

POL 316 Public Opinion, Voting Behavior, and Elections

SSB 325 MoTh 12:30 - 1:50

Instructor: Dr. Daniel Bowen
Department: Political Science
Office Hours: MoTh: 9:00–9:55a;
2:00–3:00p or by appointment

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1 Course Description and Purpose

The purpose of this course is to introduce students to the study of public opinion and voting behavior. The course is focused on key political questions like: what is public opinion? How do we measure it? Does it matter for American democracy? Why do we vote the way we do, and how do our opinions and voting behavior influence elections and governance? The course is separated into four sections: polling, microlevel opinions, macrolevel opinions, and voting behavior. Throughout the course we will study how public opinion and voting behavior influences election outcomes, issues of representation and citizenship, and governance.

2 Course Goals

The course meets the following learning goals set out by the Department of Political Science:

- (2) To lead students to examine the workings of fundamental political processes and institutions at the local, national, and international level while offering them the opportunity to explore a subfield of political science in more depth.
- (4) To mentor students in developing advanced skills in critical thinking so that they may read analytically, understand complex relationships and concepts, identify underlying assumptions, and “dissect” a scholarly text.
- (7) To develop in students the ability to locate themselves within an historical, social, and cultural setting; to grasp politics in a conceptual manner; and to transfer that conceptual understanding to other situations.

3 Course Required Materials

Four books are required for this class and are available for purchase at the bookstore or online:

- Asher, Herbert. 2007. *Polling and the Public: What Every Citizen Should Know, 7th Edition*. CQ Press.
- Erikson, Robert and Kent Tedin. 2007. *American Public Opinion: Its Origins, Content, and Impact, 7th Edition*. Pearson Longman.
- Gelman, Andrew. 2010. *Red State, Blue State, Rich State, Poor State: Why Americans Vote the Way They Do, Expanded Edition*. Princeton.
- Stimson, James A. 2004. *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*. Cambridge.

4 Course Requirements and Organization

Your grade in the course will depend on several criteria: in-class participation, quizzes and short assignments, two exams, and a research paper.

In-class participation: This is an upper-level course; I expect all students to regularly engage in class discussions and do so in a way that respects your fellow students.

Quizzes and assignments: I will regularly give short quizzes over assigned readings. Less frequently I will ask students to complete short assignments (either in preparation for class or during class) in lieu of a quiz. Quizzes and assignments cannot be made up unless the student has an excused absence (illness, emergency, etc).

Response essays: Two response essays are assigned during the semester. These essays should be 900-1200 words each (\approx 3-4 pages).

1. Micro-level public opinion: Choose one of the following authors: Zaller and Feldman, Converse, or Alford et al. Evaluate and critique their argument. In your experience, does the author(s) accurately capture an important characteristic of micro-level public opinion? Do you buy the research? If the author is correct, what are the ramifications for how we as scholars and citizens should view public opinion polls?
2. Rational choice and the paradox of voting: If utility calculations do not accurately describe why people vote, what does? Can we modify the traditional Downsian vote calculation equation or do we need to abandon a rational choice paradigm altogether to understand voting behavior? Regardless of its validity in describing actual voting behavior, do you find the rational choice approach helpful for explaining or understanding voting behavior? Why or why not?

Exams: there will be two in-class, closed-book exams.

Research paper: The major project in the class is a 2700 - 3300 word paper (roughly 9-12 double-spaced pages) on a topic of your choosing. The paper is due on November 23th at class time (12:30p). Unless accommodations have been worked out in advance with me, each calendar day a paper is late will receive a 1/3 of a grade deduction (an A paper turned in on the 24th will receive an A-; the same paper turned in on the 25th will receive a B+, etc). This policy applies both to the research paper and to the response essays. Please turn in the assignment electronically using the course SOCS page. Papers should put forth an argument to explain the variation in some key issue addressed in the class, like opinions on a contemporary political issue, turnout, or candidate and party preferences. Research papers should: (1) use real survey data (like the American National Election Study); (2) incorporate course readings; (3) use and correctly cite at least 5 outside, academic sources (journal articles or books); (4) be organized and clear; (5) use correct grammar and spelling.

5 Grading

The following tables denotes the weight of each course component toward the final grade and grade ranges used.

Assignment	% of Final Grade	
Participation / discussion	10	
Quizzes and assignments	10	
Response essays	15	
Exams		
	Midterm	20
	Final	20
Research paper		25

Table 1: Grading Weights

A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	D-	F
100–93	93–90	90–87	87–83	83–80	80–77	77–73	73–70	70–67	67–63	63–60	60–0

Table 2: Grading Scale

6 Course Policies

6.1 Attendance

This course will adhere to TCNJ’s attendance policy [<http://www.tcnj.edu/~academic/policy/attendance.html>]. Participation in discussion is an important component to the course.

