

Political Science 327 Public Opinion

Class Meeting:
Winter 2015
TTh 4:20-5:50
Arts & Letters Rm. 112

Dr. Michael Zilis
mzilis@depaul.edu
Office Hours: TTh 1:30-2:30
990 W. Fullerton Rm. 2219

Course Overview

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. We begin with a survey of principles and practices in the study of public opinion. 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? We then move to the micro-foundations of opinion, answering the question of where peoples' attitudes come from. Do Americans have strong ideological beliefs? Are they self-interested? Do they divide people into "us" and "them" (in-groups and out-groups) when they look at the political world? Finally, 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 course material – both inside and outside the classroom – is essential 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.

Text

There are three books for the course, available in the DePaul bookstore (or, you are free to buy them from elsewhere, so long as you get the correct ones):

- (1) Lippman, Walter. *Public Opinion*. New York: Free Press, 1997.
- (2) Gilens, Martin. *Why Americans Hate Welfare*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- (3) Iyengar, Shanto and Donald R. Kinder. *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion*. Updated Edition. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

In addition, there are many readings from scholarly journals, which can be accessed through the DePaul library (online or in hardcopy) or on the course's D2L site.

Course Requirements

Participation, including classroom debate (20% of final grade)

I will allow one missed class per student with no penalty, and I make exceptions for religious observances, provided you notify me in advance; otherwise, missed classes will result in a lower grade (I am not interested in excuses). Your participation in the classroom constitutes a major portion of your grade. It is essential to attend every class ready to learn (cell phones turned off), to complete the assigned readings in advance, to pay attention and engage, and to offer your perspective with regularity. Students should contribute to each classroom discussion – talking about interesting points from the readings, asking questions, and adding their viewpoints on an issue. I understand that not all students are comfortable speaking up in class, particularly if they feel confused by course material or feel as though they don't know much about course topics. That's OK – you can still participate (and will be expected to). Ask a question. Answer questions using information you do understand from the readings. Offer a relevant personal experience.

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 such 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, and the instructor; and demonstrate a clear knowledge of the relevant research on the topic.

Research project (40%)

One particularly compelling aspect of the study of public opinion is that it can cover almost any public policy topic in which students have an interest. During the quarter, students will choose one such topic. Each student will be expected to become an expert on public opinion on his or her topic. This means three things: (1) that you will develop a sophisticated understanding of what it means to study public opinion (the material found in the principles and practices section of this course), (2) that you regularly review the state of public opinion data in your stated area of interest, and (3) that you critically analyze and engage with this data. Students will demonstrate their acquired expertise through their work on a comprehensive research project. The project has three components:

- (1) On **February 10**, a 3-page research proposal is due. This paper will *review the literature* on the principles and practices in public opinion research, *define a choice of topic* and summarize the present state of public opinion on it, and *propose a research design* to better understand public opinion on this topic. This proposal will count for 10% of your final grade.

- (2) On **March 5**, a 7-page final research paper is due. This paper will refine the literature review and choice of topic from the 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 at its core an *argument*. That is, don't just fill the page with observations of "who, what, where, and when." Your paper should address the "why" and the "how," linking together a small number of claims based on documented evidence and data. The remainder of your paper should connect these claims to form a coherent whole – expanding upon them as necessary – and also defend them with evidence. This will count for 25% of your final grade.
- (3) Also, beginning on **March 5**, each student will offer a 5-minute oral presentation about their topic, public opinion on it, and their findings from the research paper. This will count for 5% of your final grade.

Examinations (40%)

The midterm and final will consist of short response questions intended to test your knowledge of public opinion and the American political system.

Classroom Environment

The University's commitment to free expression, free inquiry, intellectual honesty, non-discrimination, and respect for the rights and dignity of others will be observed in the classroom. Students are expected to participate in the learning experience and contribute to classroom discussions while respecting the rights of others. If you have any special needs that require accommodation, please inform me as soon as possible.

Plagiarism

Do not plagiarize or submit work that is not your own. This includes, but is not limited to, using the ideas of others without proper attribution, using quotations from other work without proper attribution, and copying work. The most egregious forms of plagiarism will result in immediate failure in the course.

Grade Grievances

If you receive a grade that is lower than you believe your work merits, you may request a re-grade by submitting a typed grievance, using the criteria outlined in the assignment as the basis of your argument.

Missing an Exam

If you will be missing an exam for a University-approved reason, you must provide written notice at least 24 hours *in advance of the exam*. If you miss an exam due to an illness, you must provide formal documentation. There will be one makeup exam scheduled for all excused absences only.

Course Schedule

Date	Topics	Readings and Assignments Due
Jan. 6	Course introduction	
Principles and Practices		
Jan. 8	Meaning and measurement	Lippman, Parts 1-3
Jan. 13	The place of public opinion in a democracy	Lippman, Parts 4-6
Jan. 15	Sampling and collecting data	Erikson and Tedin, "Polling: The Scientific Assessment of Public Opinion"
Jan. 20	The survey interview	Zaller and Feldman, "A Simple Theory of the Survey Response"
Micro-Foundations: The Ingredients		
Jan. 22	Political knowledge	Delli Carpini and Ketter, "The Internet and an Informed Citizenry" Lupia, "Shortcuts versus Encyclopedias"
Jan. 27	Ideology	Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics"
Jan. 29	Self-interest	Downs, <i>An Economic Theory of Democracy</i> , Introduction and Chapter 3 Sears et al., "Self Interest versus Symbolic Politics in Policy Attitudes and Presidential Voting"
Feb. 3	In-class debate: knowledge and ideology	In-class debate
Midterm Examination – February 5 (in class)		
Feb. 10	Social identity: In-groups	Research proposal due Green et al. <i>Partisan Hearts and Minds</i> , Introduction Gilens, Part I
Feb. 12	Social identity: out-groups II	Gilens, Part 2
Feb. 17	In-class debate: In-groups and out-groups	In-class debate

Politics		
Feb. 19	Opinion writ large	MacKuen et al., "Macropartisanship"
Feb. 24	Media effects	Iyengar and Kinder, all
Feb. 26	Elite discourse	Zaller, "Strategic Politicians, Public Opinion, and the Gulf Crisis" Gilens and Page, "Testing Theories of American Politics"
Mar. 3	In-class debate: Elites vs. masses	In-class debate
Mar. 5	Research presentations	Research paper due; research presentations begin
Mar. 10	Research presentations	Research presentations continue
Mar. 12	Course review	

Final Exam – March 19, 2:45-5:00
