PUBLIC OPINION, VOTING, AND ELECTIONS

COURSE OUTLINE AND READINGS:

The class will include considerable class discussion as well as lectures. There will be frequent short assignments, a midterm, and a comprehensive final exam. Class attendance is expected, and grades will reflect attendance and participation.

OFFICE HOURS: Thu, 2:00-3:00, Friday 11:00-12:00; and most other times, 8am-4:30pm

TEXTS:


Additional readings are available on electronic reserve (via the syllabus on Blackboard).

ASSIGNMENTS:

All assignments should be typed, double-spaced, and 3-4 pages long (1 inch margins, 12 pt font) unless otherwise noted. Because there is flexibility built into the system by virtue of group assignments, late work will be accepted only under rare circumstances. Note that it is possible that changes will occur in the schedule. If you miss a class, it is your responsibility to find out what the assignment is for the next class period.

Students will be divided into pairs—according to their own preferences insofar as possible. Most assignments will be done by pairs rather than individually.

GRADING:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Points</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assignments</td>
<td>90 points</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class discussion</td>
<td>10 points</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exams</td>
<td>160 points</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>260 points</td>
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Note: Failure to hand in multiple assignments or to take any of the exams on time (without prior arrangements) may be interpreted as your not having completed the course.

SCHEDULE OF CLASSES:

Aug. 30-Sept. 18 Public Opinion Polling
30  No class (Most political scientists will be in New Orleans for our annual convention)
  4  Getting organized; nonrandom sampling
  6  Random sampling
     Reading: Asher, ch. 3-5
 11  Internet surveys; practical matters in sample design/execution
     Reading: Asher, ch. 7-8
 13  Designing questions for surveys; interviewing effects; your questions on polling.
     Assignment (small): Hand in one or more questions about polling. This assignment will not be graded, but it will count against your “discussion” grade if you fail to hand in a question.
 18  Public opinion and policy
     Assignment 1: Read handout on gun control. Report in class on your interpretation of public opinion on gun control and how legislators should respond to it (in addition to a written report).

Sept. 20-25 People=s Knowledge of Politics
 20  Public knowledge
     Reading: Erikson & Tedin, ch. 3
 25  More on knowledge levels, measuring knowledge
     Reading: Niemi & Weisberg, *Controversies in Voting Behavior*, pp. 100-13
     Assignment 2: Evaluate NAEP public items and survey test items. Do they constitute adequate tests? Assuming you were to add something, what would it be? Think broadly about the topics covered and about the response formats that are used. However, you may also suggest specific questions that you think should be added.

Sept 27-Oct. 16 Issues and Issue Voting
 27  Meaningfulness of public opinion
     Reading: Erikson & Tedin, ch. 7
     Dalton, pp. 20-39 & ch. 6
  2  More on meaningfulness
     Reading: Dalton, ch. 7
     Assignment 3: Political scientists have long emphasized citizens’ lack of knowledge about issues in general and about candidates’ issue positions. As a consequence, citizens use short-cuts (party identification, individual and group endorsements, personal characteristics, etc.) to make decisions about candidates. However, primary elections are something of a problem—as party is the same for all candidates. In the 2012 presidential primaries, what short-cuts do you think voters will use? Will these short-cuts provide good information about the candidates (meaning useful in distinguishing between candidates and reasonably correct guides to candidates’ issue positions)? Do you think any of these short-cuts are poor (misleading or not useful)?
Does lack of issue knowledge matter?
Reading: Erikson & Tedin, ch. 4

No class (Fall break)

Elites and issue positions
Reading: “The Content of U.S. House Member Web Sites”
Assignment 4: Examine state legislators’ web sites. Evaluate the sites, where the basic question is whether (and how easily and thoroughly) voters might find enough information about legislators’ issue positions to help them decide how to cast their ballots.

Attitudes over time
Assignment 5: Take an issue (e.g., capital punishment, abortion, race, gay marriage, international involvement). Find public opinion data showing trends over time and analyze them. How has opinion changed? Has it changed in some sensible fashion, or randomly? Can you identify any events/actions/movements that appear to have led to changes?

OR
Take a policy issue. Find survey data showing multiple questions about the same topic (e.g., not simply one question such as should immigration be increased, but perhaps that plus a question about whether immigration is a good thing for the country and a question about whether immigration contributes to increased crime). Interpret the data from these multiple questions, trying to answer the question “what do Americans think about the topic”?

