

University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Political Science/Communication Studies 334
Polls, Politics and Public Opinion - Fall 2013

Dr. Dona-Gene Mitchell
Email: dmitchell2@unl.edu
Office: Oldfather Hall 524
Phone: 472-5994

Course Meetings: TR 11:00-12:15
Location: OLDH 309
Office Hours: Thur 12:30-2:30,
& by appointment

COURSE INTRODUCTION: Public opinion plays a central role in American politics. In a democratic society, the political system is ultimately evaluated by the degree to which policymakers respond to the ebb and flow of public opinion. In order to have a fuller understanding of politics we must pay attention to the role of public opinion and how it has been studied. Several important questions drive the study of public opinion: What is public opinion and how do we measure it? Are citizens capable of providing meaningful opinions when they possess little knowledge pertaining to the most basic facets of politics? What factors influence the process of opinion formation? What opinions do citizens hold on key points of political debate? Are elected representatives responsive to citizen preferences? Throughout this course we will grapple with these questions by drawing on the insights of contemporary research in political science on the topic of American public opinion. The readings will be discussed in five sections: 1) How is Public Opinion Research Conducted? 2) Is Public Opinion Meaningful? 3) What Shapes Public Opinion? 4) Does Public Opinion Impact Policy? and 5) What Opinions Do Citizens Hold?

COURSE OBJECTIVES: This course will seek to meet three main objectives. First, students should gain insights and be able to critically evaluate the ways political scientists have approached the study of public opinion. Second, students should demonstrate a fundamental understanding of the psychological perspectives that explain how citizens form political opinions. Third, students should understand the ways public opinion influences public policy. By the end of the course, students will have gained a solid understanding of the dynamics of public opinion and an appreciation of the connections between social science research and applied politics. Together, these will help you to become sophisticated analysts of electoral politics and better able to evaluate the credibility of polls and published public opinion research.

REQUIRED READINGS: Most of the required readings are drawn from scholarly journal articles and book chapters that report original research by political scientists on the topics we will exam. A link to these is provided on the course Blackboard site (<http://blackboard.unl.edu>). If you would like to explore any particular topic in greater depth, I will be happy to recommend supplemental references.

Additionally, students are required to purchase the following book, which is available at the campus bookstore:

Erikson, Robert S., and Kent L. Tedin. 2010. *American Public Opinion: Its Origin, Contents, and Impact*, 8th edition. New York: Longman. (Referred to below as E&T)

GRADING SUMMARY AND SCALE: A percentage scale will be used for grading. In the case of borderline grades, I may refer to your participation record and office hour attendance.
 97-100 = A+, 93-96 = A, 90-92 = A-, 87-89 = B+, 83-86 = B, 80-82 = B-, 77-79 = C+, 73-76 = C, 70-72 = C-, 67-69 = D+, 63-66 = D, 60-62 = D-, 0-59 = F

| | |
|--|-----|
| Exams (3)..... | 45% |
| Random Reading Checks (6 – <i>drop lowest</i>)..... | 5% |
| Reaction Paper & Presentation..... | 15% |
| Analysis Paper & Presentation..... | 20% |
| Class Participation..... | 15% |

COURSE STRUCTURE AND REQUIREMENTS: Because I want to have you actively engaged in the learning process, class sessions will be conducted in a seminar format where emphasis will be on class discussion of the scheduled topics rather than primarily relying on lecturing. In most sessions I will provide an overview of the state of the literature about the day’s topic in order to place the assigned reading(s) in context. All students are expected to share their own reactions to the readings and are encouraged to raise questions for discussion. It is essential that all readings be completed prior to each class meeting and students be prepared to actively participate in discussions. Students will play a central role in guiding class discussions and will take turns submitting discussion questions and providing a critical review of each piece of original research

Exams. There will be three exams during the semester. Each exam is worth 15% of your grade. Questions will vary in difficulty from those that should be easy to answer correctly if you completed the readings and attended class to those that will require you to critically engage the readings and apply the concepts we discuss in class. **No make-up examinations will be given unless you obtain approval from me *prior* to the examination.**

| Exam | Tentative Date |
|------|----------------|
| 1 | October 3 |
| 2 | October 31 |
| 3 | December 5 |

Random Reading Checks. Six unannounced reading checks will be made throughout the semester at the *beginning* of class. Each will have five three-category multiple choice items, with all items drawn directly from that day’s assigned reading(s). Items will vary in difficulty from those that should be easy to answer correctly if you completed the reading to those that will require close readings and careful thought. **You are allowed to use any notes that you have taken yourself** (you are not allowed to use the original text). If you come late to class or miss the class altogether, you cannot make up the reading check – you will receive a zero. However, because some students may do poorly on a specific day or occasionally miss class, I will drop your lowest score. Thus your top five quiz scores will be worth 5% of your final grade. Please note: **You Will Receive A Score Of Zero If You Do Not Stay In Class For The Full Class Session** unless you have received prior permission to leave class early.

