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PSC 342.01: Media and Public Opinion

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MEDIA AND PUBLIC OPINION - PSC 342

Spring 2005

M/W/F 3:10 -- 4:00, 337 Liberal Arts

REVISED SYLLABUS

Please discard the earlier provisional syllabus.

Professor Christopher Muste

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Course Description: This course provides an overview of the news media and public opinion, two crucial aspects of the dynamic forces at work in American politics, and the critical interaction between the news media, its practices and content, and public opinion formation and expression. The media-opinion interaction is not a one-way street, and while our attention will primarily be on 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 to understand public (or “mass”) opinion. In the second section we will turn to examine the news media, methods of selecting, gathering, and disseminating news, and the content that results from those processes. 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 links or fails 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 empirical 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 course reserves at the Mansfield Library, and are listed 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. The *Wall Street Journal* has less political news, and is only available free on Factiva, through the Mansfield Library website. All three papers and many others are available daily at the Mansfield Library. Other sources of news can provide a useful contrast with and supplement to newspaper reading, including 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) and TV (KUFM) programs. 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, although it covers local and state news well.

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, which will be 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 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 I ask you to write briefly about the readings for the day in order to check your knowledge of the readings. These pop readings quizzes cannot be made up, so it benefits you to attend class regularly and keep up with the readings. One of the most important forms of class participation is asking questions. If there are things in the readings, lectures, or discussions you don't understand, you should ask. Asking good questions and participating frequently and intelligently in class discussions count toward the 10% quiz & participation grade.

There will be a short "reading and analysis" assignment 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. We will use the Blackboard discussion board to talk about this assignment, worth a total of 5% of the course grade.

There will be another short 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. The 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.

In order to do some of the assignments for the course, for communication and course resources, and to access your grades and other 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. If you use another email account, go into CyberBear to have your official UM email forwarded to your preferred email account, and check that account frequently.

Grades will be based on the following, with 93-100=A, 90-92=A-, 87-89=B+, 83-86=B, 80-82=B-, 77-79=C+, 73-76=C, 70-72=C-, 67-69=D+, 63-66=D, 60-62=D-, below 60=F.

Short reading and analysis assignment	5%
Exercise analyzing public opinion survey quality	5%
Exercise analyzing public opinion data from tables	5%
Reading quizzes and participation	10%
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.

COURSE TOPICS AND READINGS

I. Introduction: What are News Media and Public Opinion, and Why Study Them?

II. Defining Public Opinion and its Role in a Democracy

1. Erikson and Tedin, "Public Opinion in Democratic Societies," Chapter 1 in *American Public Opinion*, 6th ed., pp 1-22.
2. Williams and Edy, "Basic Beliefs, Democratic Theory, and Public Opinion," Chapter 7 in Glynn, et al., *Public Opinion* pp. 212-226.
3. Herbst, "Techniques of Opinion Expression and Measurement," Chapter 3 in *Numbered Voices*, pp. 43-68.
4. Ginsberg, "How Polling Transforms Public Opinion" in *The Captive Public*, pp. 272-293.

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) and "Analyzing and Interpreting Polls," (Chapter 8, pp. 150-178) in *Polling and the Public*, 5th edition.
3. Simmons, "Basic Principles of Table Reading"

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."

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."

Midterm Exam 3/14 or 3/16

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.

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.

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*.

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.

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.

XI. Political Elites and the Media

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

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, TBD.

Research Paper: Due Wednesday, May 4 in class.

Final Exam: Monday, May 9, 3:20 – 5:20