Political Science 3221: Public Opinion

University of Memphis
Spring 2021
Course offered online, asynchronously

Instructor: Dr. Kris-Stella Trump
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Virtual Student Hours (aka Office Hours): Tuesdays, 2-4pm
Sign up here: [link redacted]

Course website: [link redacted]

Teaching assistant: Michelle Miller

What is this course about?

This course provides an overview of public opinion in the United States. We will explore what affects people's political opinions, how opinions change, and how opinions affect (and are affected by) politics.

Some of the questions we will discuss are: What is public opinion? How much do Americans know about politics? How do the issue positions of leading politicians affect public opinion? How do race relations affect public opinion? What role does partisanship play in all this? When and how do people change their minds about politics? How can my voice be heard in politics?

In addition to the substantive content of the course, you will learn to read various types of written sources. The reading assignments include a variety of writing types, from newspaper editorials to peer reviewed articles in scholarly journals. You will gain experience in how to read and evaluate different types of evidence and arguments.

The main assignment in this course will be a final paper or podcast (you select the format), in which you interview people about politics and analyze their perspectives using tools and concepts you learn in this class. By the end of the course, you will 1) know more about public opinion, and 2) have experience analyzing public opinion using scholarly tools.

Required materials

There is no assigned textbook for this course. The assigned readings for each week are listed below. These will be made available through a combination of electronic access through the McWherther library and the course website.

Course format

As a practical matter, in a typical week in this course you will:
- read some original academic research
- watch a "context" video on the course website
- read a "lighter" assigned reading, such as a newspaper or magazine article
- fill in a worksheet based on the academic readings
- participate in the class discussion board where you can discuss how the academic readings relate to the lighter reading that week (among other topics).

These assignments will always appear in the form of a checklist for that week in ecourseware, to make it easy to keep track of your progress.

The assignment types are described in more detail below.

Assigned materials and video

The assigned readings are listed in this syllabus, and will be made available on the course website as downloadable pdf's or as links to electronic library access to them.

Every week, the readings will be a combination of original academic research publications, and "lighter" material, such as relevant magazine articles or editorials.

Additionally, there will be "context" videos each week. These are like mini-lectures, which provide additional context and information to help you link the different readings together within and across weeks. These should be watched only *after* you have finished the readings. They will be much shorter than a typical lecture, and thus will assume you have done the readings.

Weekly worksheets – due 5pm Wednesdays

Every week, you will be assigned a worksheet based on that week's assigned academic research publications and the "context" video. You can access the worksheets on the course website starting the Friday before they are due.

The worksheets are due by 5pm on Wednesdays.

The worksheets are "open book", which means you can consult the readings while you answer them. For best success in your other assignments (discussion forums, exams, and the final project) I strongly recommend that you first read the material and make notes, and only then try to fill in the worksheet using your notes. If you need to go back to the texts to improve your answers before submitting, that is fine. Just trying to answer the questions by yourself first is a great learning tool, as it will force you to engage more actively with the material.

The worksheets are graded on a pass/fail basis. Again, they are first and foremost a tool to help you learn – putting effort into them will enable you to do well in the other parts of the course.

Weekly Discussion Boards – due 5pm Fridays

Every week, you will be asked to participate in class discussions on the online discussion forum. The discussions will include student reactions to the newspaper/magazine article assigned that week.

Discussion forum participation is due by 5pm on Fridays. You are encouraged to not leave participation to the last minute, in order to make the experience more enjoyable for everyone.

Each week, the instructors will start some discussion topics, but we expect most conversations to be started by and be carried out by the students. The instructors will answer some questions, but we encourage you to answer questions posted by other students and to try to work things out together. The forums replace in-class discussions AND study groups in a face-to-face class.

Examples of discussion topics:
- **Connecting the academic readings to the lighter reading assigned that week** – "The Gallup poll results showing that members of the public are politically polarized in their attitudes toward Coronavirus response makes so much more sense after I read the Cohen piece about elite influence on public opinion. But I still don't understand why this effect is more pronounced among well educated respondents – did someone figure that out?"
- **Connecting the academic material to news material you share yourself** – "This NYT article from yesterday discusses the voting patterns of Latino voters in Texas in the 2020 election – I think it reflects some of the points made in the academic readings on group attitudes from this week. Also, the person they interview in the second paragraph sounds *exactly* like my uncle who also lives in Texas!"
- **Clarification questions** – "On p.29 in the Kalmoe et al. academic reading this week, I don't really understand what the lines in Figure 1 illustrate. Anyone help me out?"
- **Connections between different parts of the material** – "In the Krupnikov et al reading this week, the discussion of independents reminded me of the first weeks when we read about how little Americans know about politics. Do you think that independents know more or less about politics than other Americans?"
- **Sharing notes** – "The paper with the statistical results was quite dense to get through – here are my notes for that reading if someone finds it helpful. Let me know if there are things you'd add to this!"

