

Department of Political Science
POSC 146: Mass Media and Public Opinion

Contact Information

Course Instructor: Professor Jennifer Merolla

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Office hours: Tuesdays, 1:00-2:00, Thursdays 9:30 to 10:30

Course Schedule

Quarter: Winter 2020

Meeting day, time: TTh, 11:00-12:20

Course Location: INTN 1002

Course Description

This course is concerned with understanding what public opinion is, how one measures it, and the forces that influence it, in particular the media. In the first part of the course, we deal with questions of what public opinion is and the broad forces that influence public opinion. In the second section of the course, we will focus on how to measure opinions through polls, how to analyze polls, and how the media presents polls to the public. In the final part of the course, we will focus more in depth on the ways in which the mass media covers issues and influences public opinion.

The primary goal of the course is to help you gain an understanding of how the public forms opinions on matters of politics and what this means for the quality of democracy in the U.S. political system. Another goal is to provide a lens into how the media influences the opinions the public holds. Finally, the course aims to provide practical skills in writing, survey design, and the analysis of media coverage and public opinion data.

Background Preparations (Prerequisites)

There are no prerequisites for this course.

Course Learning Outcomes:

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. Understand what public opinion is and what it means for American democracy
2. Understand how to measure public opinion through modern polling
3. Discuss the forces that shape public opinion, especially the media
4. Examine public opinion in different policy areas
5. Construct a public opinion survey
6. Learn how to conduct a basic content analysis of media coverage
7. Refine communication skills in seminar participation and assignments
8. Improve writing skills in course assignments, including writing an op-ed or blog post.

Course Requirements & Assignments:

Short Quizzes: 10%

You are expected to attend class and do the readings prior to attending lecture. There will be pop quizzes spread throughout the quarter on TopHat to assess both attendance and knowledge of course readings.

Participation: 5%

We break up into small groups at various points in class to discuss topics, so attendance and engagement in discussion is an important part of class. This will primarily be accessed through TopHat.

Op-ed: 10%

You will work on an opinion editorial piece (between 800-1200 words) on a topic related to any political issue you care about.

Group Project and Presentation: 15%

You will work with a team of students (five per group) to examine the way in which two media outlets present public opinion polls on an issue of your choosing. You will submit a two to three page write up of your analysis and send it electronically (merolla@ucr.edu) and through Safe Assignment. You will also present your project to the class. We will begin the group presentations the day the assignment is due and they will run for a few weeks. Details on the assignment will be posted on i-Learn and will be reviewed in lecture. Late assignments are subject to one-third grade decrement for each *day* they are late.

Content Analysis Paper: 20%

You will write a four to five page (double-spaced) paper in which you look at the way in which the media covers a policy issue or political figure of your choosing. Details on the assignment will be posted on i-Learn. An electronic copy must be simultaneously submitted through Safe Assignment as well. Late papers are subject to one-third grade decrement for each *day* they are late.

Midterm and Final Exam (20% each):

Each exam will consist of identification, multiple choice, and short answer/essay questions based off of readings and lecture. The mid-term will focus on the first half of the course, while the final will focus on the second half. The final exam is NOT cumulative. The midterm will be in class, while the final exam will take place during the designated final exam schedule.

All course assignments are due on the date assigned. No extensions, make-up exams, or incompletes will be given without prior approval. All course requirements must be completed in order to pass this course.

Important Dates

Midterm exam: February 6th

Op-ed Assignment: February 13th

Group Project: February 25th

Paper Due: March 10th

Final Exam: March 20th

Blackboard (iLearn)

All assignments will be available on Blackboard (<http://ilearn.ucr.edu>). I will also post announcements. If you need help accessing Blackboard, consult the Computing and Communications website: http://www.cnc.ucr.edu/index.php?content=blackboard_help

Class Cancellation

In the event a class is canceled (due to natural disaster, instructor illness, etc.) you are still responsible for having done the work assigned on this syllabus by its due date.

Office Hours

I am available to meet with you in my office during office hours. If you cannot make the scheduled times, we can schedule an appointment.

Attendance

Students are expected to attend all classes. If a student has to miss a class, he or she should arrange to get notes from a fellow student.

Scientific and Professional Ethics

The work you do in this course must be your own. Feel free to build on, react to, criticize, and analyze the ideas of others but, when you do, make it known whose ideas you are working with. You must explicitly acknowledge when your work builds on someone else's ideas, including ideas of classmates, professors, and authors you read. If you ever have questions about drawing the line between others' work and your own, ask the course professor who will give you guidance. **Plagiarism Policy: Academic dishonesty is not tolerated. Students engaged in any form of academic dishonesty will both receive an 'F' in the course and be reported to the Office of Student Conduct and Academic Integrity.**

Instructor Feedback and Communication

The best way to get in touch with me is via email. If you do not hear from me in three business days, please re-send your message as it may have gone to spam.

Expectations and Logistics

The class format is a lecture, but I will ask for your participation and we will break up into discussion groups regularly. It is expected that you will have completed and thought about the reading before attending class. It is incumbent on every participant in the class (instructor and students alike) to maintain an environment conducive to learning. We should always remember that people bring differences with them into the classroom and that these differences should be respected. It is imperative that each of us maintain civility and professionalism when asking questions and making comments.

Please respect your fellow classmates—be on time, don't be disruptive, silence your cell phones, and really listen to them when they participate.

Any student with a documented disability (physical, learning, or psychological) needing academic accommodations should speak with me in the first few weeks of the course so we can make proper arrangements for course assignments.

