

public opinion & political behavior

PLS 333.001
FALL 2022
BERKEY HALL 318
MW 10:20 – 11:40 A.M.

DR. JENNIFER WOLAK
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OFFICE HOURS: WEDNESDAYS 1-3 P.M.
318 SOUTH KEDZIE

This class concerns the joy and magic that is the study of 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. We will begin by thinking about how the public forms opinions about politics – what people know about politics, how they organize their beliefs, and why it matters. We will then investigate the factors in the political world that influence and shape public opinion, including self-interest, political rhetoric, and social forces. Finally, we will explore the consequences of public opinion – for citizen participation in politics, for the actions of political leaders, and for representation.

D2L is your friend

I will regularly update class information on the website for the class at d2l.msu.edu. This syllabus will be posted there, as well as links to assignments and other exciting material.

reading material

There is no textbook for this course. Instead, the readings include a set of journal articles and book chapters, which can be accessed via the course website.

expectations

You are encouraged to be an active participant in class! Please feel free to raise questions at any point during class, including matters of clarification, theoretical points, or topics to address in class discussion. You should also keep in touch by e-mail or by visiting office hours if you have any questions about course expectations or the material covered in class.

You are also expected to maintain proper classroom etiquette. This includes respecting the opinions of others even if you disagree, not talking out of turn, not distracting others in class, silencing cell phones, and not disrupting the class if arriving late.

being flexible

The assignments for this course have been designed to allow for some flexibility in case you (or others important to you) become ill or things otherwise go awry in your life. Please keep in touch through the semester if you need additional help or accommodations.

requirements

In addition to the readings, you will be responsible for the following:

PARTICIPATION, SHORT ASSIGNMENTS, AND QUIZZES *(worth 20% of your final grade)*

Throughout the semester, you can accumulate points toward this portion of your grade through attending class lectures, participating in in-class activities, taking some short quizzes, and completing homework assignments. Links to homework assignments will be posted on D2L. Details about how your participation/homework grades are calculated are described in greater detail on D2L.

TWO PAPERS *(each worth 20% of your final grade)*

You will be asked to write two essays this semester, around 1500 words each (5-6 pages double-spaced). Three paper assignments will be given over the course of the semester, and you can choose which two topics you would like to write about among the three options. Paper guidelines will be detailed in separate handouts.

TWO EXAMS *(each worth 20% of your final grade)*

There will be a midterm exam and a final exam.

special accommodations

If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, please let me know in a timely manner so that your needs may be met. You can contact the Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities for more information at www.rcpd.msu.edu.

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 refer to ombud.msu.edu/resources-self-help/academic-integrity. Academic dishonesty will result in an F in the course and possible 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).

schedule of readings and topics

WHY STUDY PUBLIC OPINION?

Wednesday, August 31 and Wednesday, September 7

Introduction to the class and the study of public opinion. Why we rely on polling to understand public opinion.

- Hillygus, Sunshine D. 2016. "The Practice of Survey Research: Changes and Challenges." In Adam J. Berinsky, ed., *New Directions in Public Opinion*. New York: Routledge.

MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION; CIVIC COMPETENCE

Monday, September 12 – Wednesday, September 14

More about polling. The role of citizens in a democracy.

- Berelson, Bernard. 1952. "Democratic Theory and Public Opinion." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 16:313-330.

WHAT PEOPLE KNOW ABOUT POLITICS

Monday, September 19 – Wednesday, September 21

How much do people know about politics? Do citizens learn what they need to know?

- Delli Carpini, Michael X. 2005. "An Overview of the State of Citizens' Knowledge about Politics." In Mitchell S. McKinney, Lynda Lee Kaid, Dianne G. Bystrom, Diana B. Carlin, eds., *Communicating Politics: Engaging the Public in Democratic Life*. New York: Peter Lang. p. 27-40.
- Lupia, Arthur. 2006. "How Elitism Undermines the Study of Voter Competence." *Critical Review* 18:217-232.

MISINFORMATION

Monday, September 26 – Wednesday, September 28

Why people believe conspiracy theories. How to correct misperceptions about politics.

- Enders, Adam M., and Joseph E. Uscinski. 2021. "Conspiracy Theories and Political Identities." In David Barker and Elizabeth Suhay, eds. *The Politics of Truth in Polarized America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nyhan, Brendan. 2020. "Facts and Myths about Misperceptions." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 34(3):220-236.

HOW PEOPLE ORGANIZE THEIR BELIEFS.

Monday, October 3 – Wednesday, October 5

How organized and coherent are people's beliefs? Partisanship and ideology.

