

Public Opinion and Political Socialization – PSC 221.LH
Fall 2005 Syllabus

Instructor: Mark Allen

Class hours – Mondays, 6:00 – 8:00pm

September 12th – December 7th

Hall of States, Room

Contact information

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Class Overview

Why do you have the political values and beliefs you do? Are they your own ideas or have you been influenced, knowingly or unknowingly, by others in your thinking? The means by which you acquire political attitudes and beliefs is called “political socialization.” And because what you think influences our political culture and governmental action, we need to know how people come to hold the views they do.

This class will examine the sources and dynamics of public opinion and political socialization. We will delve in to what makes individuals the political “beasts” that they are and what lead them to vote the way that they do. Throughout the entire class we will examine what public opinion is on each topic and how that public opinion is shaped. While this is not a “polling” class, surveys will play an important role as this is the best way we have to judge public opinion.

Throughout the semester, we will look into the influences that shape how people vote and where they may fit on a political spectrum. We will look at things you can choose (choice of school, military service) and things you cannot (race, gender, your parents!).

We will also spend a lot of time talking about political parties and ideology. While this is an off-election year, we will be discussing how people make their voting decision as they lead up to Election Day and look at voting behavior (stated intention versus actual voting).

And through each step of the way we look at public opinion. How does public opinion impact a vote for President or for Senator? How is public opinion shaped? What role does the media play and do polls influence polls?

Course Requirements

Your primary obligation on a weekly basis is to complete the readings and be prepared to discuss them. Class discussion will be a big part of your grades and, as such, you will need to be in class. In the event you cannot attend class, you will be required to prepare a two-page presentation of the points you would have raised in class and provide some original insights (not just feedback the readings).

As part of this discussion and a component of your participation grade, I also want you to submit to me by Sunday night at 7 p.m. a list of questions, thoughts or ideas you would like to discuss in class the following night. To help you with the thinking process, I will email you with a few questions as food for thought on the Wednesday night prior to our class.

The second primary obligation you will have during the semester is a research paper and presentation of that paper. I want you to take an issue that you care about and I want you to analyze how public opinion has changed around that issue and how the dynamics of opinion around that issue have changed.

The paper should be in the range of 20 pages, but I put a premium on content over volume. I want you to be creative as you think about an issue and how opinion influences that issue. You can take the position from the perspective of a candidate, political party, a third-party organization, or a non-profit group. You can even create your own survey to prove your thesis. I am open to a wide range of ideas and want to see a variety of issues and presentations of your findings.

Near the end of our class (November), you will present the results of your study in class, expecting to spend approximately 30 minutes. For this presentation, you will have to prepare a two page summary of your research for the class and share it in advance so we can react to the subject matter. You may also assign a discrete reading assignment (10 pp) for the class to read in preparation.

Readings

I will only ask you to buy two books for the class. There are others you can buy and may choose to do so in assisting in your paper. I will also be assigning selected readings throughout the semester that I will either provide to you in hard copy or I will provide you with the URL for you to print off yourself.

Main Texts:

Erikson & Tedin, American Public Opinion: It's Origin, Contents and Impact (6th or 7th Ed.) Available from Amazon or B&N.Com. You can also try Bookfinder which searches used bookstores all around the country. **(APO in Readings)**

Norrander and Wilcox, Understanding Public Opinion (CQ Press)
The CQ book is available directly from their website. **(UPO in Readings)**

Alternate Texts:

Glynn, Herbst, O'Keefe, and Shapiro, Public Opinion (Westview Press)
Niemi and Weisberg, Controversies in Voting Behavior (CQ Press)

Course Assignments

30 points	Class participation
10 points	Paper topic and bibliography. This will be due on October 10 th which gives you a month to decide on a topic and research the books and articles that you will be using for this paper. It also gives me enough time if I need to steer you in another direction or fine tune your topic.
10 points	Outline and Literature Review. I want to see your thinking and your progress, so you will need to submit this outline, which may include a literature review and “informational nuggets” around which you plan to organize. This will be due on October 31 st .
25 points	Class presentation. The presentations will be given during the month of November. The final size of the class will determine how long each presentation is to be, but 30 minutes or so is what I am estimating. You will be asked to engage the class on the topic of your choice and lead a discussion on your topic. You may assign supplemental reading (of not more than 10 pages) for your discussion if you like, plus you need to prepare a 2-page summary for our consumption.
25 points	Paper. The final paper is due on December 5 th , the next to last class of the semester and you should address some of the feedback/input/critique/questions that you hear during your presentation.
100 points	Total

Resources for Polling Information:

- Democracy Corps (<http://www.democracycorps.com>)
- Gallup (<http://www.gallup.com>)
- Kaiser Family Foundation (<http://www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/>)
- Pew Charitable Trusts (<http://www.pewtrusts.com>)
- Polling Report.com
- Roper Center (<http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/>)

- National Election Study (<http://www.umich.edu/~nes/>)

Class Schedule and Reading Assignments

September 12th – Introduction

Review of Syllabus, Assignments and Class Structure

September 19th – Intro to Public Opinion and Political Socialization

September 26th – Family Matters, Gender, Education, Military Service

October 3rd – Political labels – Party Identification and Ideology **(APO Ch3, APO Ch4)**

October 10th – Voter Turnout **(APO Ch7, APC Ch12, UPO Ch10)**

October 17th – Attitudes Towards Government **(UPO Ch12, UPO Ch13, UPO Ch14)**

Paper Topic Due

October 24th – Media’s Impact on Public Opinion **(APO Ch8, UPO Ch2)**

October 31st – NO CLASS (Halloween)

November 7th – Congressional and Presidential Voting and Opinions

(APO Ch10, UPO Ch9, UPO Ch11)

Paper Outline Due

November 14th – Issues R Us 1 -- Class Presentations 1 & 2

November 21st – Issues R Us 2 -- Class Presentations 3 & 4

November 28th – Issues R Us 3 -- Class Presentations 5 & 6

December 5th – Issues R Us 4

December 7th – Final Class -- Final papers due.