Public Opinion and Participation (GOVT 258)
Fall 2014

Professor Nick Goedert
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Meeting Times: 10-11 MWF
Office Hours: Tuesday 2:00-4:00, Wednesday 1:30-3:00
Office: Kirby 005

Description

This course considers a central question of democracy – can the people govern? Do ordinary citizens have the capacity and motivation to hold officials accountable? Influential research suggests that they do not. People do not know even basic facts about the American political system, they often seem to make up opinions on the fly, they lack coherent political ideologies, and they seem easily manipulated by the media and election campaigns. But other research suggests that despite these shortcomings, public opinion is good enough – it is coherent and sensible most of the time, and it does significantly shape what government does. Both the critics and the supporters of public opinion recognize that opportunity matters for the public’s capacity and motivation to govern. The opportunity to govern consists of conditions that help citizens to become informed, to reason well, to participate meaningfully in the political system, and to influence its decisions and processes. The forces that shape the opportunity to learn, to reason, to participate, and to influence include: the media, political campaigns, and inequalities in society. We will consider both the negative and positive assessments of the public’s capacities, and the role of the opportunity to govern. We will also discuss different ways to measure public opinion, particular in the form of polls, and the advantages and drawbacks to various polling methods.

Intended Student Learning Outcomes

At the conclusion of the course, it is expected that students will be able to:
• Analyze historical and contemporary political events involving mass behavior.
• Understand better the reasons for their own political views and behaviors.
• Read common ways of presenting quantitative data.
• Conduct simple analyses of public opinion poll data.
• Write a research paper based on primary research of public opinion data.
• Speak more confidently and skillfully in a group presentation.

Readings

The course has five required books:
• Erikson and Tedin, American Public Opinion, 9th ed. (The 8th edition is also OK)
• Iyengar and Kinder, News that Matters (2010)
• Green, Palmquist, and Schickler, Partisan Hearts and Minds (2004)
• Page and Shapiro, The Rational Public (1992)
• Bartels, Unequal Democracy (2010)

All books should be available from the campus bookstore and online. Additional articles and book excerpts will be posted on Moodle as noted in the syllabus.
Requirements

The course grade consists of the following:

1. Midterm Exam (in class October 10): 20%
2. Final Exam: 40%
3. Poll Watch Paper & Presentation: 20%
4. Participation & Moodle posts: 20%

Exams: There will be two examinations in the course, an in-class midterm on October 10th, and a final on the designated final exam date. The final will be cumulative, but focus on material from the last half of the semester. Each exam will have a designated in-class review session, and the final will have at least one additional optional review session. Both exams will include short answer and one or more longer essay questions. All exams are open-notes, although you are not permitted to access electronic devices or the internet during the exam.

Poll Watch Paper and Presentation: 20% of your grade will be based on a group project composed of two pieces: 10-12 page paper due on the day of the final class meeting (December 5th), and a 10-15 minute in class presentation on one of the designated “Poll Watch” days in class. Groups should be composed of 3 people; you can either select your own group, or request that I place you into a group. The project requires students to survey and analyze the political polling over time of a current issue or election in American politics, or the politics of another country. Details of both aspects of the project will be discussed in class. I am willing to read drafts or outlines of the paper submitted prior to the Thanksgiving holiday.

Participation and Moodle Posts: Class participation will be composed of both your participation in class discussions and your responses to the readings posted on Moodle. For each class session, students are expect to:

- Attend all classes, having read the designated material from syllabus;
- Be well-prepared to answer questions about the of the week’s readings
- If you cannot attend a class, please let me know ahead of time

You are required to post five reading responses on Moodle over the course of the semester. At least two of these posts should be made before the midterm. You should post under the correct unit on the GOVT 258 Moodle site. Posts are due by 2pm on the day before the associated class meeting.

There is no required format or length to the Moodle posts, although I would expect many will be about one typed page or two paragraphs. You may respond to any aspect of any the day’s readings; you may tie together multiple readings, readings from previous weeks, current events or you own life experiences or simply argue why you think a particular argument is correct or incorrect, etc.

The Moodle posts will not be given individual letter grades; for the most part, they will be graded on a pass/fail basis. If I find your post particularly interesting or insightful, I may ask you to expand on it in class.
Class Schedule

Week 1: Introduction; What is Public Opinion?
• August 25, 27
• Readings:
  o Text Ch. 1 and Ch. 2
• **NO CLASS Friday, August 29**

Week 2: Do Americans have Political Opinions?
• September 1, 3, 5
• Readings:
  o Text, Ch. 3, p. 55-79
  o Converse, P. “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics” (1964)

Week 3: Heuristics & Cues
• September 8, 10, 12
• Readings:
  o Popkin, S. The Reasoning Voter, 2nd ed. (1994), Prologue (p. 1-6), Ch. 1 (pp 7-21), and Ch. 4 (p. 72-81, 91-95)

Week 4: Class and Social Forces
• September 15, 17
• Readings:
  o Text, Ch. 7, p. 184-192
  o Bartels, L. Unequal Democracy, Ch. 1 (2010)
• **Poll Watch #1 Friday, September 19**

Week 5: Partisanship
• September 22, 24, 26
• Readings:
  o Text, Ch. 5
Week 6 & 7: Economic Voting
• September 29, October 1, 6
• Readings:
  o Text Ch. 9, p. 267-276
  o Excerpt from Downs, A., An Economic Theory of Democracy (1957)
• Poll Watch #2 Friday, October 3
• Exam Review Wednesday, October 8
• Midterm Exam Friday, October 10

Week 8: Values
• October 15, 17
• Readings:
• NO CLASS Monday, October 13 (Fall Break)

Week 9: Aggregation
• October 20, 22
• Readings:
  o Text, Ch. 4
  o Page, B. and R. Shapiro, The Rational Public, Chs. 1, 2, 8, 9 (1992)
• Poll Watch #3 Friday, October 24

Week 10: Polarization
• October 27, 29, 31
• Readings:
  o Excerpt from McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, Polarized America (2008)
  o Bartels, Unequal Democracy, Ch. 9

Week 11: Race & Gender
• November 5, 7
• Readings:
  o Text, Ch. 7, p. 193-216
  o Burns, N. and D. Kinder.. Categorical Politics: Gender, Race, and Public Opinion (chapter 7). In A. Berinsky, ed., New Directions in American Politics. (2012)
• Poll Watch #4 Monday, November 3
Week 12: Voting and Turnout
• November 10, 12, 14
• Readings:
  o Text Ch. 9, p. 250-266

Week 13 & 14: Media
• November 17, 19, 24
• Readings:
  o Text, Ch. 8
  o Iyengar and Kinder, News That Matters, Chapters TBD (2010)
• Poll Watch #5 Friday November 21
• NO CLASS Wednesday Nov. 26 or Friday, Nov. 28 (Thanksgiving)

Week 15: Deliberation
• December 1, 3
• Readings:
  o Excerpt from Mansbridge, J., Beyond Adversary Democracy (1983)
  o Karpowitz, Mendelberg, and Shaker, "Gender inequality in deliberative participation." (2012)
• Wrap-Up and Exam Review Friday, December 5

Final Exam (DATE TBA)

Academic Honesty

Academic dishonesty, such as plagiarism or cheating, is a violation of College policy and may result in a failing grade and/or other disciplinary measures. Please review the guidelines on “Principles of Intellectual Honesty” available in the Student Handbook (go to http://www.lafayette.edu/currentstudents and click on Student Handbook under Resources and Services), which elaborate College policy on plagiarism and academic integrity.