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PSC 342.01: Media and Public Opinion

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MEDIA AND PUBLIC OPINION - PSCI 342
Spring 2010
Monday & Wednesday 2:10 – 3:30, LA 337

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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 public opinion formation and expression. The media-opinion interaction is not a one-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.

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 on the media, and the news content that results. The third section explores the interaction between media and opinion, paying special attention to the processes of 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 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 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 for this course, available at the University Bookstore. It is: Shanto Iyengar and Jennifer McGrady, *Media Politics: A Citizen's Guide*, W.W. Norton 2007 (this is listed as “MPCG” in the readings section below).

The other readings for the course will be available on electronic and traditional paper course reserves at the Mansfield Library, 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 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 are typically either less timely or complete. These include reading weekly news magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, or *U.S. News*; watching the national news on the major tv networks, CNN, Fox News, or PBS (“The News Hour”); or listening to 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 part of the course grade. One of the most important forms of class participation is asking questions. If you have questions about the readings, lectures, or discussions, you should ask. Asking good questions and participating frequently and intelligently in class discussions counts 5% toward the course grade.

Four Short Papers: There will be four short analysis papers. * The first one 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. This paper is worth 5% of the course grade.

* 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. This paper is worth 5% of the course grade.

* 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. This third analysis paper will be worth 5% of the course grade.

* The fourth short paper is about political socialization, in which you will apply the concepts concerning influences on opinion formation to your own experiences. This paper is worth 5% of the course grade.

There will be 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 have material from both lectures and readings.

There will be a research paper of 8-10 pages in length that will provide you an opportunity to do an original research project focusing on a topic of your choosing, 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	20% of grade
Research paper (8-10 pages)	20% of grade
Final exam	30% 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 4-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 12-15 pages instead of 8-10, and graded on writing clarity and organization, 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.** See the UM plagiarism warning at <http://www.umt.edu/catalog/academic/policy.htm#plagiarism> and the Student Conduct Code at http://life.umt.edu/vpsa/student_conduct.php

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 until February 12, and from then until April 5 using a drop slip signed by me. After April 5, you must go through the more formal and difficult “late drop” petition process. I will sign late drop petitions for only one week after the midterm exam grades are posted, and after that only under extraordinary circumstances, as stated at <http://www.umt.edu/catalog/academic/policy.htm#add>

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/academic/policy.htm#incomplete>

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.

EMAIL AND BLACKBOARD

In order to obtain course materials and access your grades and other important course information, you will need to sign into the Blackboard website that has been created for this course. Information on how to access your account is at: <http://umt.edu/xls/blackboard/default.aspx>

Blackboard uses your official UM email account, so you should check it frequently. I may also send e-mails to your official UM e-mail account. If you use another email account, go into Cyberbear to have your official UM email forwarded to your preferred email account.

GRADUATE STUDENTS

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

1/25 Introduction: What are News Media and Public Opinion, and Why Study Them?

1/27 - 2/1 Defining Public Opinion and its Role in a Democracy

1. Williams and Edy, "Basic Beliefs, Democratic Theory, and Public Opinion," Chapter 7 in Glynn, et al., *Public Opinion* pp. 212-226.
2. Herbst, "Techniques of Opinion Expression and Measurement," Chapter 3 in *Numbered Voices*, pp. 43-68.
3. Ginsberg, "How Polling Transforms Public Opinion" in *The Captive Public*, pp. 272-293.

*** 2/1 - MONDAY - SHORT PAPER ON FORMS OF OPINION EXPRESSION DUE IN CLASS**

2/3 - 2/10 Nuts and Bolts: Understanding Public Opinion Surveys

1. Erikson and Tedin, "Polling: The Scientific Assessment of Public Opinion," Chapter 2 in *American Public Opinion*, 6th ed., pp. 23-50.
2. Asher, "Wording and Context of Questions," (Chapter 3, pp. 44-61) in *Polling and the Public*, 5th edition.
3. Asher, "Analyzing and Interpreting Polls," (Chapter 8, pp. 150-178) in *Polling and the Public*, 5th edition.

