P SC 3423: Public Opinion

University of Oklahoma

Spring 2011

Tuesday/Thursday, 10:30 AM - 11:45 AM, Sarkeys 207

Dr. Tyler Johnson

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Office hours: Wednesday, 2:00 PM - 4:00 PM or by appointment

Course Description

This course is an introduction to public opinion. Over the next fifteen weeks, we will examine the role public opinion plays in society, the factors that form public opinion, the movement of public opinion over time, and the impact of public opinion on both politicians and policy. We will also inquire into the process of designing, implementing, and interpreting surveys.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, students should be able to address the following topics: 1) how individuals are socialized to believe what they believe, 2) how beliefs and opinions change at multiple levels, 3) how elites like the media and politicians shape opinions, 4) how elites react electorally and legislatively to opinions, and 5) what factors separate strong survey techniques from weak ones.

Required Texts

The following texts are available at local bookstores (as well as through online sources).


Exams, Papers, and Grading

Your course grade will be calculated as follows:

Exam One 20%
Exam Two 20%
Exam Three 20%
Talking Points 20%
Participation 5%
Research Paper 15%
Attendance is not mandatory, but it is strongly advised. Ideal answers to questions on the examinations will express clear knowledge of both the assigned reading materials and the content of the lectures. In addition, class will be where I deliver important information on exams and the research paper.

Tuesday class periods will be a mix of lecture and professor-driven discussion. Thursday class periods will be devoted entirely to student-driven discussion dealing with the week’s readings and lectures. The participation portion of your course grade will be based on your level of involvement in these discussions. Students who regularly take part in the debate can expect to receive full participation credit. Note, however, that there is such a thing as “negative” participation. Do not talk just for the sake of talking; have something to say (and think it through before you choose to enter the debate). Also: remember that this is a political science course and not a “politics” course; discussion is not the time for you to get up on your ideological soapbox.

The foundation for Thursday discussions will be talking points. Talking points should be the most interesting questions, thoughts, arguments, or comments you have about the week’s material. Talking points are NOT moments for you to expound on your political views, your philosophy on the world, and so forth. Talking points should not be restatements of discussions from earlier in class. They should be submitted in the form of a sentence or short paragraph. Examples of what constitute good talking points will be shared with the class during the introductory session so students will have a better idea of what the assignment entails. To receive the maximum amount of credit for talking points, you must submit a talking point by the deadline (2:00 PM on Wednesday) in the D2L dropbox for ten of the twelve Thursday discussions. Please put some care into your talking point submission (in other words, proofread it before submitting it). Obviously, since there are approximately forty students in the class, we will not cover all talking points every week; most weeks we will cover approximately 10 points, depending on the nature of the discussion. However, submitting a talking point by the deadline (provided it is a relatively fresh idea not already addressed in the Tuesday class period) is sufficient to receive credit, regardless of whether or not your talking point is used.

There will be three examinations in this class. The exams will contain short answer and essay questions about topics from the preceding lectures. The first exam, scheduled for February 22, will cover the first five weeks of lecture content and readings. The second exam, scheduled for March 29, will cover weeks six through nine of lecture content and readings. The final exam, scheduled for May 13, will cover weeks eleven through fifteen of lecture content and readings. During the session prior to each exam, I will hold a review to answer questions and highlight what topics will be covered. Note that you are eligible to take a makeup exam only if the following conditions are met: 1) you must have a documented emergency condition or University recognized excused absence, and 2) you must make arrangements for the makeup prior to the exam or within two days of the exam (depending on your situation).

Students will also write a ten page research paper on a topic of their choosing (provided the topic can be credibly tied to an issue discussed in class). Papers are due Thursday, April 28 at 10:30 AM; I require a copy submitted in person and a copy placed in the D2L dropbox. I will only accept papers via e-mail in cases where the student has a University excused absence. Despite the fact that students will pick their own paper topics, a short description of the topic must be submitted to me by March 24 so I can advise students concerning the direction of their paper; I am only looking for one paragraph of information on what the paper will examine. Students who fail to submit a paper topic by this deadline will immediately be penalized ten percent on their paper. Also, note that even though paper topics are due at the end of March, if a student wants to write about a topic that will not be discussed in class until after topics are due, I will allow it. I will read rough drafts of papers until 48 hours before papers are due. Research papers not handed in by the deadline will lose ten percent of the potential grade for each twenty-four hour period they are late.

Final class grades will be assigned as follows:

A = 89.5-100 B = 79.5-89.4 C = 69.5-79.4 D = 59.5-69.4 F = Less Than 59.5

Questions concerning grades should be dealt with during office hours. I will not discuss grades via e-mail.

