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PSCI 342.01: Media, Public Opinion and Polling

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MEDIA AND PUBLIC OPINION - PSCI 342

Spring 2016

T-Th 11:10 – 12:30, LA 337

Draft Syllabus – To Be Revised

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COURSE DESCRIPTION: This course provides an overview of the news media and public opinion, two of the main dynamic forces in American politics, and explores the critical interaction between news media's practices and content, and how public opinion is formed and changed. The media-opinion interaction is a two-way street, and while we will focus on the effects of the news media on mass opinion, we will also explore some of the ways in which citizens influence the media, other major political actors, and public policy. This semester we will take advantage of two timely opportunities – the presidential nomination campaigns, and unique access by UM to the world's largest database of public opinion surveys, the Roper Archive.

The course is divided into three main sections. The first section focuses on public opinion – how to define it, how to measure it, and some of the fundamental concepts used by scholars to understand public (or “mass”) opinion and their research findings. In the second section we examine the news media's methods of selecting, gathering, and disseminating news, government policies and other pressures and restrictions on the media, and the news content that results. The third section explores how the media and public opinion interact, focusing on the process of media influence, the different circumstances under which media can influence opinion, and the ways in which the media link or fail to link citizens to politics, political leaders, and policymaking.

In this course we study theories and concepts about the roles of media and public opinion in a democratic society, as well as the evidence used by social scientists to evaluate those theories and concepts. Students must learn and understand the theories and concepts, understand how the evidence relates to those theories and concepts, and learn to apply the theories and concepts to their own use and analysis of news media.

READINGS: There is one textbook we may use in the second half of this course. If so, it will be at the University Bookstore, and is *Media Politics: A Citizen's Guide, 3rd Edition*, by Shanto Iyengar, W.W. Norton, 2016 (this is listed as “MPCG” in the readings section below). We would use only the 3rd edition of this book. The other readings for the course will be available on Moodle, and are listed individually in the “Course Topics and Readings” section below.

Students should also become regular and critically aware consumers of news media and media coverage relating to public opinion. For this reason you should keep up with news coverage in a major newspaper on a daily basis. The *New York Times* and *The Washington Post* are two of the best in news coverage and have semi-free websites (www.nytimes.com, www.washingtonpost.com). The *Wall Street Journal* is also a good news source, but it has less political news and is only available free on Factiva, through the Mansfield Library website.

Other sources of news can provide a useful contrast with and supplement to newspapers and are important to a fuller understanding of media, but they may be either less timely or complete. These include weekly news magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, or *U.S. News*; national news on tv networks such as CBS, ABC, NBC, CNN, Fox News, MSNBC and PBS (“The News Hour”); or public radio news (on KUFM, 89.1). In addition, TV public affairs programs such as “Washington Week,” “Meet the Press” and “This Week” are good ways to observe how journalists look at politics and how political leaders try to present their views in ways that appeal to the public. You should keep up with these sources as often as possible, and focus on the national and state news coverage. The Missoulian and local tv news do not have enough coverage of national political news to be very useful in this regard, but provide good examples of local news coverage for our class discussions.

GRADES AND REQUIREMENTS: Because the subject matter of this course is varied, the assignments will be as well. Keeping up with the course readings, daily attendance, and participation are essential. The class lectures and discussions will cover material not in the course readings, and vice-versa. All lecture and reading material will potentially be on the exams. When events provide an opportunity, we will explore current news coverage and public opinion using supplemental readings not currently on the syllabus.

Written reading reflections: To participate in discussion and do well on the exams, you will need to keep up with the assigned reading, and there will be several days during the semester when there will be unannounced written reflections on the current readings. These pop reading reflections are 5% of the course grade and cannot be made up if you miss one, so it's essential to attend class regularly and keep up with the readings.

Class participation is important to understanding this material, so contributing to class discussion with insights, comments and questions on the readings and topics is essential. Asking questions is encouraged as part of discussion, so if you have questions about the readings, lectures, or discussions, you should ask. Contributing frequently and intelligently to class discussions counts 5% toward the course grade.

Short Papers: There will be three or four short analysis papers, worth 5% each.

* The first paper is on the forms of opinion expression, due the second week of class, to sharpen your understanding of the initial readings and your ability to apply important concepts to current news stories.

* There will be a second short paper in which you will apply criteria for determining the quality of a public opinion survey to a survey presented in the news media.

* Understanding and interpreting public opinion survey data is difficult for many students. We will learn how to "read" opinion data and interpret the data in tables generated from opinion surveys. This will require some very basic math skills and a willingness to learn by doing exercises designed to help you practice the fundamentals of data interpretation.

* The fourth short paper is about political socialization, in which you will apply the concepts concerning influences on opinion formation to your own experiences.

* If we do only 3 short papers, the Final Exam will be worth 30% of the course grade.

Two exams: a midterm and a final. The final will be comprehensive but weighted toward the material in the second half of the course. Both exams will cover both material covered in class and the readings.

A research paper of 6-8 pages in length that will provide you an opportunity to do an original research project focusing on a topic you develop, either a news media content analysis or an analysis of public opinion data. The specific requirements of the paper will be provided later in the semester.

GRADES: Grades will be calculated according to the following percentages:

A = 93-100	B+ = 87-89.9	C+ = 77-79.9	D+ = 67-69.9	below 60=F
A- = 90-92.9	B = 83-86.9	C = 73-76.9	D = 63-66.9	
	B- = 80-82.9	C- = 70-72.9	D- = 60-62.9	

Short paper on forms of opinion expression	5%
Short paper analyzing public opinion survey quality	5%
Short paper analyzing public opinion data from tables	5%
Short paper on political socialization	5%
Participation in discussion	5%
Written Reading Reflections	5%
Midterm exam	25% of grade (or 25% if only 3 short papers)
Research paper (6-8 pages)	20% of grade
Final exam	25% of grade

The midterm and final exams, and the research paper must be completed and turned in on time in order to pass this course.