- Kinder, Donald R., and Nathan P. Kalmoe. 2017. *Neither Liberal nor Conservative: Ideological Innocence in the American Public*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chapters 1-2.
- Hetherington, Marc. 2016. "Partisanship and Polarization in Contemporary Politics." In Adam J. Berinsky, ed., *New Directions in Public Opinion*. New York: Routledge.

PARTISANSHIP & THE ORIGINS OF ATTITUDES

Monday, October 10 – Wednesday, October 12

Party polarization in the electorate. The origins of political beliefs. The effects of political socialization.

- Klar, Samara, and Yanna Krupnikov. 2016. *Independent Politics: How American Disdain for Parties Leads to Political Inaction*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 2.
- Strother, Logan, Spencer Piston, Ezra Golberstein, Sarah E. Gollust, and Daniel Eisenberg. 2020. "College Roommates Have a Modest but Significant Influence on Each Other's Political Ideology." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118(2):1-5.

WHERE DO ATTITUDES COME FROM?

Monday, October 17

The origins of political beliefs. How personality shapes political perspectives.

- Hetherington, Marc. 2019. "Worldview Politics." In Adam J. Berinsky, ed., *New Directions in Public Opinion*. 3rd ed. New York: Routledge.

Wednesday, October 19: Midterm exam

Monday, October 24: Fall break – class does not meet.

SELF-INTEREST AND SOCIAL MOTIVES

Wednesday, October 26

The influence of social groups and the role of self-interest.

- White, Ismail K., Chryl Laird, and Troy Allen. 2014. "Selling Out? The Politics of Navigating Conflicts Between Racial Group Interest and Self-Interest." *American Political Science Review* 108(4):783-800.

GROUP INFLUENCE ON PUBLIC OPINION

Monday, October 31 – Wednesday, November 2

The role of race, gender, and place in public opinion.

- Burns, Nancy, and Donald Kinder. 2012. "Categorical Politics: Gender, Race, and Public Opinion." In Adam J. Berinsky, ed., *New Directions in Public Opinion*. New York: Routledge.
- Cramer Walsh, Katherine. 2012. "Putting Inequality in Its Place: Rural Consciousness and the Power of Perspective." *American Political Science Review* 106(3):517-532.

POLITICIANS' INFLUENCE ON PUBLIC OPINION

Monday, November 7 – Wednesday, November 9

The effects of campaigns on public preferences. Politicians' attempts to persuade.

- Sides, John, and Jake Haselswerdt. 2016. "Campaigns and Elections." In Adam J. Berinsky, ed., *New Directions in Public Opinion*. New York: Routledge.

WHAT THE PUBLIC WANTS FROM GOVERNMENT

Monday, November 14 – Wednesday, November 16

How people want government to work. Congressional approval.

- Hibbing, John R., and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse. 1995. *Congress as Public Enemy: Public Attitudes Toward American Political Institutions*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Chapters 3 and 5.

DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES AND POLITICAL TOLERANCE

Monday, November 21 – Wednesday, November 23

Support for democratic values. Why do people try to limit the rights of others?

- Carey, John, Katherine Clayton, Gretchen Helmke, Brendan Nyhan, Mitchell Sanders, and Susan Stokes. 2022. "Who Will Defend Democracy? Evaluating Tradeoffs in Candidate Support Among Partisan Donors and Voters." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 32:230-245.
- Kuklinski, James H., Ellen Riggle, Victor Ottati, Norbert Schwarz, and Robert S. Wyer, Jr. 1991. "The Cognitive and Affective Bases of Political Tolerance Judgments." *American Journal of Political Science* 35(1): 1-27.

POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Monday, November 28 – Wednesday, November 30

Why do people participate in politics? And why do some avoid politics?

- Lewis-Beck, Michael S., William G. Jacoby, Helmut Norpoth, and Herbert F. Weisberg. 2008. *The American Voter Revisited*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. Chapter 5.
- Bergan, Daniel E., Dustin Carnahan, Nazita Lajevardi, Mel Medeiros, Sarah Reckhow, and Kjerstin Thorson. 2021. "Promoting the Youth Vote: The Role of Informational Cues and Social Pressure." *Political Behavior*.

REPRESENTATION AND RESPONSIVENESS

Monday, December 5 – Wednesday, December 7

Does public opinion influence policy outcomes?

- Erikson, Robert S., and Kent L. Tedin. 2019. "Public Opinion and the Performance of Democracy." In *American Public Opinion: Its Origins, Content, and Impact*. New York: Routledge. p. 314-327.

Friday, December 16: Final exam (7:45 - 9:45 a.m.)