Public Opinion and Representation in the United States

Political Science 395 (22348)
Scott Hall 107 (Burdick Room), Mondays, 300pm-550pm
https://canvas.northwestern.edu/courses/85814
Syllabus date: February 18, 2019 (6:56pm)

This course is about Americans’ views of political issues (“public opinion”) and the extent to which their views influence elected officials (“representation”). The first and larger part of the course takes up public opinion. The second part takes up representation.

This is not a course about statistics or computing. That said, background in statistics or econometrics is sure to help, as many of the assigned readings contain statistical analyses of data on public opinion or representation.

Assignments and Grades

Each student must write two responses, each 2-3 pages long and accounting for 10% of the overall grade. Discussion accounts for 30% of the final grade. A final paper, 12 to 18 pages long, accounts for 50% of the final grade.

Perfect attendance does not ensure that you will get a satisfactory discussion grade. If you always attend class but rarely speak, or if you speak regularly in ways that suggest that you haven’t thought about the readings, you will receive a low discussion grade—perhaps an F. In the
past, most discussion grades have been in the B range, and C grades have sometimes been more common than A grades.

There is no formal penalty for missing a class. But you cannot contribute to class discussion if you do not attend, so it will be hard to get a high discussion grade if you miss more than a few classes.

DISCUSSION
Discussion will be based heavily on the readings.

You are required to lead the first part of discussion in two different classes. In each of these classes, you should come prepared to speak about the assigned reading for 15 minutes at the beginning of class. It may make sense to begin with a brief overview of the assigned reading, but as with the reading responses, the emphasis should be on critique rather than summary. (As a rule of thumb, spend no more than 90 seconds summarizing any particular reading.) The discussion grade is based on discussion throughout the term, but I will weight these presentations heavily as I determine the discussion grade.

In some weeks, more than one student may be assigned to discuss. In those cases, each student must be prepared to talk for 15 minutes. Students should also coordinate with each other to ensure that their comments don’t overlap much.

At least 24 hours before the start of class, students who are going to present must post at least one page of notes on their presentations to the “Discussions” section of the Canvas site. These notes will be part of the final discussion grade for the term.

READING RESPONSES
Each student must write two reading responses. These responses should be 2-3 pages long. They should critique—not summarize—at least one of the assigned readings. They must pertain chiefly to the current week’s reading. They may focus on a small part of the assigned reading. I encourage you to talk about the readings with each other, but each of you should write responses on your own.

Whenever you refer to a specific passage or claim in the assigned readings, be sure to mention the relevant page numbers. You can do this briefly and informally: “Smith says X (page 92).” You must cite the page numbers in the printed text, not the page numbers of the PDF file or any other page numbers.

Responses are due 24 hours before the beginning of class. They should be posted in the appropriate thread of the “Discussions” section of the course web site—not sent by e-mail.

You must submit your first response by February 10th. You may turn in only one response per week, and I will not grant deadline extensions for the responses. Remember, you need to write only two of them.
By early March, I expect that I will have graded and returned only those responses that you wrote by early February. See the “Format of Assignments” section of this syllabus for further instructions. If you fail to follow those formatting instructions, I will automatically lower your grade: an A will become an A−, a B will become a B−, and so on.

FINAL PAPER
It should be 12 to 18 pages long. It’s due at 900am on March 19th. Please meet me by March 5th to discuss potential topics: I don’t want you to take on topics that are too big. Upload the paper through the “Assignments” section of the Canvas site and slip hard copy under the door of my office. Do not send a copy by e-mail.

I will not reply to email about the final paper that is sent after March 8th unless the questions are about formatting or are otherwise purely procedural. Please plan accordingly.

WRITING FOR ME
I’ve posted memos about the writing and formatting of papers. They set forth rules and guidelines to follow when you write papers in my courses. Please read every word, including every item in the long list at the end of the writing memo. If there is something in the memos that you don’t understand, just ask me about it.

If you don’t follow the rules and guidelines—and you can’t explain why—you will do poorly in this course.

AWARDS
Your final paper may be eligible for several national awards. I have in mind the Seymour Sudman Student Paper Award given by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR). And the ICPSR Research Paper Competitions.

MAPPING BETWEEN NUMBERS AND LETTER GRADES
All of the grades that you receive in this course will be letter grades, e.g., A, B+. To compute an average grade for the semester that I can report to the Registrar’s Office, I will translate those letter grades into numbers, average the numbers, and then translate the average back into a letter grade. This is the mapping between letter grades and numbers: below 60 = F, 60 to 63 = D−, 63 to 67 = D, 67 to 70 = D+, 70 to 73 = C−, 73 to 77 = C, 77 to 80 = C+, 80 to 83 = B−, 83 to 87 = B, 87 to 90 = B+, 90 to 93 = A−, 93 and above = A.
GRADES WILL NOT BE ROUNDED UP
Grades will not be rounded up. For example, a final grade of 92.9 will be reported to the
Registrar as an A–.

