

POLS 4510-63941
Public Opinion and American Democracy
MW 2:55-4:15
Classroom- Baldwin 102
Fall 2026
Instructor- Dr. Colin French
Office- Baldwin Hall 378
Office Hours- Tuesday 10AM-2PM, or by Appointment

Course Description

One of the fundamental tenets of Democracy as a form of government is that 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)

Exams (Midterm and Final, Take Home)- 30%
Group Research Project- 40% (May 10th)
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 (Daily Readings in Parenthesis)

Week 1- The Basics- What Americans Know

8/17- Class Introduction (Syllabus)

8/19- Ideological Innocence (Converse pp 1-29)

Week 2- What Americans Know II

8/24- Making it up as we go along (Zaller 76-96)

8/ 26- Other great works (Lippmann summary, Page & Shapiro Summary)

Week 3- Party ID

8/31- Party as a Social Identity? (Greene 393-403)

9/2- Operational Ideology (Chen & Goren 703-715)

Week 4- Social Pressure & Influence in Political Attitudes

9/7- Labor Day, No Class

9/9- Personality, Childhood Experience, & Ideology (De Neve 55-73)

Week 5- Conducting Good Survey Research

9/14- Conducting Surveys (Berinsky 1-21)

9/16- Creating your first survey in Question Pro (No assigned readings)

Week 6- Demographic Differences

9/21- The Gender Gap (Norranders & Wilcox 503-523)

9/23- The Rural-Urban Gulf (Gimpel et al 1343-1368)

Week 7- Special Topics in Public Opinion

9/28- Aging and Conservatism (Glenn 176-186)

9/30- Using Experiments in Public Opinion (No Assigned Readings- optional available)

Take-Home Midterm Due 10/3

Week 8- Elite Influence

10/5- COVID Attitudes (Gadarian 161-174)

10/7- Anti Intellectualism, Populism & Resistance to Elite Consensus (Merkley 24-48)

Week 9- Media Effects & Changing Media Landscape

10/12- Political Knowledge & The Internet (Kleinberg & Lau 338-362)

10/14- Facebook & Polarization (Nyhan et al 137-144)

Week 10- Misinformation and Misperceptions

10/19- Misperceptions Part 1 (Nyhan, Reifler, Flynn 1-36)

10/21- Misperceptions Part 2 (Same as 10/19)

Week 11- Spatial Models of Ideology

10/26- Economic Left-Right (La Cerda et al 1-16)

10/28- Other Dimensions (Jackson & Jolly 316-339)

Week 12- Polarization

11/2- Polarization is not a myth (Abramowitz 542-555)

11/4- Polarization is overstated (Fiorina 556-560)

Week 13- Group Presentations (11/9, 11/11)**Week 14- Group Presentations (11/16, 11/18)**

Thanksgiving Break 11/23-11/27

Week 15- Group Presentations (11/30 only)

Take Home Final Due December 5th

Final Project Due December 9th

Readings Note-

All readings will be available via ELC or class handout.

The best way to ensure a good grade in a seminar-style course is to have done 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 to 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.

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

AI Policy:

AI will not be permitted for the purposes of quiz/test taking, or the dictation of written assignments.

Students may use AI for web searches and excel/stata coding, but do so at their own risk, as AI is still reputationally unreliable in these areas.

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:

Attendance is a required element of this course.

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.
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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 will receive a lowered grade for participation- one grade point (.3) per additional missed class.

Disclaimer:

This syllabus is a general plan for the course; deviations announced to the class by the instructor may be necessary.

Student Honesty:

All academic work must meet the standards contained in “A Culture of Honesty.” Students are responsible for informing themselves about these standards before performing academic work. The penalties for academic dishonesty are severe and ignorance is not an acceptable defense. Also note that the course syllabus is a general plan for the course and that deviations announced to the class by the instructor may be necessary.

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 students seeking mental health services or crisis support. If you need help managing stress anxiety, relationships, etc., please visit 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.