Reaction Paper and Presentation. Each student is asked to select one class meeting at which to present a short reaction paper (approximately five-six typed, double-spaced pages) critically analyzing the day's assigned reading. A sign-up sheet will be circulated during the first week of class. The paper should help structure the discussion in that seminar meeting and should include 1) a brief overview of the main research question(s) addressed in the session's reading(s), 2) a brief review of how the authors conducted their study, 3) a quick summary of the major findings, 4) a critical analysis of potential problems with the study (i.e. its design, conclusions) and 5) a discussion of possible future research related to the day's reading, (with emphasis on points 4 and 5). You need to ensure that I have a copy of the response paper by noon on the day prior to class (If you are signed up for a Thursday reading, I must receive your paper by noon on Wednesday). During class you are expected to help lead the day's discussion and along with a classmate, you will present a brief 10-15 minute presentation. The response paper (combined with evaluation of your in-class presentation and performance in helping to lead class discussion) counts as 15% of the final course grade. **Recommended Consultation Session.** I encourage each of you to meet with me prior to submitting your paper in order to improve the quality of your submission and the content of your in-class presentation. This will also be an opportunity for me to learn more about you and your academic interests.

Analysis Paper and Presentation. Each student will write and submit a longer analysis paper. The text of each paper should be approximately eight-to-ten typed, double-spaced pages, along with appropriate supporting material (i.e., references, tables, figures, etc.). In your papers, you will have the opportunity to take what you have learned during the semester and conduct your own analysis on a topic relevant to the study of public opinion. Two or three topics will be provided for the assignment. During the last week of class students will work in groups to present their findings. Attendance is expected of all students during the last week of class. The paper (combined with evaluation of your in-class presentation) counts as 20% of the final course grade and is due at the beginning of class on **Tuesday, December 10**. Details of the assignment will be made available no later than four weeks prior to the assignment's due date.

Class Participation. To encourage active engagement during class, participation counts as 15% of your final course grade. This portion of your grade includes 1) sharing your opinions and insights during our class discussions or via the Blackboard discussion board, and 2) completing any in-class activities or group assignments. Regular contributions to our class discussions is expected of all students. Although students, understandably, will differ in how often they contribute to discussion, *some* contributions are expected from all class members. Participation will be evaluated on its contribution to the class, not solely by volume or quantity.

Discussion Questions. As part of class participation, students are expected to regularly come to class prepared with discussion questions based on the day's readings. During class students will be encouraged to share their reactions and questions as a means to facilitate our discussions. Formally, each student will be asked to submit 2-3 questions for 2 different class meetings. These questions will be evaluated based on the degree to which they critically engage the material. Your questions should be posted on the day's Blackboard discussion board by noon the day before class. A sign-up sheet will be circulated during the first week of class. These two question set submissions will comprise a portion of your participation grade. Failure to submit a total of two sets of discussion questions will result in your participation grade being lowered by a letter grade.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS IN POLS 334

Readings and Note Taking. Because this is an upper-level course, the reading load may be more than you have experienced in the past and will require careful time management on your part but should be doable by looking over the reading schedule and planning accordingly. Success in this course depends on students both **attending class where new material will be presented**, as well as **completing all of the reading assignments prior to the date assigned**. To get the most out of your readings, I recommend highlighting and making notes as you read. This should help you retain the information and aid in your performance on the reading checks. Remember you are able to use your notes during the reading checks!

Course Website and Lecture Outlines. The course website can be found at <http://blackboard.unl.edu>. Links to additional readings, discussion boards, details on writing assignments and exams, and grades will be posted to the site throughout the semester. In addition, **I will post outlines for most class sessions to the site by 9 a.m. on the day of class**. Many students find it helpful to print these outlines and use them to organize their note-taking during class. You should keep in mind that these are provided as a supplement and are not a substitute for attending class and taking careful notes. If you miss a class, it is your responsibility to obtain complete notes from a classmate.

Attendance, Preparation & Participation. Regular class attendance is expected. In order to get the most out of our time together you should have completed the readings, taken notes on them and come to class with discussion questions in mind. This is genuinely necessary for your success in this course! First, you must carefully read all of the assigned material in order to perform well on the reading checks. Second, your participation grade and more importantly, the quality of class discussions hinges largely on your preparation, and the ideas you contribute to the discussions. It is my hope that each of you will take this advice and come to class prepared and ready to share your thoughts on the day's topic but if there is a lull in class discussion and I suspect that many of you have not completed the readings, you may be called on to answer specific questions.