Readings
Two books are required:


These books will not be available from the Northwestern Bookstore, but they are available from
online booksellers. Please order your copies soon; “it was out of stock” is not an adequate excuse
for not having the books.

Other required readings are marked with an asterisk in the pages that follow.

I expect to make small changes to the reading list throughout the term. Whenever I make
changes especially worth noting, I’ll send an announcement via email.

FINDING THE READINGS
There is no packet of course readings, and you should print or acquire the readings yourself. Most
are available online, either from URLs that are given in this syllabus or from the course website.
If there is no URL in the syllabus and the course website doesn’t have the article, please search
for it online. *You are responsible for locating every one of the assigned readings.*

I find most of the course readings (except those available through Canvas) by searching
Google Scholar. To use it effectively, you may need to use an on-campus computer or to
connect through the Northwestern VPN. If you don’t know what a VPN is, see http://www.it.
northwestern.edu/oncampus/vpn/.

CAN YOU REPRODUCE THE AUTHORS’ RESULTS?
Most of the readings on the syllabus involve some form of data analysis. The authors are making
empirical claims about the world, and they are backing up their claims with analyses of data.
Sometimes the data are from the authors’ own studies; sometimes they are from studies that
others have conducted.

You should ask: how confident should I be that the authors’ claims are correct? This is a
large question, but part of the answer lies with the availability of the data and the code (i.e., the
statistical programs) that the authors wrote to analyze the data. Even if you do not understand
data and code at all, you should care about whether they are available to the public. Professors often make mistakes, and if the data and code are not available, they cannot be checked for mistakes or otherwise investigated in any way.

In political science, norms of data-sharing and code-sharing are very strong. As a result, it is difficult to publish in respectable political science journals if you are unwilling to put your data and your code online so that others are free to analyze them. But this has been true for less than a decade. Norms for data-sharing and code-sharing were weaker in political science in the past, and they remain weaker in other disciplines. The upshot is that you should be very skeptical of any contemporary political-science research for which the data and code are not available. Temper your skepticism when considering other fields, and especially when considering older work. It would be foolish, for example, to fault Stanley Milgram for not putting his data online.

You will see that entries for some of the readings on this syllabus are preceded by [CNA] or [DNA]. These entries stand for “data not available” and “code not available.” They indicate that I have been unable to locate the authors’ code or data. Some readings rely on both public and private datasets; in these cases, I have tended not to apply a [DNA] tag.

WHAT WE WON’T COVER THIS YEAR
In this course, we take up both ideas and findings in public opinion research and ideas and findings in representation research. And we do it all in a quarter rather than a semester. This set of circumstances requires some tough compromises.

Perhaps the toughest compromises are the omissions of weeks on media effects and on public opinion about war. I will bring these topics into our discussions when appropriate, and you shouldn’t hesitate to ask about them. But notice that we don’t have a full class devoted to any of these topics.

RECOMMENDED READINGS
Almost all of my recommendations are topic-specific, and they therefore appear below, in the sections on specific topics. But I also recommend two general texts to you:


BACKGROUND READINGS IN STATISTICS
There is no statistics prerequisite, but many of the assigned articles use simple statistics. If you want to better understand the statistical methods that you encounter in the articles, I recommend:


- Freedman, David A. 2009. *Statistical Models: Theory and Practice*. Revised ed. New York: Cambridge University Press. This is better than *Statistics* but also more advanced. Chapters 1-5 are excellent for self-study if you do the exercises.

Office Hours
Office hours will take place on the times specified at [https://www.slotted.co/2019winter](https://www.slotted.co/2019winter). They will be held at my office: Scott Hall 304. You do not need to make an appointment in advance, but I prefer that you do. Making an appointment also reduces the probability that you will need to wait while I’m meeting with other students.

You cannot sign up for my office hours through Canvas. Instead, please make appointments through [https://www.slotted.co/2019winter](https://www.slotted.co/2019winter). When you make an appointment, please add a comment indicating what you would like to talk about when we meet.

If all office-hours slots are full—you can tell by checking the slotted.co site—I generally will not be able to meet with you during or immediately after office hours.
January 7 (Mon): Introduction; Should We Care about Public Opinion?

INTRODUCTION


*Lee, Hermione. 1996. Virginia Woolf. New York: Knopf. Pages 286-87. Read from “At the time, in fact . . . ” to “the specialist in abnormality.” There is a direct link between this reading and the Stimson reading. What is it? Come to class with an answer: I may put the question to you, and “I don’t know” will not be an acceptable response.

