

POLS 4510-64821  
Public Opinion and American Democracy  
MWF 3:00-3:50PM  
Classroom- Baldwin 102  
Spring 2025  
Instructor- Dr. Colin French  
Office- Baldwin Hall 378  
Office Hours- T/TH 2:15-4PM or by appointment

## Course Description

One of the fundamental tenets of Democracy as a form of government is that in order for it to function properly, the public must at least have a very basic understanding of politics and political issues. Decades of in depth scholarship have repeatedly shown that the American public struggles with even the simplest concepts, and lacks even the most fundamental political knowledge needed to meaningfully participate in voting and democracy. Is this situation rectifiable? In this course, we will draw extensively from literature both in political science and economics to try to understand trends in public opinion why and where the public lacks knowledge, and consider the implications of a poorly educated public for democratic performance and responsiveness.

By the end of the course you should have a grasp of the following concepts:

1. Aggregate level changes in public opinion over American history
2. Theories of public opinion, including public ignorance, the miracle of aggregation, rational choice, and the free rider problem
3. Different ways to measure public opinion, from open-ended responses to likert scales
4. Will be able to design their own surveys for research (as well as personal interest)

## Books

Rather than a required textbook for this class, **I will be uploading readings to ELC in weekly 'modules.'** **These will be available late in the preceding week.** There will be a number of articles, many of which are scientific and written at a complicated level, so if you have any difficulty understanding the writing at any point, remember that coming to class is one of the best ways to help synthesize the materials.

I will also be including excerpts from major works of political science, but these will be uploaded to ELC as well to reduce the amounts students have to spend out of pocket.

## Assignments

Participation- 20% (Semester-long)  
Weekly Quizzes (Fridays)- 30% (12 quizzes, lower 2 grades dropped)  
Group Research Project- 40% (May 10<sup>th</sup>)

Research Presentation- 10% (In-Class Date)

## **Grading**

At the end of the semester, your grade will be assigned based on the following scale:

A (94-100), A- (90-93), B+ (87-89), B (83-86), B- (80-82), C+ (77-79), C (73-76), C- (70-72), D (60-69), and F (0-59). (Note that there are no +/- grades in the D or F range.)

## **Course Schedule**

### **Week 1- The Basics**

1/6 : Syllabus & Class Policies

1/8: Does the American Public know enough to “Vote with intelligence?”

1/10: Ideology, & Is the American Public Ideological?

Reading- Converse

### **Week 2- Tools of Research & Models of Opinion Formation**

1/13: Tools of measuring attitudes: Surveys, Interviews, Experiments

1/15: : Zaller- the Nature and Origin of Mass Opinion

1/17: Political Ignorance and Heuristics, “Pictures in our heads”

### **Week 3- Party ID as an “Unmoved Mover”**

*Monday 1/20- MLK Day (No Class)*

1/22: Do we choose our parties based on our views, or vice versa?

1/24: Party ID and social identity. Prius or Pickup

### **Week 4- Social Pressure & Influence in Political Attitudes**

1/27: Family partisanship and youth political attitudes, regional partisanship

1/29: Childhood values and left-right orientation

1/31: The political influence of peer groups, and the slow death of cross-cutting political exposure

### **Week 5- Problems in survey work: Are we getting real attitudes?**

2/3 & 2/5 : Problems with public opinion measurement- Issue salience, expressive answers, question order effects, Social desirability bias & framing

2/7 : Researcher Reputation, Polling nonresponders.

<https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/nonresponse-bias-ipsos-poll-findings/>

## **Week 6- Demographic Differences**

2/10: The Gender Gap in Public Opinion- Historical & Modern Theories  
2/12: The Age gap- why does age beget conservatism?  
2/14: The partisan education realignment- 2012-2024

## **Week 7- Special Topics in Public Opinion**

2/17: American Public Opinion on foreign policy & alliance commitment in war  
2/19: COVID-19 Elite-Public relations  
2/21: Election skepticism and support for democracy

## **Week 8- Institutional Effects on Public Opinion**

2/24: Comparative public opinion (US vs other modern democracies)  
2/26: The effect of the two-party system on US public opinion  
2/28: Why there is no popular socialist movement in the United States

*March 2<sup>nd</sup> to March 8<sup>th</sup>- Spring Break (No Class)*

## **Week 10- Media Effects & Changing Media Landscape**

3/10: Media I – Basic Media Effects  
3/12: Media II – Issue Coverage, alternative media  
3/14: Modern Media- Echo Chambers & Propaganda