Office Hours and Communication. I strongly encourage you to take advantage of my office hours throughout the semester. I am here to be an additional resource to assist you in getting the most out of this course. I'm available if you are struggling with any of the course material or if you would like to discuss in more depth specific course topics or the discipline in general. If you have class or work conflicts during my scheduled office hours, I am happy to make appointments. Also, please feel free to call my office or email me. Likewise, please regularly check your email as important announcements will be disseminated via email and on the course website.

GENERAL POLICIES

Late Work. I understand that serious illnesses and emergencies do occasionally arise. It is your responsibility to notify me **BEFORE** the due date to discuss alternate arrangements if you find yourself in such a situation. If you fail to make such an advance agreement, late submissions will be assessed a penalty of 5% per day. The maximum penalty for late work is 50%. So even if you are extremely late, you can still submit your work to earn partial credit. No make-up quizzes will be given except in the case of absences that have been excused in advance. In the rare case that a make-up quiz is granted, it must be taken within one week of the original date of the quiz.

Cell Phones, iPods, and Other Electronic Equipment. Cell phones and music players are distracting to others and disrupt learning. Therefore, **the use of cell phones, MP3 players and other electronic equipment is strictly forbidden during class.** Also, any laptop use should be limited to activity specifically related to this course – such as note-taking. Violations will affect your participation grade and **violation of this policy during a quiz or mini exam will result in a zero!**

Show Respect! Our time in class provides a forum for the open exchange of ideas and opinions. But an atmosphere of mutual respect is essential for this to occur. I will exercise my responsibility to manage the discussions so that ideas and argument can proceed in an orderly fashion. If at any time you feel that the classroom atmosphere has made it uncomfortable for you to openly share your political views, I encourage you to come talk to me about your concerns.

Academic Honor Code: This course is designed to encourage students to think for themselves about relevant research on public opinion. Therefore, it is critical that students complete their own work. Cheating and plagiarizing the work of others are both easily identifiable and the potential benefits are not worth the consequences. Any act of academic dishonesty or misconduct as outlined by the University's Student Code of Conduct (Section 4.2) will be severely penalized. **Students in violation of the University regulations regarding academic honesty will receive a failing grade in the course and will be reported to the dean.** Further, students may be subject to additional University penalties. If you have any additional questions (about how to include proper and complete citations, how to use your own words to discuss an author's work, etc.) I encourage you to talk with me rather than risk the penalty associated with failing to maintain academic honesty.

Academic Accommodations: If you have disabilities or special needs that require academic accommodation I ask that you notify me of those conditions and requested accommodations during the first week of class (By August 30). As outlined in the official university policy: "Students with disabilities are encouraged to contact the instructor for a confidential discussion of their individual needs for academic accommodation. It is the policy of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to provide flexible and individualized accommodation to students with documented disabilities that may affect their ability to fully participate in course activities or to meet course requirements. To receive accommodation services, students must be registered with the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) office, 132 Canfield Administration, 472-3787 voice or TTY."

SYLLABUS CHANGE POLICY: This syllabus and the contained course calendar and assignments may change as the semester progresses. Syllabus alterations will be announced in class. Thus regular attendance is strongly encouraged to ensure that you have the information necessary to succeed in this course. Ignorance of course changes will not be accepted as an excused reason for failing to complete course assignments and readings.

Still have questions? Is something unclear? Just come talk to me...the earlier the better!

Course Calendar and Reading Schedule

| Date | Topic | Readings | Assignment* |
|---|---|---|--|
| <i>Foundations: How Is Public Opinion Research Conducted?</i> | | | |
| Tue – 08/27 | Welcome & Course Overview | Syllabus – available on blackboard course website | Print syllabus and bring to class |
| Thur – 08/29 | Introduction to Polling and the Study of Public Opinion | E&T: Chapter 1. | |
| Tue – 09/03 | | | |
| Thur – 09/05 | | | |
| <i>Opinion Formation: Is Public Opinion Meaningful?</i> | | | |
| Tue – 09/10 | The Nuts & Bolts of Polling and Public Opinion Research Methods | E&T: Chapter 2. | |
| Thur – 09/12 | | | |
| Tue – 09/17 | Political Knowledge Levels | E&T: Chapter 3 pp. 57-66; Delli Carpini, Michael X., and Scott Keeter. 1991. “Stability and Change in the U.S. Public’s Knowledge of Politics.” <i>Public Opinion Quarterly</i> 55: 583-612. | |
| Thur – 09/19 | Measuring Political Knowledge | Mondak, Jeffery J., and Belinda Creel Davis. 2001. “Asked and Answered: Knowledge Levels When We Will Not Take ‘Don’t Know’ for an Answer.” <i>Political Behavior</i> 23:199-224. | |
| Tue – 09/24 | The Role of “Top-of-the-Head” Considerations | E&T: Chapter 3 pp. 66-91; Chong, Dennis. 1993. “How People Think, Reason and Feel about Rights and Liberties.” <i>American Journal of Political Science</i> 37: 867-99. | |
| Thur – 09/26 | Heuristics | Kuklinski, James H., and Norman L. Hurley. 1994. “On Hearing and Interpreting Political Messages: A Cautionary Tale of Citizen Cue-Taking.” <i>Journal of Politics</i> 56:729-51. | |
| Tue – 10/01 | The Lifespan of Information Effects | Mitchell, Dona-Gene. 2012. “It’s About Time: The Lifespan of Information Effects in a Multi-Week Campaign.” <i>American Journal of Political Science</i> . 56: 298-311 | |
| Thur – 10/03 | Exam #1 | <i>No Readings</i> | Exam #1 |

