POLI 736
Public Opinion and Political Attitudes

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Office Hours: 2:30-3:30 MW
and by appointment

Seminar Meetings:
Wednesdays, 4:00 – 6:30 PM,
WMBB 132

Seminar Description:

In a representative democracy, few concerns are as vital as the quality and influence of public opinion. Representative democracies rest on the concept of the consent of the governed. For many in the modern survey era, this has come to mean that citizens have some influence on public policy not only through the act of voting every two or four years, but also by registering their approval (or disapproval) of policies and elites between elections. Not surprisingly, evidence indicates that political elites spend a great deal of time, effort, and money monitoring public opinion and studies have found that public opinion exerts influence on subsequent policymaking.

In this seminar, we will examine how citizens process information and form political opinions. We will begin the semester by examining classic debates regarding economic and psychological conceptions of decision making and citizens’ capacity for effective political decision making. We will next spend several weeks examining the factors that shape the quality of citizens’ political decision making. In the following weeks, we will turn our focus to the roles of emotion, values, and tolerance in opinion formation. We will next examine how citizens’ interactions with each other, the media, and the government impact opinion formation. We conclude the semester by turning our attention to the macro level, examining the factors that shape and move aggregate opinion as well as the question of whether the process of aggregation can overcome any limitations in micro-level decision making.

Course Objectives:

By the end of the course, students will be able to identify the central themes, subjects, and debates in the public opinion literature. Students will be able to analyze and critically synthesize the literature on public opinion. Students will also have developed skills to pursue original research in the field of public opinion.
Course Requirements:

Grades in the seminar will be based on the following three items:

1) Class participation 20%
2) Analytical Papers 40%
3) Seminar Paper 40%

Class Participation:
Students are expected to read and critically analyze the required readings prior to each seminar meeting and to come to seminar meetings prepared to discuss the readings. Students should identify areas of synthesis in the week’s readings (and with those in previous weeks) and points of disagreement. Students should also critically consider and identify limitations in the theoretical and analytical components of the readings.

To foster seminar discussion, all students will be required to prepare five discussion questions for each seminar meeting to guide the discussions. I will call on students to present these questions for discussion at the seminar meetings.

Analytical Papers:
In addition to the preparation of discussion questions for each seminar meeting, students will also write two five page analytical papers during the semester. These analytical papers will critically analyze and synthesize the week’s required readings. The papers, in short, should not review the readings. Instead, they should provide a critical evaluation of the readings along theoretical and analytical dimensions and discuss areas of agreement and disagreement among the week’s readings. The papers are due to me and the other seminar participants by 10 a.m. the day of the seminar meeting (no exceptions). Each analytical paper will be worth 20% of the course grade.

Seminar Paper:
Students will write an original research paper during the semester. In this paper, students will conduct original research to test one or more hypotheses regarding public opinion. Students should select a topic of interest to them and can write on any topic for which they receive the instructor’s approval. Students should be able to turn this paper into a subsequent conference paper and, hopefully, a published article. The paper will be due by 4:00 p.m. on April 29th (no exceptions).

Required and Recommended Books:

Several books are required for the course and two additional books are recommended. All should be available at the local bookstores.

The required books are:


The recommended books are:


**Week 1: Economic and Psychological Perspectives on Decision Making**

*Required:*


**Recommended:**


**Week 2: Political Belief Systems and Citizen Competence**

**Required:**


Recommended:


Week 3: Political Information and Misinformation

Required:


Recommended:


**Week 4: Information, Heuristics, and Decision Making**

Required:


Recommended:


**Week 5: Perspectives on Citizen Competence**

*Required:*


*Recommended:*


Week 6: Theories of Information Processing

Required:


Recommended:


Week 7: Affect and Political Decision Making

Required:


Recommended:


**Week 8: Values, Value Conflict, and Attitudinal Ambivalence**

*Required:*


**Recommended:**


**Week 9: Race, Ethnicity, and Political Tolerance**

**Required:**


**Recommended:**


**Week 10: Social Interactions and Political Decision Making**

**Required:**


Recommended:


Week 11: The Media and Public Opinion

Required:


Recommended:


**Week 12: Political Trust**

**Required:**


**Recommended:**


**Week 13: Macro Politics I**

**Required:**


Recommended:


**Week 14: Macro Politics II**

**Required:**


**Recommended:**

