

POSC 343: Public Opinion and Voting Behavior
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Office Hours: MW 1-2, and other times by appointment

Description

This course will examine the origins and implications of public opinion in American politics. We will cover topics including the formation of public opinion, influences on public opinion, and the relationship between opinions and voting behavior. Throughout the course, we will address consistent themes, such as the rationality of public opinion and political behavior, the methodological challenges of studying public opinion, and the implications of our findings for democratic theory.

While there are readings throughout the course, this is not a class in which you will passively absorb materials from books and lectures. One of the great benefits of studying public opinion is that we have access to so much data that it is relatively easy for students to start doing their own research. We will take advantage of this throughout the class, and you will have many opportunities to investigate the claims made in lectures and readings for yourselves. Under no circumstances should you take anything I say, or anything the readings say at face value.

In particular, you should become acquainted with the following website:
<http://sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm>.

This website provides access to several of the most respected national surveys with a simple, web-based interface that allows anyone to conduct simple analysis and view results with ease. In particular, the General Social Survey (GSS) and the American National Election Studies (ANES- no jokes, please) are well-run surveys with questions on more than most students would ever want to know. You will be given periodic advice on how to use these and similar resources because you will be asked periodically to bring findings to class, as well as to use these resources for papers (more on that below).

Course procedures

This course meets three times per week. Mondays will be primarily lecture. For Wednesdays, students shall conduct some simple analysis of survey data from the SDA web page relevant to the week's topic. Each student should be prepared to present a simple table showing something of interest, either demonstrating, elaborating on, or refuting a claim made in lectures or readings. On these days, several students will be selected at random to present their simple table to the class, who will discuss the results. Fridays will be discussion days. I am/was a pathetic loser who engaged in certain activities involving dice with unusual numbers of sides. I will begin class with questions about themes from the week, and what we have read and discussed. I will roll dice, and that will determine who begins the discussion. Whenever discussion wanes, the

dice will determine who speaks next. Come prepared. If you are unprepared on the topic because, for example, you haven't done the readings, that will be reflected in your course participation grade.

Course Requirements

Course requirements are as follows: one short analysis paper (15%), one term paper (30%), one take-home midterm (15%), one take-home final (25%), class participation (15%).

The short paper will be due on 10/10. By "short," I mean that the paper should be no longer than 1000 words. The topic is, essentially, whatever you want. You will be asked to pose a simple question about public opinion, and answer it using data available to you from either the SDA website, or other sources (if you can't find what you want on that website, talk to me). The question should be of a "causal" nature. You should pose a question about what explains differences in public opinion on some dimension (e.g., why do some people support policy X and some people oppose policy X). You should pose a hypothesis based on course materials, and you should examine survey data to determine how much support there is for your claim. If you don't have a background in statistics, don't worry. You will not be required to do anything more complicated than a simple table of cross-tabulations (comparing percentages). Sessions will cover enough about compiling basic tables, etc., that you should be able to do the analysis you need, and if you need assistance beyond that, come to my office.

The term paper will be due at the end of the last week of class, and will be on a topic of your choosing as well. You should develop a more elaborate question, and conduct more analysis. Because the topic is flexible, and requires a significant amount of work, students should plan to meet with me regularly. The following is a timeline for completing specific tasks for the term paper: submit a topic and a list of survey questions that will be used (10/17), brief summary of results (11/7), rough draft (11/21).

In addition to completing a term paper, you will make brief presentations to the class at the end of the semester discussing your questions and your findings. 1/6 of the term paper grade (5% of the total course grade) will be based on this presentation. Consider this preparation for capstone presentations.

Attendance

Attendance is required. You may miss three sessions. Each absence beyond that will result in a three percentage point deduction from your course grade. Exceptions will only be granted under extraordinary circumstances. To clarify, you do not have three excused absences plus however many doctors' notes you can get. You have three excused absences, so it would be best to save them for when you are ill. Please contact me as soon as possible if you have an extended bout of serious illness. Attendance and participation are critical.

