticated understanding of what it means to study public opinion (mastery of material under Principles and Practices in the course schedule section), (2) regularly reviewing the state of public opinion data in your chosen area of interest, and (3) critically analyzing and engaging with relevant data. Students will demonstrate their acquired expertise through their work on a comprehensive research project. If executed well, this project will give you an option for a writing sample when you apply for jobs or graduate school. The project has three components:

- (a) Research Project Proposal (3-pages, due **February 10**) - 10% of grade: This paper will review the literature on the principles and practices in public opinion research, define a choice of topic and summarise the present state of public opinion on it, and propose a research design to better understand public opinion on this topic.
 - (i) Research design resource:
<https://library.sacredheart.edu/c.php?g=29803&p=185902>
 - (ii) Survey research resource:
https://web.stanford.edu/dept/communication/faculty/krosnick/Survey_Research.pdf
- (b) Research Project Final Paper (7-page, due **March 4**) - 25% of grade: This paper will refine the literature review and choice of topic from research proposal, and then offer an original argument about the state of public opinion on the topic. This means that students should construct a research inquiry that relies on data, evidence, and critical thinking. The paper needs to have an argument at its core. So your paper's main focus must be the "why" and the "how" rather than the "who, what, where, and when." It ought to link together a small number of claims based on documented evidence and data.
- (c) Research Project Presentation (beginning **March 4**) - 5% of grade: Each student will offer a 5-minute oral presentation about their topic, public opinion on it, and findings from the research paper followed by 2-3 minutes of questions and answers.

(3) **Examinations - 40%**: Midterm (**Feb. 5**, 20%) and final exams (**Mar. 18**, 20%) will consist of short response questions intended to test your knowledge of public opinion and the American political system.

DECORUM

- (1) **Attendance and Participation:** Arrive on time, put all handheld devices on silent, be prepared to take notes, and be ready to actively discuss topics and readings assigned for each class day. Quality participation involves attentiveness, active listening, and thoughtful responses or questions.
- (2) **Civil Discourse:** civil discourse is engagement in conversation intended to enhance understanding. Our discussion of controversial political topics is not a license for disruptive confrontation or use or promotion of derogatory ideas under the guise of freedom of expression. Class will adjourn if disruptions prevent civil discourse.
- (3) **Academic Integrity:** Plagiarism occurs if students submit unoriginal ideas as their own, by carelessly or inadequately citing ideas or words borrowed from other sources including one's own prior work. Plagiarism is a major barrier to learning because it compromises the student's credibility and professional integrity, as well as threatening traditions of scholarly research. Plagiarism is also easy to identify and its consequence in this class is a grade of 0 for the assignment and the possibility of an F grade for this course. Explanations on what constitutes plagiarism may be found in the following sources:
<https://resources.depaul.edu/teaching-commons/teaching-guides/feedback-grading/Pages/responding-to-plagiarism.aspx>; <http://wpacouncil.org/node/9>
- (4) **Online Resources:** Resources for this class will be uploaded to the course website and communication between the professor and students will occur via email. It is the student's responsibility to check the course website and email inboxes regularly to remain apprised of developments affecting this class like class discussions, cancelations, changes in office hours, uploaded materials, and grades.
- (5) **Reading:** Student must complete the assigned reading ahead of topics discussed in class outlined in the syllabus and specified by the professor. Readings will oftentimes serve as a point of departure and all students are eligible to be called on to answer questions by the professor based on readings.
- (6) **Writing:** Learning to write well is an ongoing process crucial to professional development of all undergraduate students. I understand that student writing abilities may vary, so students are expected to put forth their best effort in written communication on exams, essays, and emails. Students are free to provide the professor with drafts of papers prior to deadlines for review and comments. Everyone becomes stuck and does not know how to start a paper one way or another. Consult the following resource for a breakdown on formulating a well structured paper: BR Weingast's "Caltech Rules for Writing Papers"
https://web.stanford.edu/group/mcnollgast/cgi-bin/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/CALTECH.RUL_.pdf
- (7) **Electronics:** Students are allowed to use computers and tablets for note taking purposes only. Handheld devices like smartphones are not permitted. The professor will also ask students to navigate to interactive online polling websites where students will provide real-time but anonymous responses to questions about class material. Text messaging and online browsing yield body language that makes the distraction obvious. The professor

may call on distracted students to answer questions that will be graded under “Attendance and Participation” detailed below.

