Public Opinion and Representation
in the United States

Political Science 395 (16565)
Scott Hall 107 (Burdick Room), Tuesdays, 200pm-450pm
https://canvas.northwestern.edu/courses/150580
Syllabus date: October 11, 2021 (8:25am)

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. 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

In October, each student must evaluate a hypothetical reading response that I will post to Canvas. The evaluation is limited to two pages and graded on a pass-fail basis; it accounts for 5% of the overall grade. In addition, each student must write two reading 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 45% of the final grade.
CALENDAR OF DEADLINES

Evaluation of a hypothetical reading response ........................................... 200pm, October 18th
First reading response ................................................................. 200pm, October 25th
Office-hours meeting ............................................................... October 29th
Second reading response ......................................................... 200pm, November 22nd
Final paper .............................................................. 800am, December 6th

DISCUSSION

Discussion will be based heavily on the readings, and perfect attendance does not guarantee a satisfactory discussion grade. If you rarely speak in class, or if you speak regularly in ways that suggest that you haven’t thought about the readings, you will receive a low grade.

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.

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 10 minutes at the beginning of class. You should also be prepared—even more than in a normal class—to answer specific questions about the readings.

When you lead discussion, it may make sense to begin class with a brief overview of the assigned reading, but as with the reading responses, the emphasis should be on analysis rather than summary. (As a rule of thumb, spend no more than 60 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 analyze—not summarize—at least one of the assigned readings from the current week or the previous week. 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.

Excerpts from a textbook by Erikson and Tedin are assigned in many classes. Do not write reading responses about these excerpts.
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 October 25th. 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 the end of November, I expect that I will have graded and returned only those responses that you wrote by the end of October.

FINAL PAPER
It should be 12 to 18 pages long. It’s due at 800am on December 6th. Please discuss potential topics with me in office hours: I don’t want you to take on topics that are too big. Upload the paper through the “Assignments” section of the Canvas site. Do not send a copy by e-mail.

I will not reply to email about the final paper that is sent after November 26th unless the questions are about formatting or are purely procedural in some other way. Please plan accordingly.

WRITING FOR ME
I’ve posted memos about the writing and formatting of papers. They set forth rules and guidelines for written assignments in my courses. Please read them carefully, and be sure to read every item in the 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.

I prefer that you submit assignments as .docx files; if you do that, it’s a little easier for me to leave comments on specific passages. But if you prefer to submit assignments as PDF files, please feel free to do so.

AWARDS
Your final paper may be eligible for several national awards. I have in mind the ICPSR Research Paper Competitions and the Seymour Sudman Student Paper Award, which is given by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR).
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
Required readings are marked with an asterisk (*) in the pages that follow. There is no required book that you need to purchase.

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.

How confident should you be that the authors’ claims are correct? 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 don’t 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 addition, many authors are more careful when they know that their code and data will be available for inspection.

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 extremely 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.

You will see that entries for some of the readings on this syllabus are preceded by \textit{CNA} or \textit{DNA}. These entries stand for “code not available” and “data 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 \textit{DNA} tag.

\section*{WHAT WE WON’T COVER THIS YEAR}

In this course, we take up ideas from research about public opinion and from research about representation. 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 we won’t have a full class devoted to either of these topics.

\section*{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 be held at my office: Scott Hall 304. Please make appointments through https://slotted.co/2021fall. When you make an appointment, please add a comment indicating what you would like to talk about when we meet.

By October 29th, you are required to have met me at least once in office hours. We will speak for at least part of the time about your ideas for a final paper—please come prepared.

Apart from the required meeting, 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.

If all office-hours slots are full—you can tell by checking the URL—I generally will not be able to meet with you during or immediately after office hours.
September 21 (Tue): Intro; Should We Care about Public Opinion?

INTRODUCTION


*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 does not seem to be available online. See page 4 for details.


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**September 28 (Tue): 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.

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 does not seem to be available online. See page 4 for details.
October 05 (Tue): “Nonattitudes” and Political Sophistication

You will find some of the assigned readings 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.

We’ll first consider political sophistication and nonattitudes. Then we’ll turn to the possibility that “source cues” can be used as “shortcuts” to help uninformed people act as they would if they were informed.

POLITICAL SOPHISTICATION AND NONATTITUDES


* 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](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. I’ve posted a few notes to the "Files > Miscellany" section of Canvas that may help you if you try to work through the covariance algebra.

* Freeder, Sean, Gabriel S. Lenz, and Shad Turney. 2019. “The Importance of Knowing ‘What Goes with What’: Reinterpreting the Evidence on Policy Attitude Stability.” *Journal of Politics* 81. [https://doi.org/10.1086/700005](https://doi.org/10.1086/700005). See also the corrections to the published version. They are not substantively important, but when you’re trying to figure out exactly how the authors analyzed the data, they may help.


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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.

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CUES AS SHORTCUTS


October 12 (Tue): 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.


S1049096501000026. Interesting and important, but difficult to understand if you do not have prior experience with regression analysis.


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


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October 19 (Tue): Tolerance and Democratic Values
Twenty-four hours before this class begins, each student must submit a one- or two-page analysis of a hypothetical reading response that I’ll post to Canvas. The reading response will be about Jacoby’s 2006 article.


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October 26 (Tue): Race and Racism

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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**November 02 (Tue): Partisanship and Partisan Polarization in the Mass Public**

**PARTISANSHIP**


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**PARTISAN POLARIZATION IN THE MASS PUBLIC**


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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:


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November 09 (Tue): Theoretic Foundations of Representation


MEASURING REPRESENTATION


[CNA] 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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November 16 (Tue): Income and Representation


*CNA* Gilens, Martin, and Benjamin I. Page. 2014. “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens.” *Perspectives on Politics* 12 (September): 564-81. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1537592714001595](http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1537592714001595). Skim the early section on “Four Theoretical Traditions”; read the rest.


*Gilens, Martin, and Benjamin I. Page. 2016 May 23. “Critics argued with our analysis of U.S. political inequality. Here are 5 ways they’re wrong.” [http://wapo.st/1TDPnzE](http://wapo.st/1TDPnzE).*


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 does not seem to be available online. See page 4 for details.
dull, but if you know the background—if you realize that Gilens is using the chapter to join a long debate about the importance of public opinion—you probably won’t agree. *Boston Review* published a symposium on Gilens’ book. I recommend the contributions by Bartels, Yglesias, and Ferejohn. You can find links to those responses at http://goo.gl/Cywco3.


**November 23 (Tue): 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.


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But it does have some useful ideas. Read Table 1 (page 525) immediately after reading the introduction.


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