Each week, you can gain **up to 6 participation points**, according to the following rules:
- Starting a new topic is worth 2 points (must be a topic that does not already exist)
- One response given in an existing topic is worth 1 point
- You get up to three points for starting or participating in a topic that discusses the assigned "lighter" reading piece or other news/current events and how these connect to the class material
- You get up to three points for starting or participating in a topic that discusses the academic material only, without news
- You are very welcome to post more! Your points just max out at 6.

Discussion Forum Ground Rules

- You are welcome to use memes, jokes, images, and video links – but keep it clean and "safe for work"! You should feel comfortable explaining anything you post to your 4-year old sibling. The instructors reserve the right to remove any posts that we think violate this rule.
- You are welcome to post news articles or other sources that are related to that week's topics, but you are not required to do so. You can get full participation points if you simply read and discuss the "lighter" reading assignment for that week.
- You are encouraged to use your free UofM access to the New York Times for finding news stories that relate to that week's readings. Instructions for signing up for free access are available here: https://www.memphis.edu/libraries/resources/nyt.php.
- You are allowed to post other news sources, but they have to meet these two requirements:
  - They fall in the "most reliable for news" (green) category in this media watchdog chart
  - The article is accessible to your classmates without a paywall
- No explicitly partisan discussion. We are here to understand politics better, not to have partisan arguments. Discussion around how to achieve specific policy goals, the consequences of political actions, and how to defend a democratic political system are welcome. But no declaring one option "good" or "bad" without additional analysis. For example, "The new healthcare proposal is *$#$%$@!" is not OK. "The new healthcare proposal includes protections for the elderly but does not include provisions for uninsured college students." is OK.
- When you get to this bullet point, show that you paid attention by emailing me (ktrump@memphis.edu) your favorite gif involving a pet. Thank you!

Final assignment

The main/final assignment in this class will be a paper or podcast in which you interview people about their political opinions and analyze their opinions using the tools and concepts you learn about in this class. This assignment has two components:

- **Interview plan due April 7:** a written plan of how you will recruit your participants and what questions you will ask them.
    - **NB:** you should not contact any interviewees before you have received feedback on your interview plan from me.
- **Final paper or podcast due May 6:** a paper or podcast that analyzes the public opinion of at least two people whom you have interviewed yourself.

More detailed instructions for this assignment will be circulated separately.

Assessment

Participation

Discussion forum participation will be graded based on a points system (0-6) every week.

Worksheets are graded as pass/fail.

Take-home exams

There will be two exams in this course. Both exams are take-home, open book exams consisting of short essay questions. The second exam will be cumulative, which means it will cover all material from the course, with a focus on the second half of the course.

The exams become available on the course website at 6am on the first day of the exam, and will be due by midnight on the day the exam is due. You can complete them at any point during the time when the exam is available. The exams are designed to be completed in about two hours. I do not recommend spending more than two hours on each exam.

Course grade

Your course grade will be determined as follows:

Weekly worksheets: 20%
Weekly discussion board participation: 20%
Written interview plan: 5%
Exam 1: 15%
Exam 2: 20%
Final paper or podcast: 20%

Weekly worksheets and discussion board participation cannot be submitted late. Your lowest weekly score for each will be dropped (i.e. your best ten weeks, out of eleven, count toward the grade).

Other written assignments will drop one-third of a grade for each day they are late. No assignments will be accepted more than one week after the due date.

Letter grades will be assigned based on the following scale (%):

100-97: A+
96-93: A
92-90: A-
89-87: B+
86-83: B
82-80: B-
79-77: C+

76-73: C
72-70: C-
69-67: D+
66-63: D
62-60: D-
59-0: F

Additional policies and resources

Reading academic journal articles

Academic research can be dense to read. To make it easier, try to focus on answering the following questions:
1) What is the main argument the authors are making?
2) What evidence do the authors use to make their point?
3) How does this reading relate to the topic of class today?