PSCI 400: Undergraduate students taking the 1-credit PSCI 400 Advanced Writing course will write a 2-page research proposal and complete a draft of the research paper, both of which I will provide comments on. Based on the draft comments students will revise the paper into final form. The final version of the paper will be 8-10 pages instead of 6-8, and graded on writing clarity, organization, and revisions of the first draft, as well as content. First drafts will be due one week before the paper due date for the rest of the class.

ACADEMIC HONESTY AND PLAGIARISM:

All students must practice academic honesty. Academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or a disciplinary sanction by the University.

All students need to be familiar with the Student Conduct Code. The Code is available for review online at http://life.umt.edu/vpsa/student_conduct.php

The University of Montana Student Conduct Code prohibits plagiarism, which is “representing another person’s words, ideas, data, or materials as one’s own.” This is a serious academic violation that can result in penalties up to suspension or expulsion from the University. **I take academic honesty very seriously, and will do my utmost to prevent, uncover, and penalize any form of cheating in this course.** Read the UM plagiarism warning <http://www.umt.edu/catalog/acad/acadpolicy/default.html> and Student Conduct Code above. Please contact me if you have any questions or concerns about academic honesty

CLASS COURTESY:

In order to have a pleasant and effective learning environment in a class this size, we need to observe a few basic courtesies. This is a small campus, so it is possible to get to the classroom on time from all other campus buildings; arriving late or leaving early disrupts the class and disturbs other students and the instructor. Please turn off all cell phones before class begins. Please don’t read a newspaper or other non-course material, eat during class, or use text messaging, web browsers, or similar communications. If you have a question or comment about the material, please raise your hand instead of discussing it with your neighbor. We’ll all benefit if we just keep in mind the reason we’re in the room together.

DROP POLICY AND INCOMPLETES:

You can drop on Cyberbear through September 16, and from September 17 to October 28 using a drop slip signed by me. Starting October 29, you must go through the more formal and difficult “late drop” petition process. I will sign late drop petitions until October 29, and after that only under extraordinary circumstances, as stated at <http://www.umt.edu/catalog/acad/acadpolicy/default.html> under “Beginning the forty-sixth...” Incompletes will only be permitted when all the conditions set forth in the official University policy are met – the policy is at <http://www.umt.edu/catalog/acad/acadpolicy/default.html> under “Incomplete Grade Policy”

DSS STUDENTS:

Qualified students with disabilities will receive appropriate accommodations in this course. Students with disabilities requesting accommodations on exams, papers, or other course requirements should contact me as soon as possible, and must contact DSS in order to arrange for and provide me with a letter of approval for accommodations. DSS is in Lommasson Center 154.

E-MAIL AND MOODLE:

Every registered UM student has an official UM e-mail account, and students registered for this course have a Moodle course account. I may use your official UM e-mail to send you important announcements, and your exam and research paper grades will be posted on Moodle. See <http://umonline.umt.edu/> for instructions on how to access your UM e-mail and Moodle accounts.

GRADUATE STUDENT REQUIREMENTS

Graduate students taking this course must complete additional graduate-level readings and a written analysis for each course topic as specified by the instructor, and must complete a 20-25 page research paper consisting of a research design and hypothesis, original coding and analysis of multiple criteria of news content, an extensive literature review, and an analysis that synthesizes the three components.

COURSE TOPICS AND READINGS

NOTE: DATES SUBJECT TO CHANGE BY INSTRUCTOR

- 1/26 Introduction: What are News Media and Public Opinion, and Why Study Them?**
- 1/28 - 2/4 Defining Public Opinion and its Role in a Democracy**
- * 2/4 - THURSDAY - SHORT PAPER ON FORMS OF OPINION EXPRESSION DUE IN CLASS**
- 2/9 - 16 Nuts and Bolts: Understanding Public Opinion Surveys**
- *2/16 - MONDAY - SHORT PAPER ON MEDIA SURVEY QUALITY DUE IN CLASS**
- 2/16 - 20 Analyzing Surveys**
- * 2/23 – TUESDAY - SHORT PAPER ON OPINION DATA ANALYSIS DUE IN CLASS**
- 2/23 - 3/1 Individual Opinion: Sources, Formation and Change**
- * 3/1 – TUESDAY - SHORT PAPER ON POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION DUE IN CLASS**
- 3/3 – 10 Democratic Citizens? The Quality of Public Opinion: Knowledge and Organization**
- 3/15 - TUESDAY - MIDTERM EXAM (TENTATIVE DATE: MAY BE CHANGED)**
- 3/22 - 29 The News Media: A Concise History and Political Roles**
- * 3/29 - THURSDAY - RESEARCH PAPER PROPOSALS DUE IN CLASS**
- * 4/4 – 4/8 -- SPRING BREAK**
- 4/12 - 14 News Media at Work and Under Constraint - Selection, Form, and Content**
- 4/19 – 21 Media Influence: Learning, Persuasion and Other Effects**
- 4/26 - 28 Political Leadership and the Media**
- * 4/28 – THURSDAY - RESEARCH PAPER DUE IN CLASS**
- 5/3 – 5/5 New Media and Old: The Present and Future of Public Opinion and the News Media**
- * 5/13 – FRIDAY - FINAL EXAM, 8:00 – 10:00 AM**