(8) **Students with Special Needs:** Students that may need accommodations based on a documented disability should contact the professor for arrangements as early as possible in the quarter. DePaul University also provides resources for all students at the PLuS Program (773-325-1677, Student Center #370) to help cope with a learning disability or attention disorder, The Office for Students with Disabilities for managing disabilities (773-325-1677, Student Center #370), and University Counseling Services for emotional, psychological, and interpersonal concerns (<https://offices.depaul.edu/student-affairs/support-services/counseling/Pages/default.aspx>). There is no need to struggle in silence or solitude.

(9) **Deadlines and Extensions:** Students will not receive extensions on papers or opportunities to “make-up” exams, Late work is accepted with a 1/2 grade penalty per day the assignment is late. Course grades of incomplete will not be provided to students under any circumstances.

GRADING SCALE

❖ A: 100-93	❖ B- 82.9-80	❖ D+: 69.9-67
❖ A-: 92.9-90	❖ C+ 79.9-77	❖ D: 66.9-63
❖ B+ 89.9-87	❖ C 76.9-73	❖ D-: 62.9-60
❖ B 86.9-83	❖ C-:72.9-70	❖ F: below 60

Course Schedule

Date	Topics	Readings and Assignments Due
Mon., Jan. 6	Course Introduction	Review Syllabus

Principles and Practices

Wed., Jan. 8	Meaning and Measurement	Berelson (1952): "Democratic Theory and Public Opinion", Cutler (1999): "Jeremy Bentham and Public Opinion Tribunal"
Mon., Jan. 13	Public Opinion in Democracy	Erikson and Tiden, Ch. 1
Wed., Jan. 15	Sampling and Data Collection	Erikson and Tiden, Ch. 2,
Mon., Jan. 20	No Class	MLK Holiday

Micro-Foundations: The Ingredients

Wed., Jan. 22	Expression, Opinion Formation	Hillygus (2014): "The Practice of Survey Research"; Erikson and Tiden, Ch. 3
Mon., Jan. 27	Political Sentiment	Erikson and Tiden, Ch. 4
Wed., Jan. 29	Socialization and Learning	Erikson and Tiden, Ch. 5
Mon., Feb. 3	Knowledge vs. Ideology	Carney et. al (2008): "The Secret Lives of Liberals and Conservatives"; Tilley and Wlezien (2008): "Does Political Information Matter?"; In-class debate
Wed., Feb. 5	Midterm Exam	In-class
Mon., Feb. 10	Self-Interest	Erikson and Tiden, Ch. 6; <u>Research proposal due</u>
Wed., Feb. 12	Social Identity	Erikson and Tiden, Ch. 7
Mon., Feb. 17	In-Groups and Out-Groups	Gilens (1996): "'Race Coding' and White Opposition to Welfare"; Brader et al. (2008): "What Triggers Public Opposition to Immigration?"; In-class debate

Politics

Wed., Feb. 19	Media Effects	Erikson and Tiden, Ch. 8
Mon., Feb. 24	Voting and Elections	Erikson and Tiden, Ch. 9

Wed., Feb. 26	Elite Discourse	Erikson and Tiden, Ch. 10
Mon., Mar. 2	Elites vs. Masses	Erikson and Tiden, Ch. 11; In-Class Debate
Wed., Mar. 4	Research Presentations	<u>Research Paper Due</u> ; Presentations Begin
Mon., Mar. 9	Research Presentations	Presentations Continue
Wed., Mar. 11	Course Review	In-Class Exam Preparation
Wed., Mar. 18	Final Exam	LVC 502, 11:30 to 1:45 pm