Most readings make one key point and many smaller points. Learning to identify the key point of the reading is an important skill. If the reading has an abstract (short summary of the argument that appears at the beginning of the reading), the main point is summarized there. If the reading does not have an abstract, the introduction and conclusion are the best places to look for the main point. The body of the text, especially any tables or figures, is where you find the evidence the authors use to make their argument.

Disability statement

The federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) mandates that all students with disabilities be guaranteed reasonable accommodation of their disabilities in the classroom. I will gladly support all documented accommodation needs. Contact Disability Services in Wilder Tower for more information.[1]

Plagiarism and academic honesty

Plagiarism and other forms of cheating are taken very seriously and will not be tolerated.[2] Note that plagiarism is not just about using the work of others without attribution, but also includes "the reuse [within or across classes] of one's own academic work previously submitted for academic credit at any academic institution (including the University of Memphis)."[3] Additionally, please keep in mind that when you choose to directly quote course readings in your worksheets or exam answers, you should always use quotation marks and give appropriate credit by using a formal citation.

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[1] See https://www.memphis.edu/drs/

[2] See https://www.memphis.edu/osa/students/academic-misconduct.php

[3] See https://www.memphis.edu/osa/pdfs/csrr.pdf

Student (a.k.a. office) hours and communications

I hold student hours – time that is set aside for talking to students – on Tuesdays, 2pm-4pm.

To see me during student hours, please sign up for a timeslot here by 2pm on the day of the office hours. [link redacted]

If this recurring time does not work, I am always happy to meet by appointment – e-mail me to set something up.

We connect on a Zoom meeting [link redacted]. You can join with video, audio, or using a phone line.

You can also reach me via e-mail. I generally aim to respond to emails within 24 hours during the workweek.

I will periodically send communications to the class via e-mail, so please check your @memphis.edu account regularly.

Course website

This is an online course, so the course website is our "classroom". We will use the course site to access course materials, engage in discussions on the discussion board, and submit assignments. The link for the website is: [link redacted]

Course schedule and reading list

Week 01, January 19 - 22: Introduction
Overview of course content and the syllabus. We will also talk about why you will be reading original academic research in this course and how best to approach such readings.

Academic readings:

This syllabus.

Jordan, Christian H. and Mark P. Zanna. "How to read a journal article in social psychology" in R. F. Baumeister (Ed.), 1999, *The Self in Social Psychology*, pp. 461-470.

Week 02, January 25 – 29: What is public opinion and how is it measured
We will define public opinion and discuss the various ways in which it is measured. You will learn about some basics of good polling, and what to look for when evaluating how well designed a poll is.

Academic readings:

The Gallup Organization, 2007. "What Is Public Opinion Polling and Why Is It Important?" Available at: http://media.gallup.com/muslimwestfacts/pdf/pollingandhowtouseitr1dreveng.pdf

National Council on Public Polls. "20 Questions a Journalist Should Ask about Opinion Polls" Available at: http://www.ncpp.org/?q=node/4

Harel, Ofer, "What is a Margin of Error?" *The Conversation*. Available at: https://theconversation.com/what-is-a-margin-of-error-this-statistical-tool-can-help-you-understand-vaccine-trials-and-political-polling-151833

Lighter reading:

Traugott Michael, "How to know which impeachment polls to believe – and which to skip" *The Conversation,* 2019.11.14. Available at: http://theconversation.com/how-to-know-which-impeachment-polls-to-believe-and-which-to-skip-124541

Week 03, Feb 1 – 5: How well informed is public opinion? How does context influence public opinion responses on surveys?
Public opinion consists of people's opinion on matters of public concern. But how much does the public know about matters of public concern? In other words, what do Americans know about politics? What other factors influence how they give answers to polling questions?

Academic readings:

"Americans' Civics Knowledge Increases But Still Has a Long Way to Go" *Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania Report,* 2019.09.12. Available at: https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/americans-civics-knowledge-increases-2019-survey/

Iyengar, Shanto. "Framing Responsibility for Political Issues: The Case of Poverty." *Political Behavior* 12, no. 1 (1990): 19–40.