Texts and Journal References

The following books are available in the Huntley bookstore.

Clawson, Rosalee A. and Zoe M. Oxley. 2016. *Public Opinion: Democratic Ideals, Democratic Practice, 3rd Edition*. CQ Press: Washington, D.C.

**Note: The paperback version is not cheap, so you may want to get the e-book or a used copy.

Asher, Herbert. 2016. *Polling and the Public*, 9th Edition. CQ Press: Washington, D.C.

**Note: There is also an ebook that is cheaper. There is also an option to rent this book at a lower cost on Amazon.

Journal articles and other book chapters are listed in the list of weekly readings section. I will post these readings to iLearn.

You will also have to purchase TopHat if you do not already have the application (you should have received an email already about this-see details below).

Top Hat

We will be using the Top Hat (www.tophat.com) classroom response system in class. You will be able to submit answers to in-class questions using Apple or Android smartphones and tablets, laptops, or through text message.

You can visit the Top Hat Overview (<https://success.tophat.com/s/article/Student-Top-Hat-Overview-and-Getting-Started-Guide>) within the Top Hat Success Center which outlines how you will register for a Top Hat account, as well as providing a brief overview to get you up and running on the system.

An email invitation will be sent to you by email, but if don't receive this email, you can register by simply visiting our course website: <https://app.tophat.com/e/826332>

Note: our Course Join Code is 826332

Top Hat may require a paid subscription, and a full breakdown of all subscription options available can be found here: www.tophat.com/pricing.

Should you require assistance with Top Hat at any time, due to the fact that they require specific user information to troubleshoot these issues, please contact their Support Team directly by way of email (support@tophat.com), the in app support button, or by calling 1-888-663-5491.

List of Weekly Readings

Part I: Conceptualizing Public Opinion

January 7th: Organizational Meeting/Views of Public Opinion
Clawson and Oxley, Chapter 1

January 9st: Is public opinion stable or variable?

Clawson and Oxley, Chapters 2 and 3
Recommended: Graber and Dunaway, Chapter 4 (iLearn)

January 14th: How Do People Think about Politics?
Clawson and Oxley, Chapters 4

January 16th: Long term influences on Public Opinion: Partisanship and Values
Clawson and Oxley, Chapter 5
Levendusky, Matthew. *The Partisan Sort: How Liberals Became Democrat and Conservatives Became Republican*, Chapters 1 and 2 (iLearn)

January 21st: How much do People know about politics?
Clawson and Oxley, Chapter 8
Delli Carpini and Keeter, Chapter 2 (iLearn)

January 23rd: Misinformation and Politics
Nyhan, Brendan and Jason Reifler. 2010. "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions." *Political Behavior* 32: 303-330.
Miller, Joanne M., Kyle L. Saunders, and Christina E. Farhart. 2015. "Conspiracy Endorsement as Motivated Reasoning: The Moderating Roles of Political Knowledge and Trust." *American Journal of Political Science* 60(4): 824-844.

January 28th: Models of Opinion Formation
Zaller, Chapters 2 and 3 (iLearn)

Recommended

Lodge, Milton, Marco R. Steenbergen, Shawn Brau. 1995. "The Responsive Voter: Campaign Information and the Dynamics of Candidate Evaluation." *The American Political Science Review* 89(2): 309-326.

January 30th: Shaping Public Opinion: Op-eds and Blog Posts
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/25/opinion/tips-for-aspiring-op-ed-writers.html>

Blog Posts and Op-eds TBD

Part II. Measuring Public Opinion

February 4th: Polling the Public
Asher, Chapters 1 and 2

February 6th: Midterm Exam

February 11th: Question Wording and Sampling
Asher, Chapters 3 and 4

February 13th: Conducting Surveys and Use of Polls in the Media
Asher, Chapters 5 and 6, (recommended 7)
Blog Post/Op-ed Assignment Due

February 18th: Analysis of Public Opinion, Group project
Kellstedt and Whitten, Chapter 6 (recommended 8-iLearn)

February 20th: Analysis of Public Opinion, Group project

Part III: The Media and Public Opinion

February 25th: Agenda Setting

Boydston, Amber. 2013. *Making the News: Politics, the Media and Agenda Setting*. Chapters 1 and 4. (iLearn)

Group Project Due

February 27th: Media Frames and Policy Attitudes

Druckman, James N. 2001. "On the Limits of Framing Effects: Who Can Frame?" *The Journal of Politics* 63 (4): 1041-1066

Merolla, Jennifer, S. Karthick Ramakrishnan and Chris Haynes. 2016. *Framing Immigrants: Media Coverage, Public Opinion and Policy*. Chapters 1 and 4 (iLearn)

March 3rd: Content Analysis Methods

Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, Chapter 1 and 2

March 5th: Media Images and Policy Attitudes

Soroka, Stuart, Peter Loewen, Daniel Rubenson, and Patrick Fournier. 2016. "The Impact of News Photos on Support for Military Action," *Political Communication* 33(4): 563-582.

Farris, Emily and Heather Silber Mohamed. 2018. "Picturing Immigrants: How the Media criminalizes immigrants." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 6(4): 814-824.

March 10th: The New Media Environment and its Effects

Arceneaux and Johnson, Chapters 1-3

Paper Due

March 12th: Incivility, Negativity and Bias in the Media

Graber and Dunaway, Chapter 13 (iLearn)

March 20th: Final Exam 8:00 to 11:00 a.m.