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Political Science 311
SUNY-Geneseo
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PUBLIC OPINION AND THE MASS MEDIA

The purpose of this course is for you to learn what political science has learned about public opinion and the mass media. While there will be occasional allusions to public opinion and media in countries outside the U.S., our primary focus will be on the United States. This course concentrates on the origins and trends of important political attitudes and orientations—trust in government, ideology, political tolerance, values, politics, presidents, foreign policy, racial issues, and social issues. How does political science explain American opinion in these many areas? How do Americans form their opinions? What consequence does public opinion have for American politics? What are the expectations for public opinion in a democracy? To what extent do citizens fulfill the responsibilities associated with democracy? We will also examine the role of the mass media in the American political system; discussing the role of the media in a democratic society and its effect on public opinion and American Politics. What role should the mass media play in a democratic polity? How well does the mass media inform citizens? How well does the mass media perform its watch dog function?

American public opinion and mass media are fascinating topics; I approach their study with great enthusiasm as it reveals much about contemporary American politics, citizens' political lives, and human nature. Many of the normative questions pertaining to public opinion and the mass media have been debated for literally thousands of years, testifying to the importance of some of these issues. My hope is that you will leave this course with a considerably deeper understanding of American public opinion and the role of the mass media in American Politics.

Research Paper: A research paper is due the last day of class, it should be submitted to the PLSC 311 mycourse web-site. The paper should be approximately 15 pages in length; you may choose from the two options listed below.

1. Complete a case study of some political event where public opinion is of central interest. It is import to use a variety of sources (newspapers, web, television), perhaps also keep a journal of how the topic is covered in the national press, as well as reports on the level of public interest and public opinion on the matter (<http://www.pollingreport.com> is a good source). Students should also consult and review academic sources on the topic. You may do some comparative analysis by finding some comparable historical example of the same or related topic and then analyze the current and historically antecedent example. How does the topic emerge? How is it covered in the media? What public attention does it receive? How does the framing of the story emerge? How does the story evolve? What are the political ramifications (on the participants, on public opinion, on political leaders, on related political issues)? Does the story disappear? When and why?
2. The second option is to do an empirical analysis of American public opinion with respect to some important political matter. A student should develop several hypotheses that might explain public opinion on a matter of interest (gun control, abortion, gay marriage, affirmative action, environmental protection, welfare spending, defense spending, universal health coverage, etc.). You should consult academic research on your topic,

and briefly review that research. The student will examine original data to learn which of, say, four to six factors matter for determining public opinion toward that issue. Additionally, a time series analysis of the issue can also be done to explore change in public opinion over time. This option is best utilized by students who have gained experience performing data analysis in a college course (such as PLSC 251). If a student has completed PLSC 251 they have access to the 2004 American National Election Study (ANES) and the 2006 General Social Survey (GSS). A student can use spss to analyze these data for the above exercise. Alternatively, a student can visit the web site listed below to conduct data analysis. This data set contains both GSS and ANES data. To analyze the determinants of American opinion on an issue use the most recent survey available, to track change in an issue over time use the GSS or ANES cumulative file.

Data and the means to analyze those data in a web environment are also available at the following web site: <http://sda.berkeley.edu/>

Guidelines for a good paper.

1. Begin early, papers begun a few days before the due date often read like papers that were begun a few days before the due date. The more work you put into your paper the higher its quality. Your paper deserves your attention.
2. Edit and rewrite relentlessly. Well-written and well-organized papers result from hard work.
3. Read and cite academic literature on your topic.
4. Provide a good introduction. A good introduction tells the reader what the paper is about, what is learned, and what is ahead.
5. Conclusion. Tell the reader what has been learned
6. Divide your paper into sections with subtitles.
7. Be eager to cite public opinion data, and be eager to analyze public opinion data.

The research paper counts for 25% of your final grade.

Discussion:

Discussion—questions, comments, interpretation, arguments—is highly encouraged. Indeed, I am interested in hearing your opinions on American public opinion and the mass media. The professor can be greatly impressed by students who demonstrate they have read the assigned readings and contribute to the discussion of the issues contained in these readings. The professor suspects that those students who do not contribute or who ask no questions about the readings have failed to do the readings. This will disappoint him. Periodically we might discuss current events as they relate to public opinion and the mass media. It is therefore advisable that you follow contemporary politics.

Exams:

There will be one midterm and a final. The date for the midterm is listed below but is subject to change; the final exam will be given at the scheduled time during final exam week, Tuesday, May 11 at 8:00 A.M. The midterm and final will each count for 25% of your final grade. Exams will cover materials presented in the readings and lecture.

The only reason that an exam can be rescheduled is in the event of an illness verified by the health services center or a death in one's immediate family. Other reasons one might offer for

being unable to take an exam at the schedule time—too many exams schedule on one day, already purchased travel tickets, ride is leaving early, scheduled family vacation, etc., —are not acceptable.

Group Project:

The Professor will construct six teams of approximately equal size. Each team will complete an exercise and make a presentation on its findings to the class. This project will count for 5% of your final grade.

Participation and Quizzes: The readings on the mycourse web page and in Norrander and Wilcox are typically more provocative and, in some cases, more challenging than the readings in Glynn and Leighley. The readings in Norrander and Wilcox and those on mycourse we will discuss in class. Students will form teams of two to lead discussion of the readings, leading the discussion will count towards your participation grade. The length of the discussion will be guided by a timer. Participation and quizzes will each count for 10% of your final grade. Quizzes will be given on the mycourse readings and those in Norrander and Wilcox.