Lighter reading:

"Leading Questions". Video clip from "Yes Prime Minister". Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0ZZJXw4MTA

Week 04, Feb 8 – 12: Role of partisanship and elite cues
The concept of elite cues is introduced. What is the mental process that leads citizens to adopt the positions of their party elites? Why do the most informed people tend to be the most ideological?

Academic readings:

Cohen, Geoffrey L. "Party over Policy: The Dominating Impact of Group Influence on Political Beliefs." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 85, no. 5 (November 2003): 808–22. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.85.5.808. Read pp. 808-813 only (up to Study 3).

Kinder, Donald R. and Nathan P. Kalmoe. 2017. *Neither Liberal Nor Conservative: Ideological Innocence in the American Public*. Chicago: Chicago University Press. Chapters 1 and 2.

Lighter reading:

Newport, Frank. "The Partisan Gap in Views of the Coronavirus". *Gallup* News. May 15, 2020. Available at:
https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/311087/partisan-gap-views-coronavirus.aspx

Week 05, Feb 15 – 19: Race and ethnicity – white attitudes
Attitudes toward race and race-related issues are one of the most important factors that structure American public opinion. The readings this week discuss how race attitudes are measured and their consequences for politics.

Academic readings:

Tesler, Michael. 2016. *Post-Racial or Most-Racial? Race and Politics in the Obama Era.* Chicago: Chicago University Press. Chapter 1.

Sides, John, Lynn Vavreck and Michael Tesler. *Identity Crisis*. 2018. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Chapter 5.

Lighter reading:

Mason, Lilliana. "Both the Democrats and Republicans were once white majority parties. Now race divides them." 2019.12.02. *The Washington Post.* Available at:
https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/12/02/both-democrats-republicans-were-once-white-majority-parties-now-race-divides-them/

Week 06, Feb 22 – 26: Race and ethnicity – African American attitudes
We turn our attention to a significant minority group's public opinion. Why do African Americans vote overwhelmingly for liberal candidates even if they hold socially conservative views or earn high incomes?

Academic readings:

White, Ismail K. and Chryl Laird. 2019. *Steadfast Democrats: How Social Forces Shape Black Political Behavior.* Princeton: Princeton University Press. Introduction.

Dzotsi, Emmanuel. "The Real Enemy, Part 1" *Reply All Podcast*, December 12, 2019. Available at https://gimletmedia.com/shows/reply-all/llhd33/152-the-real-enemy-part-1

Lighter reading:

Benjamin, Andrea. "Bloomberg, Sanders, and Warren have black leaders' endorsements. Which will influence black voters?" 2020.02.25. *The Washington Post.* Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/02/25/several-black-mayors-have-endorsed-bloomberg-will-that-influence-black-voters/

Week 07, March 1 – 5: Group identities extravaganza
In addition to partisanship and race, many group memberships affect public opinion. We will consider how urban/rural divides, gender, ethnicity, and age relate to partisan coalitions.

Pick two of the following five readings/podcasts:

Income/class:
Ogorzalek, Thomas, Spencer Piston, and Luisa Godinez Puig. "Nationally Poor, Locally Rich: Income and Local Context in the 2016 Presidential Election." *Electoral Studies*, September 23, 2019, 102068. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2019.102068.

Rural/urban:
Walsh, Katherine Cramer. "Putting Inequality in Its Place: Rural Consciousness and the Power of Perspective." *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 3 (August 2012): 517–32. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055412000305.

Gender:
Gillion, Daniel Q., Jonathan M. Ladd, and Marc Meredith. "Party Polarization, Ideological Sorting and the Emergence of the US Partisan Gender Gap." *British Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 4 (October 2020): 1217–43. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123418000285.

Religion:
"Apocalypse Now", *Throughline Podcast*, June 13, 2019. Available at: https://www.npr.org/2019/06/11/731664197/apocalypse-now

Ethnicity:
"Why Latinos Moved to Trump (and Why Most Are Still Democrats)". *Science of Politics Podcast*, December 2, 2020. Available at: https://www.niskanencenter.org/why-latinos-moved-toward-trump-and-why-most-are-still-democrats/

Week 08, March 10 – 12: Take-home exam.
Take-home exam designed to last approx. 2 hours. No other readings or assignments this week.