***2/10 - WEDNESDAY - SHORT PAPER ON MEDIA SURVEY QUALITY DUE IN CLASS**

**** 2/15, Monday NO CLASS DUE TO WASHINGTON / LINCOLN DAY HOLIDAY**

2/17 & 2/24 Analyzing Surveys

1. Review: Asher, "Analyzing and Interpreting Polls," (Chapter 8, pp. 150-178)
2. Simmons, "Basic Principles of Table Reading"

**** 2/22, Monday NO CLASS DUE TO ACADEMIC CONFERENCE**

*** 3/1 - MONDAY - SHORT PAPER ON OPINION DATA ANALYSIS DUE IN CLASS**

3/1 - 3 Individual Opinion: Sources, Formation and Change

1. Erickson and Tedin, "Political Learning and Political Socialization," Chapter 5 in *American Public Opinion*, 6th ed., pp. 112-141.
2. Jennings & Niemi, "Issues and Inheritance in the Formation of Party Identification," in *AJPS*.
3. Newcomb, "Attitude Development as a Function of Reference Groups: The Bennington Study."

*** 3/8 - MONDAY - SHORT PAPER ON POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION DUE IN CLASS**

3/8 - 10 Democratic Citizens? The Quality of Public Opinion: Knowledge and Organization

1. Erickson and Tedin, "Microlevel Opinion: The Psychology of Opinion Holding," Chapter 3 in *American Public Opinion*, 6th ed., pp. 51-80.
2. Delli Carpini and Keeter, "Stability and Change in the U.S. Public's Knowledge of Politics."
3. Schuman and Presser, "Public Opinion and Public Ignorance: The Fine Line Between Attitudes and Non-Attitudes."

3/15 - MONDAY - MIDTERM EXAM (TENTATIVE DATE: MAY BE CHANGED)

3/15 - MONDAY - MIDTERM EXAM (TENTATIVE DATE: MAY BE CHANGED)

3/17 - 22 The News Media: A Concise History and Political Roles

1. Iyengar and McGrady, "Introduction: Image is Everything," chapter 1 in *Media Politics: A Citizen's Guide* (designated *MPCG* below), pp. 1-16.
2. Iyengar and McGrady, "The Democratic Process," chapter 2 in *MPCG*, pp. 17-47.

3/24 - 4/7 News Media at Work and Under Constraint - Selection, Form, and Content

1. Iyengar and McGrady, "The Media Marketplace: Where Americans Get Their News," chapter 3 in *MPCG*, pp. 48-84.
2. Iyengar and McGrady, "Reporters, Official Sources, and the Decline of Adversarial Journalism," chapter 4 in *MPCG*, pp. 85-104.
3. Iyengar and McGrady, "Campaigning Through the Media," chapter 6 in *MPCG*, pp. 127-166.

MARCH 29 - APRIL 2 NO CLASSES DUE TO SPRING BREAK

4/7 RESEARCH PAPER PROPOSALS DUE IN CLASS

4/12 - 4/21 Media Influence: Learning, Persuasion and Other Effects

1. Iyengar and McGrady, "Campaigns that Matter," chapter 9 in *MPCG*, pp. 237-269.
2. Iyengar and McGrady, "News and Public Opinion," chapter 8 in *MPCG*, pp. 197-236.
3. Zaller, "Information, Predispositions, and Opinion," Chapter 2 in *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, pp. 6-39.
4. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "2006 Media Usage and Credibility Study," excerpts.

4/26 - 28 Political Leadership and the Media

1. Iyengar and McGrady, "Going Public: Governing Through the Media," chapter 7 in *MPCG*, pp. 167-196.
2. Iyengar and McGrady, "The Consequences of Going Public," chapter 10 in *MPCG*, pp. 270-294.
3. Bosso, "Setting the Agenda: Mass Media and the Discovery of Famine in Ethiopia."
4. Zaller, "Monica Lewinsky's Contribution to Political Science," in *PS: Political Science and Politics* v.31, pp. 182-189.

*** 4/28 (WEDNESDAY): RESEARCH PAPER DUE IN CLASS.**

5/3 - 5 New Media and Old: The Present and Future of Public Opinion and the News Media

1. Iyengar and McGrady, "The Rise of New Media," chapter 5 in *MPCG*, pp. 105-126.
2. Iyengar and McGrady, "Evaluating Media Politics," chapter 11 in *MPCG*, pp. 295-316.
3. Project for Excellence in Journalism, "The State of the News Media 2006."
4. Baum, "How Soft News Brings Policy Issues to the Inattentive Public."

*** 5/13 (THURSDAY): FINAL EXAM, 3:20 – 5:20**