## **Week 11- Misinformation and Misperceptions**

3/17: The “Birther” movement and the scope of misperceptions in the public  
3/19: “Rational Irrationality” and the appeal of false information  
3/21: The effects of widespread misinformation on democratic performance

## **Week 12- Changing and Updating Views**

3/24: Aggregate opinion- Page & Shapiro’s The Rational Public  
3/26: Project workshop day 1  
3/28: “New” issues for public opinion: before elites draw battle lines

## **Week 13- Polarization**

3/31: Polarization 1  
4/2: Polarization 2  
4/4: Project workshop day 2  
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## **Week 14- Special Topics**

4/7: Attitudes on Immigration  
4/9: Attitudes on Trade  
4/11: Luddites

### **Week 15- Special Topics**

4/14: Attitudes on the Supreme Court  
4/16: Tribalism and in-group bias  
4/18: Presentation Day 1

### **Week 16**

4/21, 4/23, 4/25- Presentation Days 2,3,4  
4/28: Presentation day 5

### **Readings Note-**

I will ensure that all readings for each week will be uploaded by Friday afternoon the week before they are to be read. Anything that is included in the lectures or the readings is eligible to come up on the tests- however- test questions on the readings will be more general and thematic- rather than with a focus on rote memorization.

The best way to ensure a good grade in a seminar-style course is to have at least gotten the gist of the readings and being ready to come to class with questions or thoughts.

### **COURSE POLICIES**

Make-ups for major assignments will only be offered in the case of serious need. Students should not assume an extension or make-up opportunity will be granted in all circumstances. Health and personal issues can be valid reasons. Late assignments will be penalized by ten percent for each day they are late. That said, given COVID and other major illnesses, I am flexible, just make sure too let me know if your illness is causing you to fall behind.

Rounding of grades can occur upwards, but not downwards. Upwards grading determinations will be based on participation and attendance.

Several extra credit opportunities (Attending talks, watching debates, etc) will occur over the course of the semester. Standard practice is that involvement will award one bonus point on the final calculated grade.

### **SCHOLASTIC DISHONESTY AND ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

UGA Student Honor Code: "I will be academically honest in all of my academic work and will not tolerate academic dishonesty of others." A Culture of Honesty, the University's policy and procedures for handling cases of suspected dishonesty, can be found at [www.uga.edu/ovpi](http://www.uga.edu/ovpi)

### **Plagiarism:**

Writing and presenting original work in college can be challenging, but this is not an excuse to plagiarize. Any directly taken information, quotations, or work that is not referenced or cited can be counted as plagiarism. Please take note and remember to provide references to any outside materials used in your work or writing.

### **Attendance:**

The student is responsible for all assigned course work and cannot be absolved of this responsibility. When enrolled in a particular course, the student is obligated to do all of the work assigned. Punctual and regular attendance is vital to the discharge of this obligation. Absences, excused or not, do not alter this responsibility. Regulations more restrictive than College guidelines, but not in conflict with it, may be established by the instructor for any course.

Instructors are responsible for distributing their individual course attendance guidelines in their syllabi during the first class each term. Absences will be excused for:

- documented illnesses,
- official representation of the College,
- death of a close relative,
- religious holiday, and
- other circumstances beyond the control of the student.

Excuses for official representation of the College must be obtained from the official supervising that activity or event.

Students whose unexcused absences surpass **three** of the scheduled classes may receive a lowered grade or failure at the instructor's discretion.

### **Wellness Statement**

This policy statement was added as a requirement during the Spring 2020 semester. UGA syllabi are expected to include the following statement: Mental Health and Wellness Resources: • If you or someone you know needs assistance, you are encouraged to contact Student Care and Outreach in the Division of Student Affairs at 706-542-7774 or visit <https://sco.uga.edu/>. They will help you navigate any difficult circumstances you may be facing by connecting you with the appropriate resources or services.

- UGA has several resources for a student seeking mental health services (<https://www.uhs.uga.edu/bewelluga/bewelluga>) or crisis support (<https://www.uhs.uga.edu/info/emergencies>).
- If you need help managing stress anxiety, relationships, etc., please visit BeWellUGA (<https://www.uhs.uga.edu/bewelluga/bewelluga>) for a list of FREE workshops, classes, mentoring, and health coaching led by licensed clinicians and health educators in the University Health Center.
- Additional resources can be accessed through the UGA App