Week 09, March 15 – 19: Polarization: Partisanship as social identity
We have learned about elite cues and their impact on public opinion. But how do Americans think about partisanship in their daily lives? What does it mean to say that partisanship functions as a "social identity"?

Academic readings:

Iyengar, Shanto, and Masha Krupenkin. "The Strengthening of Partisan Affect." *Political Psychology* 39, no. S1 (2018): 201–18. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12487.

Finkel, Eli J., Christopher A. Bail, Mina Cikara, Peter H. Ditto, Shanto Iyengar, Samara Klar, Lilliana Mason, et al. "Political Sectarianism in America." *Science* 370, no. 6516 (October 30, 2020): 533–36. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abe1715.

Lighter reading:

Lauter, David. "Democratic, Republican voter bases are more different than ever" 2018.03.20 *Los Angeles Times.* Available at:
https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-voter-groups-20180320-story.html

Week 10, March 22 – 26: Independent politics
When asked about their partisanship, a lot of Americans say they are independents. Does this mean they don't hold any partisan leanings – or that they are fed up with politics?

Academic readings:

Klar, Samara and Yanna Krupnikov, *Independent Politics*. 2016. New York: Cambridge University Press. Chapters 1, 3.

Druckman, James N, Samara Klar, Yanna Krupnikov, Matthew S. Levendusky, and John Barry Ryan. "The Illusion of Affective Polarization." Available at:
https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/documents/working-papers/2019/wp-19-25.pdf.

Lighter reading:

Americans Say Their Politics Don't Define Them. But It's Complicated. - The New York Times
https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/12/upshot/us-politics-identity.html

Week 11, March 29 – April 2: The role of the media
Given what we have learned about public opinion, how should we think about the role of the media? How does social media affect the dynamics of public opinion?

Academic readings:

Sides, John, Lynn Vavreck and Michael Tesler (2018) *Identity Crisis.* Princeton: Princeton University Press. Chapter 4.

Karpf, David. "On Digital Disinformation and Democratic Myths." *MediaWell*, Social Science Research Council, December 10, 2019. Available at: https://mediawell.ssrc.org/expert-reflections/on-digital-disinformation-and-democratic-myths/.

Lighter reading:

Election Coverage and Democracy Network. 2020. *Recommendations for Media Covering the 2020 Presidential Election.* Available at: https://mediafordemocracy.org/

Week 12, April 5 – 7: Interview plans due
No readings or other assignments this week.

Week 13, April 12 – 16: Changing minds – facts and socialization
In light of everything we have learned so far, what role can facts play in changing people's political opinions? What about everyday interactions with people who do not share our political beliefs?

Academic readings:

Nyhan, Brendan, Ethan Porter, Jason Reifler, and Thomas J. Wood. "Taking Fact-Checks Literally But Not Seriously? The Effects of Journalistic Fact-Checking on Factual Beliefs and Candidate Favorability." *Political Behavior*, January 21, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-019-09528-x.

Strother, Logan, Spencer Piston, Ezra Golberstein, Sarah E. Gollust, and Daniel Eisenberg. "College Roommates Have a Modest but Significant Influence on Each Other's Political Ideology." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, December 17, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2015514117.

Lighter reading:

Saslow, Eli. "The White Flight of Derek Black" 2016.10.15 *The Washington Post*. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/the-white-flight-of-derek-black/2016/10/15/ed5f906a-8f3b-11e6-a6a3-d50061aa9fae_story.html

Week 14, April 19 – 23: Changing minds – campaigns and elections
What, if anything, can political activists do to persuade others to see things their way?

<u>Academic readings:</u>

Kalla, Joshua L., and David E. Broockman. "The Minimal Persuasive Effects of Campaign Contact in General Elections: Evidence from 49 Field Experiments." *American Political Science Review* 112, no. 1 (2018): 148–66. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055417000363.

Broockman, David, and Joshua Kalla. "Durably Reducing Transphobia: A Field Experiment on Door-to-Door Canvassing." *Science* 352, no. 6282 (April 8, 2016): 220–24. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aad9713.

<u>Lighter reading:</u>

Hahrie Han, "When does activism become powerful?" *The New York Times* 12/16/2019. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/16/opinion/activism-power-victories.html

Week 15, Apr 26 – 27: Take-home exam
Take-home exam designed to last approx.. 2 hours. No other readings or assignments this week.

End of exam period, May 6: Final project due