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Spring 2-1-2006

PSC 342.01: Media and Public Opinion

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MEDIA AND PUBLIC OPINION - PSC 342

Spring 2006

M/W/F 2:10 -- 3:00, 337 Liberal Arts

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COURSE DESCRIPTION: This course provides an overview of the news media and public opinion, two of the main dynamic forces at work in American politics, and explores the critical interaction between news media practices and content, and public opinion formation and expression. The media-opinion interaction is not a one-way street, and while we will emphasize the effects of the news media on mass opinion, we will also explore some of the ways in which citizens influence the media and other major political actors.

The course will be divided into three general sections. In the first section we will focus on public opinion – what it is, how to define it, how to measure it, and some of the fundamental concepts used by scholars seeking to understand public (or “mass”) opinion and its influence on public policy. In the second section we will turn to 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 will focus on the interaction of 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.

In this course we will examine 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 evidence relates to those theories, and learn to apply the theories and concepts to their own use of news media.

READINGS: There is one textbook for this course, available at the University Bookstore. It is: Jan E. Leighley, *Mass Media and Politics: A Social Science Perspective*, Houghton-Mifflin, 2004 (this is listed as “MM&P” 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 abreast of 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, but are typically not as 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, watching Sunday morning public affairs programs such as “Meet the Press” and “This Week” is a good way 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* does not have enough coverage of national political news to be very useful in this regard.

GRADES AND REQUIREMENTS: Because the subject matter of this course is so varied, the assignments will be as well. Keeping up with the reading, daily attendance, and participation are essential. The class lectures and discussions will cover material not in the course readings, and vice-versa, and both lecture and reading material will be covered on the exams. When events provide an opportunity, we will explore current news coverage and public opinion using the concepts we are studying, using supplemental readings not currently on the syllabus. To participate in discussion and do well on the exams, you will also need to keep up with the assigned reading, and there will be several days during the semester when there will be a quiz on the current readings. These pop readings quizzes are 5% of the course grade and cannot be made up if you miss one, so it benefits you 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.

There will be a short "reading and analysis" paper due in 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 a total of 5% of the course grade.

There will be another short paper assignment in which you will apply criteria for determining the quality of a public opinion survey to a survey presented in the news media. This is also worth 5% of the course grade

Understanding and interpreting public opinion data is difficult for many students. In the third section of the course 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 exercise will be 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 based on 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 reading and analysis assignment	5%
Short paper analyzing public opinion survey quality	5%
Short paper analyzing public opinion data from tables	5%
Participation in discussion	5%
Reading quizzes	5%
Midterm exam	25% of grade
Research paper (8-10 pages)	20% of grade
Final exam	30% of grade

The reading & analysis, table reading, and survey quality assignments, both exams and the research paper must be completed and turned in on time in order to pass this course.

ACADEMIC HONESTY:

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://www.umt.edu/sa/VPSA/index.cfm/page/1321>.

I take academic honesty very seriously, and will do my utmost to prevent, uncover, and penalize any form of cheating in this course. See p. 22 in the *2005-2006 Catalog*, and the Student Conduct Code on the UM website listed 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 class, 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, or eat during class. 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 10, and from then until March 7 using a drop slip signed by me. After March 7, 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 exams are graded, and not thereafter except under extraordinary circumstances.

Incompletes will only be permitted when all the conditions set forth in the official University policy are met – the policy is on page 21 of the *University of Montana 2005-2006 Catalog*.

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://www.umt.edu/ce/umonline/students/welcome.htm>

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.

COURSE TOPICS AND READINGS

1/23 - 25 I. Introduction: What are News Media and Public Opinion, and Why Study Them?

1/27 - 2/3 II. 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.

2/3 READING & ANALYSIS PAPER DUE

2/6 - 20 III. 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.
4. Simmons, "Basic Principles of Table Reading"

2/13 MEDIA SURVEY QUALITY PAPER DUE

2/20 OPINION DATA ANALYSIS PAPER DUE

2/22 - 3/3 IV. 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."
4. Delli Carpini and Keeter, "Stability and Change in the U.S. Public's Knowledge of Politics."

3/6 - 13 V. 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. Schuman and Presser, "Public Opinion and Public Ignorance: The Fine Line Between Attitudes and Non-Attitudes."

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

3/17 - 24 VI. The News Media: A Concise History and Political Roles

1. Leighley, "Mass, Media, and Politics in the United States" Chapter 1 in *Mass Media and Politics* (designated *MM&P* below), pp. 1-19.
2. Leighley, "The Media as a Political Institution," Chapter 2 in *MM&P*, pp. 20-46.

3/27 - 31 NO CLASS - SPRING BREAK

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

1. Leighley, "What's News?" Chapter 3 in *MM&P*, pp. 47-69.
2. Leighley, "Newsgathering: Business, Profession, and Organization," Chapter 4 in *MM&P*, pp. 70-103.
3. Gurevitch and Blumler, "Political Communication Systems and Democratic Values," pp. 24-35 in *Media Power and Politics*, 4th ed.

4/10 - 14 VIII. Media as Propaganda? Information, Learning and Persuasion

1. Leighley, "The Media, Political Knowledge, and Political Attitudes," Chapter 6 in *MM&P*, pp. 142-174.
2. Zaller, "Information, Predispositions, and Opinion," Chapter 2 in *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, pp. 6-39.
3. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "2004 Media Consumption and Believability Study," excerpts.
4. Zaller, "The Myth of Massive Media Impact Revisited," in *Political Persuasion and Attitude Change*.

4/17 - 21 IX. Media Influence: Minimal Effects and More

1. Leighley, "Agenda-Setting, Priming, and Framing," Chapter 7 in *MM&P*, pp. 175-198.
2. Iyengar, "News Coverage of the Gulf Crisis and Public Opinion: a Study of Agenda-setting, Priming, and Framing," in *Communication Research*, pp. 365-383.
3. Gilliam & Iyengar "Prime Suspects"
4. Bosso, "Setting the Agenda: Mass Media and the Discovery of Famine in Ethiopia."
5. Zaller, "Monica Lewinsky's Contribution to Political Science," in *PS: Political Science and Politics* v.31, pp. 182-189.

4/24 - 26 X. Media and Elections: Candidates, Campaigns, and Audience Response

1. Leighley, "The Mass Media and Elections," Chapter 8 in *MM&P*, pp. 199-242.
2. Patterson, "The Miscast Institution," in *Out of Order*, pp. 28-52.
3. Ansolabehere and Iyengar, "The Withdrawal of the Voter," in *Going Negative*, pp. 99-114.

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

4/28 - 5/1 XI. Political Elites and the Media

1. Leighley, "Political Institutions and the Mass Media," Chapter 5 in *MM&P*, pp. 104-141.

5/3 - 5/5 XII. Connecting the Dots: The Present and Future of Public Opinion and the News Media

1. Project for Excellence in Journalism, "The State of the News Media 2004."
2. Readings on the web, blogs, and news cycles, To Be Determined.
3. Readings on election polls and exit polls, To Be Determined.

5/11 (THURSDAY): FINAL EXAM, 3:20 – 5:20