6.2 Absences

No make-up quizzes or extensions on assignments due to an absence will be given unless you speak to me *before* you miss class or you miss class due to an illness or family emergency. If the latter is the case, I need appropriate documentation.

6.3 Academic Integrity

This course will adhere to TCNJ’s academic integrity policy [<http://www.tcnj.edu/~academic/policy/integrity.html>]. Cheating is bad; don’t do it. The work you hand in should be your own.

6.4 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

This course will also adhere to TCNJ’s Americans with Disabilities Act policy [<http://www.tcnj.edu/~affirm/ada.html>]. If you need accommodations due to a disability, please see the instructor as soon as possible.

6.5 Disclaimer

The instructor reserves the right to make changes to this syllabus during the semester.

7 Class Schedule, Topics, and Readings

References

- Aldrich, John H. 1993. “Rational choice and turnout.” *American Journal of Political Science* 37(1):246–278.
- Alford, John R., Caroline L. Funk and John R. Hibbing. 2005. “Are political orientations genetically transmitted?” *American Political Science Review* 99(02):153–167.

- Berinsky, Adam J. 2005. "The Perverse Consequences of Electoral Reform in the United States." *American Politics Research* 33(4):471–491.
- Brady, Henry E., Sidney Verba and Kay Lehman. Schlozman. 1995. "Beyond SES: A resource model of political participation." *American Political Science Review* 89(2):271–294.
- Campbell, Angus, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller and Donald E. Stokes. 1960. *The American Voter*. New York: John Wiley.
- Converse, Philip. 1964. The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics. In *Ideology and Its Discontents*, ed. David E. Apter. The Free Press of Glencoe.
- Downs, Anthony. 1957. *An economic theory of democracy*. Harper.
- Lewis-Beck, Michael S. and Mary Stegmaier. 2000. "Economic determinants of electoral outcomes." *Annual Review of Political Science* 3:183–219.
- Rosenstone, Steven J. and John Mark Hansen. 1993. *Mobilization, participation, and democracy in America*. Macmillan.
- Squire, Peverill, Raymond E. Wolfinger and David P. Glass. 1987. "Residential Mobility and Voter Turnout." *The American Political Science Review* 81(1):45–65.
- Zaller, John and Stanley Feldman. 1992. "A simple theory of the survey response: Answering questions versus revealing preferences." *American Journal of Political Science* 36(3):579–616.

Week	Dates	Topic(s)	Monday	Thursday	Deadlines
1	9-02	Introduction to Public Opinion		Intro	
2	9-06\9-09	Opinions and (Non)Attitudes	[Tues.] E&T: Ch 1; Lippmann: Part 1, Ch 4-7 Asher: Ch 3	Asher: Ch 1-2	
3	9-13\9-16	Question Wording and Sampling		Asher: Ch 4-5	
4	9-20\9-23	Data Collection; Effects of Polling	Asher: Ch 6 (skim),7,9	E&T: Ch 3	
5	9-27\9-30	Does Microlevel Opinion Exist?	Converse 1964	Zaller and Feldman 1992	
6	10-4\10-7	Origins of Political Attitudes	E&T: Ch 5	E&T: Ch 7	
7	10-11\10-14		Alford et al. 2005	E&T: Ch 8	10-14: Response Essay #1
8	10-18\10-21		No Class	Exam I	
9	10-25\10-28	Macrolevel Opinion Change	Stimson: Preface, Ch 1	Stimson: Ch 2-3	
10	11-1\11-4	Agg. Opinion and Elections	Stimson: Ch 4 & 6	Downs 1957 Ch 14 Aldrich 1993	
11	11-8\11-11	Turnout	Brady, Verba and Schlozman 1995	Rosenstone and Hansen 1993 Ch 6	11-8: Response Essay #2
12	11-15\11-18	Agg. Turnout & Vote Choice	Squire et al. 1987 Berinsky 2005	Campbell et al. 1960 Ch 5-6 Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000 (just pp.183-199) THANKSGIVING	
13	11-22\11-25	Red-Blue Paradox	Gelman: Ch 1	Gelman: Ch 4-6	11-22: Research Paper Due
14	11-29\12-2		Gelman: Ch 2-3	E&T: Ch 10 and Review	
15	12-6\12-9		Gelman: Ch 8-10		
16	TBD	Final			Exam II

Table 3: Class Schedule