| <i>Influences: What Shapes Public Opinion?</i> | | | |
|---|--|---|----------------|
| Tue – 10/08 | Political Socialization | E&T: Chapter 5. | |
| Thur – 10/10 | Media Effects: Framing, Priming and Agenda Setting | E&T: Chapter 8, 241-246; Nelson, Thomas E., Clawson, Rosalee A., and Oxley, Zoe. 1997. "Media Framing of a Civil Liberties Controversy and its Effect on Tolerance." <i>American Political Science Review</i> 91: 567-84; | |
| Tue – 10/15 | Media Bias and the Role of the Media in U.S. Elections | E&T: Chapter 8, 232-241, 251-258; James Gimpel, Karen Kaufmann, and Shanna Pearson-Merkowitx. 2007. "Battleground States versus Blackout States: The Behavioral Implications of Modern Presidential Campaigns." <i>Journal of Politics</i> . 69(3): 786-797. | |
| Thur – 10/17 | New Media Strategies | Baum, Matthew A. 2002. "Sex, Lies and War: How Soft News Brings Foreign Policy to the Inattentive Public." <i>American Political Science Review</i> 96:91-109. | |
| Tue – 10/22 | No Class – Fall Break! | <i>No Readings</i> | |
| Thur – 10/24 | Affect and Emotion | Marcus, George E. and Michael MacKuen. 1993. "Anxiety, Enthusiasm and the Vote: The Emotional Underpinnings of Learning and Involvement During Presidential Campaigns." <i>American Political Science Review</i> 87: 688-701. | |
| Tue – 10/29 | Genetics | Alford, John R., Carolyn L. Funk, John R. Hibbing. 2005. "Are Political Orientations Genetically Transmitted?" <i>American Political Science Review</i> 99: 153-167. | |
| Thur – 10/31 | Exam #2 | <i>No Readings</i> | Exam #2 |
| <i>Consequences: Does Public Opinion Impact Policy?</i> | | | |
| Tue – 11/05 | Political Participation and Elections | E&T; Chapter 9. | |
| Thur – 11/07 | | | |
| Tue – 11/12 | Voting | Lau, Richard R., and David P. Redlawsk. 1997. "Voting Correctly." <i>American Political Science Review</i> 91:585-98. | |
| Thur – 11/14 | Representation | E&T; Chapter 10 & 11. | |

| <i>Expressions: What Opinions Do Citizens Hold?</i> | | | |
|---|---|--|-----------------|
| Tue – 11/19 | Political Trust | E&T; Chapter 6 pp. 176-183 (Section 6-3); Mutz, Diana C., and Byron Reeves. 2005. “The New Videomalaise: Effects of Televised Incivility on Political Trust.” <i>American Political Science Review</i> 99: 1-16. | |
| Thur – 11/21 | Attitudes Toward Congress | Hibbing, John R. and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse. 1996. <i>Congress as Public Enemy: Public Attitudes Toward American Political Institutions</i> . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 5 (pp. 84-105).; Mondak, Jeffery, Edward Carmines, Robert Huckfeldt, Dona-Gene Mitchell, and Scot Schraufnagel. 2007. “Does Familiarity Breed Contempt? The Impact of Information on Mass Attitudes toward Congress.” <i>American Journal of Political Science</i> . 51(1): 34-48. | |
| Tue – 11/26 | Racial Attitudes | E&T; Chapter 6 pp. 175-176, Chapter 7 pp. 199-207. | |
| Thur – 11/28 | No Class – Happy Turkey Day! | <i>No Readings</i> | |
| Tue – 12/03 | Review for Exam III Designated time to work in your groups on the analysis paper presentations | <i>No Readings</i> | |
| Thur – 12/05 | Exam III | <i>No Readings</i> | Exam III |
| Tue – 12/10 | Analysis Paper Presentations – Analysis Papers: Due at start of class | | |
| Thur – 12/12 | Analysis Paper Presentations | | |

*Short participation tasks will be assigned in class throughout the semester.