In class: I will hand out a figure showing the relationship in 1952 between media usage and attitude stability along with a political scientist=s highly creative and provocative interpretation of what that relationship tells us about politics in the 19th century. We will talk about whether history bears out that interpretation.

Oct. 18 Midterm Exam

Oct. 23 Minority Attitudes
Skim recent polling data on race and ethnicity at [http://www.pollingreport.com/race.htm](http://www.pollingreport.com/race.htm). Where available, look particularly at separate responses from blacks and whites or blacks, whites, and Hispanics.
Assignment (small): In the pollingreport.com data, what one or two results did you find most interesting/surprising/significant? Why? Cite the specific result (perhaps copy the question, though results in tabular form won’t copy very well) and write a few sentences about why this result is meaningful. This assignment will not be graded, but it will count against your “discussion” grade if you fail to hand in a question.

Oct. 25 Political Rights/Tolerance
Reading: Erikson & Tedin, pp. 161-80
Oct 30-Nov. 1 Mass Media

30 Character of the media, past and present
   Reading: Erikson & Tedin, ch. 8

1 Media influence
   Reading: Wayne, “News Media: Watchdog or Pit Bull?”
   Assignment 6: Analyze three or more of: cbsnews.com; msnbc.msn.com; abcnews.com; foxnews.com; cnn.com. First, evaluate the layout and overall content of the web sites—i.e., their user-friendliness, their coverage of various aspects of the news (e.g., U.S. and foreign), and so on. Second, take three (or more) stories that are covered by all sources; compare coverage of these stories across each of the web sites. Is coverage better on a certain site or sites? Consistently? Is there any bias in the reporting? What direction is the bias? Is the bias consistent across stories? Print out the stories that you compare and hand them in along with your report.

OR

Find, report, and interpret poll data about international affairs that supports or contradicts one or more of Mueller’s propositions about public opinion on international politics. This might consist of new data, as Mueller wrote his propositions in 2001. It might consist of over-time data. Or it might consist of data showing multiple questions about the same topic. (Be careful about finding a single poll and making a great deal of it. For example, one poll showing that Americans are paying attention to the War in Afghanistan does not by itself invalidate Proposition 1.)

Nov. 6-8 Parties and Partisanship

6 Partisanship, past and present
   Reading: Abramowitz, chs. 1-3

8 Party system changes
   Reading: Abramowitz, chs. 4-6

Nov. 13-27 Political Participation; Social Capital

13 Voter turnout
   Reading: Wattenberg, pp. 9-126, 161-66
   Assignment 7: Use IDEA project data: http://www.idea.int/vt/index.cfm. Compare three (or more) specific countries. How do they differ in their turnout statistics? Is the difference consistent over time? What does that suggest to you? Why do the countries differ in their turnout levels? Is turnout declining in these countries more or less than elsewhere?

15 Other forms of participation; stratification of participation
   Reading: Wattenberg, pp. 175-95
   Schlozman, et al., The Unheavenly Chorus, ch. 6.

20 Social capital
Reading: Hibbing, “The People’s Craving for Unselfish Government,” in Norrander & Wilcox, Understanding Public Opinion

27 Origins and development of opinions; generations
Reading: Erikson & Tedin, ch. 5
Dalton, ch. 1, pp. 39-52, ch. 4
Assignment 8: Wattenberg and Putnam, on the one hand, and Dalton, on the other, have very different ideas about political participation and how it has changed over the past generation. Summarize their arguments very briefly. Then evaluate them, framing your evaluation in terms of the following questions: Are people in the past decade or two less participatory? Are young people, in particular, not participating? Cite evidence from the readings (or elsewhere) as appropriate. Are the changes you note detrimental to American democracy? Why or why not?

Nov. 29-Dec. 4 Responding to the New Reality: More, Better Civic Education?
Institutional Reforms?
Reading: Levine, The Future of Democracy, ch. 7
Assignment 9: Analyze one of the election reforms noted below. Description of the reform itself should be brief. The main part of the report should be a critique of it. What are its good points? Its drawbacks? You must include your own view on the matter. Should a change be made? Why or why not? Also, indicate to what degree this reform will have an effect on public opinion about elected officials and the political system.
Instant run-off (http://www.fairvote.org)
Electoral College—congressional district method or proportional allocation method only (Donovan & Bowler, Reforming the Republic, ch. 5, on reserve)
Initiatives, recall (Donovan & Bowler, Reforming the Republic, ch. 7); http://www.iandrinstitute.org
Deliberative polls (http://bostonreview.net/BR31.2/fishkin.html)
The citations above provide minimal sources. There are numerous web sites that deal with these issues.