Possibilities for extra credit may occur, but are not guaranteed.
Statement about Students with Disabilities

The University of Oklahoma is committed to providing reasonable accommodation for all students with disabilities. Any student in this course who has a disability that may prevent him or her from fully demonstrating his or her abilities should contact the instructor personally as soon as possible to discuss accommodations necessary to ensure full participation and facilitate your educational opportunities. Students with disabilities must be registered with the Office of Disability Services prior to receiving accommodations in this course. The Office of Disability Services is located in Goddard Health Center, Suite 166, phone 405-325-3852 or TDD only 405-325-4173.

Statement about Religious Holidays

It is the policy of the University to excuse the absences of students that result from religious observances and to provide without penalty for the rescheduling of examinations and additional required classwork that may fall on religious holidays. Please see the instructor immediately if you will need to miss class any time during this semester.

Statement about Course Materials/Copyright and Plagiarism

The handouts used in this course are copyrighted. By “handouts,” I mean all products generated for this class, which include but are not limited to syllabi, web pages, multimedia files, presentations, quizzes, exams, written assignments, and in-class material review sheets. Because these are copyrighted, you do not have the right to copy the handouts, unless I expressly grant permission.

Academic misconduct includes plagiarism, cheating on exams, improper collaboration, and fraud (such as submitting the same assignment for different classes or fabricating sources). See http://www.ou.edu/provost/integrity for academic misconduct policies and http://www.ou.edu/provost/integrity-rights for information on student rights with regards to misconduct.

As commonly defined, plagiarism consists of passing off as one’s own the ideas, words, writings, etc., which belong to another. In accordance with the definition, you are committing plagiarism if you copy the work of another person and turn it in as your own, even if you should have the permission of the person. Plagiarism is one of the worst academic sins, for the plagiarist destroys the trust among colleagues without which research cannot be safely communicated.

Plagiarized assignments will automatically be given a zero.

Course Calendar

Please note that I reserve the right to change the following calendar in order to ensure that we spend adequate time on each topic. Of course, if such changes become necessary, I will make an announcement in class. Also, note that I reserve the right to add and subtract readings as I see fit.

Students are expected to have read the assigned readings before class.

Week 1 January 18, 20: The Role of Public Opinion

• Asher, ch. 1
• CkcO, ch. 1
Week 2  January 25, 27: Survey Design and Interpretation, Part 1

- Asher, ch. 3-4
- Talking Points Due 2:00 PM Wednesday

Week 3  February 1, 3: Survey Design and Interpretation, Part 2

- Asher, ch. 5, 8
- Talking Points Due 2:00 PM Wednesday

Week 4  February 8, 10: Attitude Formation

- C&O, ch. 2
- Talking Points Due 2:00 PM Wednesday

Week 5  February 15, 17: Media Influence

- Asher, ch. 6
- C&O, ch. 3
- Talking Points Due 2:00 PM Wednesday
- Exam Review February 17

Week 6  February 22, 24: Ideology and Pluralism

- First Exam February 22
- C&O, ch. 5-6

Week 7  March 1, 3: Knowledge, Interest, and Attention

- C&O, ch. 7
- Talking Points Due 2:00 PM Wednesday

Week 8  March 8, 10: Attitude Stability and Change

- C&O, ch. 4
- Talking Points Due 2:00 PM Wednesday

Week 9  March 22, 24: Opinion Dynamics and Trends

- Asher, ch. 2
- Talking Points Due 2:00 PM Wednesday
- Paper Topic Due 10:30 AM March 24
- Exam Review March 24
Week 10  March 29 (No Class March 31): Exam

• Second Exam March 29

Week 11  April 5, 7: Trust, Support, and Social Capital

• C&O, ch. 10
• Talking Points Due 2:00 PM Wednesday

Week 12  April 12, 14: Opinion and Elections

• Asher, ch. 7
• Talking Points Due 2:00 PM Wednesday

Week 13  April 19, 21: Rights, Liberties, Groups

• C&O, ch. 8-9
• Talking Points Due 2:00 PM Wednesday

Week 14  April 26, 28: Impact on Policy and Representation

• C&O, ch. 11
• Talking Points Due 2:00 PM Wednesday
• Research Paper Due 10:30 AM April 28

Week 15  May 3, 5: Polling and Democracy

• Asher, ch. 9
• C&O, ch. 12
• Talking Points Due 2:00 PM Wednesday
• Exam Review May 5

Final Exam: Friday, May 13, 8:00 AM - 10:00 AM