*This syllabus—please read all of it before coming to class.


SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT PUBLIC OPINION?
Each reading required for this part of the class can be seen as offering a reason why we should not care about public opinion. For each reading, try to figure out what the reason is. And in light of these reasons, why should we care about public opinion?


Readings marked by an asterisk (*) are required; all others are optional. DNA indicates that the authors’ data do not seem to be available online, and CNA indicates that the code needed to reproduce the authors’ results do not seem to be available online. See page 4 for details.


January 14 (Mon): Socialization, Family Influences, and Education

SOCIALIZATION AND FAMILY INFLUENCES


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**SOCIALIZATION AND EDUCATION**


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Merelman, Richard M. 1980. “Democratic Politics and the Culture of American Education.” *American Political Science Review* 74 (June): 319-32. This article is a work of political theory. Some of the ideas in it are radical. Some are ridiculous. Some are profound. There are short follow-ups to this article in the same issue of the APSR, but I don’t find them edifying.

**Week of January 21: Attitude Stability and “Nonattitudes”**

January 21st is Martin Luther King Jr. Day. We won’t have class on that day. We will need to reschedule the class for either a day on the previous week or the Wednesday or Friday of the week of the 21st. Look out for a Doodle poll that I’ll use to set a time.

You will find some of the assigned readings exceptionally difficult. But if you work at them, you may also find them exceptionally rewarding. Please set aside much more than the ordinary amount of time for them, and struggle to understand as much as you can.

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* CNA Ansolabehere, Stephen, Jonathan Rodden, and James M. Snyder, Jr. 2008. “The Strength of Issues: Using Multiple Measures to Gauge Preference Stability, Ideological Constraint, and Issue Voting.” *American Political Science Review* 102 (May): 215-32. http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0003055408080210. This is a difficult article. Most of the math is simple, but there is a lot of it. Try reading the article twice before lecture: read first to get the gist; the second time, try to work through the math.


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Delli Carpini, Michael X., and Scott Keeter. 1996. *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. Still the most comprehensive treatment of what Americans know and don’t know about politics. And it is not as dated as you might think: this story doesn’t change much over time.

**February 4 (Mon): Income and Voting**

Of late, there has been a lot of interest in the link between income and representation: are rich citizens better represented than others? We will take up this question—but later in the course, when we take up representation. Our focus this week has more to do with the ways in which income may shape the attitudes and preferences of ordinary citizens.


THE ESTATE TAX CUTS OF 2001
These tax cuts engendered a lot of interesting scholarship.


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February 11 (Mon): Tolerance and Democratic Values


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**February 18 (Mon): Racial Attitudes**

Many of the recommended readings in this unit are not about race; instead, they are about tolerance and about other kinds of intergroup attitudes.


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February 25 (Mon): Partisanship and Partisan Polarization in the Mass Public

**PARTISANSHIP**


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University Press. Chapters 1, 2, and 8. Available from the course web site. The authors’ main argument is that party identification is very stable over time.


**PARTISAN POLARIZATION IN THE MASS PUBLIC**

* Fiorina, Morris P. 2011. *Culture War?* 3rd ed. New York: Pearson Longman. Read the whole book, except for this: you can choose whether to read the abortion chapter or the gay rights chapter, and you should skip Chapter 3, Chapter 8, and the epilogue.


Readings marked by an asterisk (*) are required; all others are optional. [DNA] indicates that the authors’ data do not seem to be available online, and [CNA] indicates that the code needed to reproduce the authors’ results do not seem to be available online. See page 4 for details.

Of late, there has been particular interest in partisan polarization with respect to survey responses, especially responses to questions about factual beliefs. You may be interested in:


March 4 (Mon): Theoretic Foundations of Representation


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MEASURING REPRESENTATION


McCarty, Nolan, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal. 2006. *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Chapters 1 and 2. Aim to understand the measurement methods. I am not assigning this material so that you will understand the argument of the book; to do that, you would need to read more chapters.


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March 11 (Mon): Descriptive and Substantive Representation

The first two required readings for this unit are theoretical, not empirical.


*Bafumi, Joseph, and Michael C. Herron. 2010. “Leapfrog Representation and Extremism: A Study of American Voters and Their Members in Congress.” American Political Science Review 104 (August): 519-42. http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=7909409. Read most of the article, but feel free to just skim “Consistency Checks on Voter Ideal Point Estimates” (527-28). Be sure that you understand Figure 2. It is simple and very important to the paper.

*Mansbridge, Jane. 2003. “Rethinking Representation.” American Political Science Review 97 (4): 515-528. http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0003055403000856. I prefer Mansbridge’s 1999 article; I find the thinking in this one to be somewhat muddled. But it does have some useful ideas. Read Table 1 (page 525) immediately after reading the introduction.


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