You are also expected to show up on time. I find it distracting and disrespectful when students walk in after class has begun. You may show up late once during the semester. Each time you

show up late beyond that, one percentage point will be deducted from your course grade. The objective is not to punish you for being late. The objective is to get you to show up on time. If you have a class on the other side of campus just before our class, you need to speak with me about it at the beginning of the semester.

Classroom rules

- 1: Check your ideology at the door. The classroom is not the place to preach. It is a place to keep an open mind.
- 2: Be respectful. Show up on time, pay attention, participate, and turn off your damned phones. Laptops, though, are different. Any student using a laptop is volunteering to be my classroom research assistant. If it is out, that better mean you can quickly look up whatever is relevant to discussions upon my immediate command. If you fall asleep in class, five percentage points will be deducted from your course grade. You don't get any free passes on this. Drinking heavily caffeinated beverages during class is perfectly acceptable. (I can't teach an early class without coffee). If you don't think you can stay awake, it is also acceptable to say you aren't feeling well, and ask to be excused. Doing so will not count against your permitted absences.

Texts:

The primary books for this class are as follows:

Abramson, Paul R., John H. Aldrich and David W. Rohde, *Change and Continuity in the 2012 Elections*

Gelman, Andrew. *Red State, Blue State, Rich State, Poor State.*

Niemi, Richard G., Herbert F. Weisberg, and David C. Kimball editors, *Controversies in Voting Behavior 5th Edition*

Noel, Hans. *Political Ideologies and Political Parties in America*

Sniderman, Paul M., Richard A. Brody and Philip E. Tetlock, *Reasoning and Choice: Explorations in Political Psychology*

Zaller, John R., *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*

Additional readings are available on the course Blackboard site, and may be downloaded as pdf documents.

In addition, feel free to follow my blog, which you are *not* required to read. I just try to keep it entertaining, but focused on political science analysis of the news.

theunmutual.blogspot.com

If you get the reference, congratulations. You are a nerd of truly obscure tastes.

Schedule:

8/29-9/2	Course introduction and working with SDA
9/5	NO CLASS- LABOR DAY
9/7-9/9	Introduction, Basic Paradigms of Psychology and Economics Downs, Chapter 1 (on Blackboard) Sniderman et. al, Chapters 1-2
9/12-9/16	Information Niemi and Weisberg, Chapter 5, 7, 8 Downs, Chapters 11-13 (on Blackboard)
9/19-9/23	Issue Positions Zaller, Chapters 1-3 Sniderman et al., Chapters 3-5 Alford, Funk and Hibbing, “Are Political Orientations Genetically Transmitted” (on Blackboard)
9/26-9/30	Ideology and Partisanship Converse, “The Nature and Origins...” (on Blackboard) Sniderman et al., Chapters 7-8, 12 Niemi and Weisberg, Chapters 14-17
10/3-10/7	The Origins of Party and Ideology Noel, complete text
10/10-10/14	Influence and Attitude Change Zaller, Chapters 6-9 Iyengar and Kinder, Chapters 1-4, 7 (on Blackboard)
10/17-10/21	Voter Turnout Niemi and Weisberg Chapters 2-4 Abramson et al. Chapter 4 Teixeira, (on Blackboard)
10/24	NO CLASS— FALL BREAK
10/26-10/28	Vote Choice Niemi and Weisberg, Chapters 9-11

Sniderman et al., Chapters 9-10
Abramson et al., Chapters 5-8
Achen and Bartels, "Blind Retrospection" (on Blackboard)

10/31-11/4	General Elections Abramson et al., Chapters 2-3 Additional readings TBA
11/7-11/11	ELECTION WEEK MADNESS Readings TBA
11/14-11/18	Congressional Elections Abramson et al., Chapters 9-11
11/21-11/23	A new perspective on wealth and electoral divisions Gelman, complete book
11/25	NO CLASS- THANKSGIVING
11/28-12/9	Presentations, wrap-up