Dec. 6 SWB: Happiness Surveys
Reading: http://pewresearch.org/assets/social/pdf/AreWeHappyYet.pdf
Lane, The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies, pp. 333-37

Dec. 11 Review for Final Exam
Important web sites:
http://www.vote-smart.org
www.ifes.org
http://www.electionstudies.org
http://www.norc.uchicago.edu/GSS+Website
http://www.idea.int/elections/
http://pollingreport.com/
www.pewglobal.org
ADDITIONAL INSTRUCTIONS FOR RESEARCH PAPERS (for students in PSC211W)

Papers must be 3,500 words or more (10-15 pages). Please double-space and, for the final copy, print only on one side of the page. You are not only allowed to but are encouraged to talk with others about your ideas. However, papers are to be written individually; in the end, the paper must be your work, not the work of others.

Papers must be on some aspect(s) of voting system reform in the U.S.—voter registration (identification requirements, registration rights of ex-felons or of college students), when and how voting occurs (early voting, absentee voting, vote by mail), voting equipment (electronic voting systems, internet voting), and so on. There is presently a great deal of writing about these topics, most of it in reaction to the 2000 election and the subsequent Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA).

The paper must draw on multiple sources; this cannot be a report of a single book or other source. The paper should be divided into sections, with relevant and meaningful headings for each section (except the first, which is an introduction). As the topic is about reform, your paper should not only summarize arguments and evidence about the topic you choose; it should also include your evaluation/opinion about what reforms, if any, federal and state governments should adopt.

It may also be possible for someone to do original research on the topic of ease of registration or ID requirements (websites; colleges). If interested, you must see Prof. Niemi early in the semester. (As a reminder to myself, go to my file “Annotated Bibliography on Voting Administration 2009” and search for “Being online” and the next entry.)

Grades: The grade for the paper will be an “add-on,” so that for students in PSC211W, grading will be as follows:

| Assignments | 90 points (10 points each) |
| Class discussion | 10 points |
| Exams | 160 points (80 points each) |
| Paper | 80 points |
| Total | 340 points |

Schedule (“on or before” applies to all dates):

Sept. 27 Pick a tentative topic and begin your reading by this date. Since the topics are pretty narrowly defined, you do not have to get approval from me. However, consult with me early if you are having trouble deciding on a topic. Be careful about picking too narrow a topic; for example, I think the issue of voting rights for ex-felons is largely (though not entirely) resolved. Note: There is nothing to hand in on this date, but if you don’t have a topic and begin reading now, you may have trouble with the Oct. 11 assignment.

Oct. 11 Hand in a statement of your topic and a list of sources you will use. Note which ones you have already read. Use the bibliographic style used to list the sources at the end of this
syllabus. Hand-ins should be a hard copy, in class.

Nov. 8 Hand in first, partial draft. I strongly suggest handing in only a page or two. If you are making fast progress, hand in a short, first draft early. I will provide feedback on this draft that will likely apply to the rest of your paper.

Nov. 20 Hand in a second draft of the original material, plus an additional few pages. I will provide further feedback.

Dec. 11 Hand in the final paper.

Be sure to accurately cite and document all of your work. Plagiarism is a serious offense and will be reported to the College if it is deemed intentional. The first step in avoiding plagiarism is to carefully document your sources. If you provide a statistic or analysis that is not your own, cite the source. This is a research paper, so it is expected that you will be citing a significant portion of the material that appears in the paper. If you have doubts about whether to cite a piece of information, ask me.

Sources (partial list) (books are on reserve; some are also available in e-form—check Voyager):


Significant journal: Election Law Journal

Important websites:
www.electionline.org (Up-to-date information; on various reforms)
www.verifiedvoting.org (Note that this source has a particular point of view)
www.sentencingproject.org/template/page.cfm?id=133 (On felon disfranchisement)
www.vote.caltech.edu (On various reforms)