PLAP 2270: Public Opinion and Political Behavior
Spring 2014

Mon & Wed 10:00–10:50am
Nau Hall 101

Course web page: https://collab.itc.virginia.edu/

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S385 Gibson Hall
office hours:
Monday 12:30–2pm
& by appointment

Teaching Assistants

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This course will examine public opinion and assess its place in the American political system, and will emphasize both how citizens’ thinking about politics is shaped and the role of public opinion in political campaigns, elections, and government. While the course will focus on research on the current state of public opinion, throughout the course we will also discuss historical developments in opinion and its place in politics, including changes that arose with the development of polling and with the advent of television and other new media. We will also consider normative questions, including the role opinion should play in American democracy.

Course Requirements
Requirements for this course include:

- attendance and participation in section,
- a midterm administered on Collab,
- a comprehensive final, administered on Collab
- a series of in-section and at-home research projects as part of section
- a final reflective paper on the section research project
Grades will be based on the following breakdown:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Section participation</td>
<td>11 percent</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Midterm</td>
<td>20 percent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final</td>
<td>20 percent</td>
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<tr>
<td>In-section research mini-projects</td>
<td>39 percent</td>
<td>(13 point for each of three projects)</td>
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<td>Final reflective essay</td>
<td>10 percent</td>
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Note however, that you cannot pass the course without receiving a passing grade on each of these items individually. Thus, for example, if you do not complete part of the in-section research project, you will not pass the course no matter how well you do on the remaining items.

Readings
There is one required book for this course:


The book is scheduled to arrive at the bookstore during the week of January 13. I will post on Collab copies of the first chapter, which we read the first week. The book is, of course, also available from online retailers.

All other readings for the course are available through Collab and/or links on the syllabus.

Tests
The midterm and final will both be administered via Collab. They will be timed, closed-book, and (of course) subject to the Honor Code. The midterm will be 60 minutes long; the final will be 2.5 hours. Each test will be available through Collab for a several-day window—you must take the exam at during one sitting at a time of your choosing during that window.

The midterm and final will be multiple-choice format, and will focus on the material from reading and lecture.

Sections
The section meetings will provide the usual opportunity for you to clarify material from the course, discuss the lectures, readings, and current events. In addition, the bulk of section will be devoted to completing a series of research projects that use different methods to collect and analyze data about public opinion.

Specifically, each section will focus for the term on public opinion in an issue area of current debate in American politics. Over the course of the term you will employ a series of different research methods to explore opinion on that issue, including in-depth personal interviews, focus groups, and content analysis of media coverage.

**Attendance at your weekly section meeting is required.** This requirement is reflected, in part, in the 10% of your grade that comes from attendance and active participation in section, and the additional 39% from the in-section projects.

Sections will meet the first week.
Other Policies
We respect and uphold University policies and regulations pertaining to the observation of religious holidays; assistance available to students with physical, visual, hearing, and other disabilities or impairments; plagiarism; racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, or religious discrimination; and all forms of harassment.

If you have (or suspect you have) a learning or other disability that requires academic accommodations, you must contact the Learning Needs and Evaluation Center (http://www.virginia.edu/studenthealth/lnec.html) as soon as possible, at least two to three weeks before any assignments are due. We take learning disabilities very seriously and we will make whatever accommodations you need to be successful in this class. However, they must be properly documented by the LNEC and we must have enough notice to make appropriate arrangements.

Plagiarism, or academic theft, is passing off someone else’s words or ideas as your own without giving proper credit to the source. You are responsible for not plagiarizing and are expected to abide by the University of Virginia Honor Code (see http://www.virginia.edu/honor/what-is-academic-fraud-2/).

Assignments turned in late without prior arrangement with your TA will not be considered for a grade.
### Course Schedule and Outline

#### I. INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

**January 13:** Welcome and introduction to the course  
Berinsky, Adam. “Introduction.” Reader

#### II. MEANING AND MEASUREMENT

**January 15:** What is “public”? What is “opinion”? Does “public opinion” = “public” + “opinion”?  

**January 20:** No Class – MLK Day

**January 22, 27, and 29:** Measurement and analysis  
Asher, *Polling and the Public*, chapters 3 and 8 (“Wording and Context of Questions” and “Analyzing and Interpreting Polls”).  

#### III. DEMOCRATIC COMPETENCE

**February 3:** The public’s political information and sophistication  

**February 5:** Acceptance of democratic norms: the case of political tolerance  

**February 10:** Ideology and the organization of opinion  
IV. INDIVIDUAL OPINION

February 12: Implicit and Explicit Attitudes


February 17: Self interest

February 19: Groups I—political parties

February 24: Groups II—race and gender


February 26: Core values

March 3: Emotion

March 5: Where have we been, where are we going?
Movie in lecture: “Magic Town”

Midterm exam on Collab

March 10 & 12: No class – spring break

V. OPINION IN POLITICAL CONTEXT

March 17 & 19: John Zaller’s theory of opinion formation and expression
March 24: The media


March 26: Framing

March 31 & April 2: The media and the campaign in practice
Movie in lecture: “Journeys with George”

April 7 & April 9: Campaigns & Elections

VII. CONCLUSIONS: PUBLIC OPINION IN POLITICS

April 14: Collective opinion


April 16: Representation—how does (does?) opinion affect policy?

April 21 & 23: Campaigns & Elections II
Movie in lecture: “Street Fight”

April 28: Conclusions: Public opinion and American democracy


Final Exam will be a timed, closed-book, assessment administered through Collab. It must be completed no later than Tuesday, May 6 at noon.