political attitudes & behavior

PSCI 7031
FALL 2015
MONDAYS, 5-7:30 P.M.
HELLEMS 196

JENNIFER WOLAK
306 FLEMING
wolakj@colorado.edu
OFFICE HOURS: MONDAYS, 1-3 P.M.

This course concerns the joy and magic that is the study of political behavior and public opinion. In many ways, public opinion is the currency of a representative democracy. It is the expression of what people expect, desire, and think of their government. And it is what politicians follow, influence, and are held accountable to. Throughout the course, we will consider the structure and dynamics of public opinion, analyzing both what influences it, as well as how it shapes other aspects of politics and public life.

reading assignments

Course readings will be drawn from several texts as well as journal articles. Book chapters will be accessible via the course website.


For those who need additional background reading, a good undergraduate public opinion textbook is:


requirements

PARTICIPATION (25% of your final grade)

One important prerequisite of participation is class attendance. Class attendance is vital and required.

It is essential to read all of the assigned readings and think carefully about what you have read in advance of the class session. Frantically skimming the articles in the minutes before class begins will limit the quality of our class discussion and impede your ability to learn anything useful. Your education and our class discussion of the readings will both benefit from your careful reading of the articles as well as the time you spend in advance of class reflecting on what you have read and learned.

You will also be expected to actively participate in class discussions in a thoughtful way.
LEADERSHIP OF CLASS DISCUSSION (15% of your final grade)

For three weeks during the semester, you will be responsible for leading class discussion. Your goal is to ensure that the class engages in thoughtful reflection about what we can learn from that week’s readings. How you do this is up to you and your fellow discussion leader. You could spend time discussing the articles individually, engaging the themes that cross different articles, connecting that week’s topic to prior readings, or discussing ways to extend and elaborate on the week’s readings. Your grade will reflect the quality of your preparation, as well as the quantity and quality of class discussion you generate.

You will be graded on your class participation and discussion leadership, which will count toward 40% of your final grade. You can choose which assignments will compose the remainder of your grade from the following options:

AN EXTRA WEEK OF DISCUSSION LEADERSHIP (each worth 5% of final grade, if selected)

RESPONSE PAPERS (each is worth 5% of your final grade, if selected)

In these response papers, you will use the week’s readings as inspiration for a possible future research project. In your memo, develop a plan for how you could empirically extend ideas raised in that week’s readings. Your proposal might extend ideas raised in the studies, or you might propose an interesting question that the authors do not consider. Describe your research question, why it is important and how it would contribute to the literature, the central hypotheses you would want to test, and how you would test your hypotheses. These papers should be single-spaced and two to three pages in length. Turn them in at the beginning of class on the day we discuss that topic.

BOOK REVIEW AND CRITIQUE (each is worth 10% of your final grade, if selected)

If there is a book on public opinion or political participation that you are interested in that is not on this syllabus, you can choose to read it and write up a book report. When we cover the most closely related topic in class, you will present a short summary of the book to the class and engage some of the strengths and weaknesses of the text. You should also turn in a book review essay (two to four pages) on the same matters, as a hard copy and as an electronic copy for distribution to the rest of the class via the course website.

LITERATURE REVIEW (each is worth 20% of your final grade, if selected)

Another option is to write an essay that assesses the current literature on a topic of your choosing (given instructor approval). This essay should be five to eight single spaced pages in length and is due the last week of the semester. The central goal of the paper will be to assess and summarize the research about a particular topic – to identify the central question or questions, highlight the most important literature related to the topic, and provide commentary about the strengths and weaknesses of the current research in the area. More details will be outlined on a separate handout.

RESEARCH PAPER (worth 50% of your final grade, if selected)

You can also choose to develop a research paper that tests an interesting question about public opinion or political behavior. This paper should follow the format of the kinds of academic papers read in class – including development of a research question, a review of relevant literature, theory, tests of these explanations, and interpretation of what you find. Expectations for the research paper are outlined in a separate handout.
**D2L is your friend**

This syllabus, assignments, and other exciting material can be accessed on the class website on learn.colorado.edu.

**special accommodations**

If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, please submit to me a letter from Disability Services in a timely manner so that your needs may be addressed. You can contact the Disability Services office for more information at www.colorado.edu/disabilityservices.

**some important comments on academic integrity**

Plagiarism and other academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. If you are not familiar with the rules of citing sources in written work or what constitutes plagiarism, you should contact me or refer to the University Honor Code at www.colorado.edu/academics/honorcode. Academic dishonesty will result in an F in the course and referral to the Honor Court for additional non-academic sanctions.

All papers are expected to be original work, not previously or simultaneously handed in for credit in another course (unless prior approval of all instructors involved is obtained).
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COURSE SCHEDULE

1. about public opinion and surveys

Monday, August 24
Introduction to the course. Overview of the field. Measuring public opinion.

2. citizen competence and political knowledge

Monday, August 31
The characteristics of a good citizen. Levels of political knowledge. Political information and vote choice.

Monday, September 7 Class does not meet

3. ideological constraint and opinion instability

Monday, September 14
4. partisanship

Monday, September 21

The roots of partisanship, partisanship as an identity, partisan stability and strength


5. vote choice

Monday, September 28

Understanding the American voter with surveys


6. political reasoning and persuasion

Monday, October 5

Political persuasion, campaign effects, the psychology of voter decision-making


7. priming, framing, & media effects

Monday, October 12

Media effects, agenda-setting, priming, framing, learning


8. political talk and deliberation

Monday, October 19

How we talk about politics, institutional influences on deliberation, gender and political talk


9. macropolitics

Monday, October 26

Public opinion in the aggregate.


10. public opinion and policy representation

Monday, November 2

Public opinion as an explanation of policy outcomes. Public opinion and political accountability.


11. trust in government

Monday, November 9

Why people trust and mistrust government


12. groups, ethnocentrism, and prejudice

Monday, November 16

The role of groups in public opinion, prejudice, racial cues


fall break

Monday, November 23
13. voter turnout

Monday, November 30

Assorted explanations for why people turn out to vote


14. political participation & equality

Monday, December 7

Political participation. Political inequality.