Classroom Etiquette: If you must use the restroom please do so before or after class; **not during class.** Keep cell-phones off during class time, texting during class is rude.

Readings:

Your most important responsibility in this course will be the careful and reflective reading of the assignments listed in the outline that follows. The outline below is a road map; detours and changes are possible.

Barbara Norrander and Clyde Wilcox, Understanding Public Opinion.
Jan E. Leighley. Mass Media and Politics: A Social Science Perspective.
Carroll. Glynn, S Herbst, G. O'Keefe, and R. Shapiro, Public Opinion, 2nd edition.
Plus readings located on mycourse, each labeled by the first author's last name.

Course Outline

1. January 20th

Introduction --What is public opinion? What is the role of public opinion in a democratic society? Are citizens capable of self-government? How important should public opinion's role be in a democracy?

Glynn, et. al, Chapters 1 and 2; "Introduction: The Diverse Paths to Understanding Public Opinion," in Barbara Norrander and Clyde Wilcox, in *Understanding Public Opinion* (hereafter N & W).

January 25th

READ: *L.C.McDonald*, *Western Political Theory: The Modern Age*, sections on Locke ("Consent" and "The Majority") & *Walter Lippman*, "The World Outside and the Pictures in our Head."

2. Measuring Public Opinion. January 27th through February 3rd.

January 27th. *Hitchens, Christopher.* "Voting in the Passive Voice: What Polling has done to American democracy." *Harpers Vol 284*, April 1992, p. 45-53.

Glynn, et. al, Chapter 3.

3. Mass Media February 8th thru February 17th

A. The Media as an Organization.

READ: Leighley. Mass Media and Politics, Chs. 1, 2, 3, 4.

February 8th. *Baum, Matthew A.* 2002. "Sex, Lies and War: How Soft News Brings Foreign Policy to the Inattentive Public." *American Political Science Review* 96 (March).

B. The Media and Political Institutions

Leighley. Mass Media and Politics, Ch. 5.

C. The Media and the Public

Leighley. Mass Media and Politics, Chs. 6, 7, 8, 9. Glynn pp 405-439.

February 10th. *Eric Alterman*, "Out of Print: The death and life of the American newspaper." http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/03/31/080331fa_fact_alterman

February 15th. *Diana Mutz1* "Effects of "In-Your-Face" Television Discourse on Perceptions of a Legitimate Opposition" *American Political Science Review*.

4. Theories of Public Opinion: Economic, Psychological, and Sociological Approaches.
Glynn, et. al, Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7.

February 22nd. *Diana Mutz2*. Hearing the Other Side, Chapter 1, skim chapter 4.

February 24th. *Virginia Sapiro and Shauna Shames*, "The Gender Basis of Public Opinion" in N & W, and *John A. Garcia* "Latino Public Opinion: Identity Politics and Policy Preferences" in N & W.

March 1st *John A. Hibbing and John R. Alford*. "The Ultimate Source of Political Opinions." in N & W.; *Lonna R. Atkeson and Cherie D. Maestas*, "Race and the Formation of Attitudes: Responses to Hurricane Katrina," in N & W.

5. Knowledge and Sophistication.

March 3rd "Is a Liberal-Conservative Identification an Ideology?", *William G. Jacoby* in N & W.

Glynn, Chapter pp.283-324.

March 8th "Party Identification, Party Polarization, and Conflict Extension in the American Electorate," *Geoffrey C. Layman and Thomas M. Carsey* in N & W.

March 10th Midterm. Bring blue books.

March 15 to March 19th, Spring Break.

6. American Political Culture.

March 22nd.

7. Public Opinion on Democratic Norms, Tolerance, and Race. Glynn 324-354.

March 24th Public Opinion, Civil Liberties, and Security in the Post 9/11 Context,
Darren W. Davis in N & W.

March 29th Presentations by Teams 1 and 2:

8. Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy

March 31st “Public Opinion and the Iraq War”, *Adam Berinsky*, in N & W.

April 5th Presentations by Teams 3 and 4.

9. Public Opinion toward Institutions, Leaders, and Politics.

April 7th *Paul Gronke, James Hicks, and Timothy E. Cook* “Trust but Verify: Three Lenses on Americans’ Trust in Government.” in N & W.

April 12th Teams 5 and 6 Presentations.

April 14th. *Barbara Norrander and Tiffany Harper*, “The Rise and Fall of George W. Bush: Popular Support for the President.” in N & W.

Kenneth D. Wald, Adam L. Silverman, Michael J. Scicchitano, and Tracy Johns
“In the Court of Public Opinion: Prejudging Defendants in Terrorism Trials.” in N & W.

10. Individual and Aggregate Change in Political Attitudes: Life Cycle, Generation, and Period Effects.

April 19th *Mack D. Mariani and Gordon J. Hewitt*. “Indoctrination U?: Faculty Ideology and Changes in Student Political Orientation.” PS. October 2008.

April 21st. “The Puzzling Case of Abortion Attitudes in the Millennial Generation,”
Clyde Wilcox and Patrick Carr in N & W.

11. **April 26th**. Responsiveness. Public Opinion, Media, and Democratic Government.

Glynn, Chapter 9.

April 28th *Martin Gilens*, “Inequality and Democratic Responsiveness.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 69 (2005).