Political Science 473: Public Opinion
Spring 2010
TR 1:20-2:10
104 Van Hise

Professor: Katherine Cramer Walsh
221 North Hall
Office Hours: Thursdays 2:30-4:30 or by appointment (kwalsh@polisci.wisc.edu)

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**Purpose of the Course:**
Welcome to Public Opinion! This course is designed to introduce you to the origins, nature, and measurement of public opinion as it relates to contemporary political processes. My goal is to help you think about the role of public opinion in contemporary democracy, the nature and quality of the procedures we use to gauge public opinion, and your own role as a member of the public. Opinion polls will be a main feature of this course, as we study how they are conducted and use polling data to understand opinion processes. However, this course investigates public opinion from a variety of angles. We will consider the roots of public opinion in casual conversation and social interaction, and learn about and use multiple methods for measuring the public’s political judgment and understanding.

**Requirements:**
There will be two exams, a midterm (**Tuesday, March 2nd**) and a final (**Thursday, May 13th 10:05am**).

In order to pass the class, you must complete all requirements, including those assigned in section. Incompletes will only be given in rare circumstances.

**Grading system.** Grades will be assigned as follows:
- Midterm: 25%
- Final exam: 25%
- Final paper: 25%
- Attendance and participation: 5%
- Section: 20%
- TOTAL: 100%

**COURSE MATERIALS:**
The following book is required reading for the course and can be purchased at University Bookstore. It has also been put on reserve in the Reserve Room at the College Library.


The additional required readings posted in the course outline below are available either online through MadCAT or if not available online, as part of a coursepack for sale at Bob’s Copy Shop at 616 University Avenue (257-4536; near the Kohl Center, not the Bob’s at the Camp Randall end of University). The coursepack is also on reserve at College Library. Those
sources available online are marked with a * in the outline of the course, below. If the source is available online, I provide the web address or the name of the database through which you can access it via MadCAT.

**TERM PAPER ASSIGNMENT**

Your term paper assignment is to write a memo to a Wisconsin public official (or one of the declared gubernatorial candidates) about a policy issue of concern to you, relying, in part, on statewide public opinion data from the UW Survey Center Badger Poll. (You are under no obligation to deliver your memo to this person or group, but I encourage you to do so at the end of the term.) More specifically, you are to write an 8-page memo to an actual state of Wisconsin public official (an elected official or government employee such as an agency head), a declared candidate in the 2010 gubernatorial race, or a political organization (e.g. a lobbying organization, a political party, an activist organization) explaining what the Wisconsin public wants on this issue, whether or not the person/organization you are advising should heed those wishes, what policy the person/organization should pursue (what the public wants? Or an alternative?), and how he/she/they should go about “selling” this policy to the public. To write this memo, you should rely on results from a recent UW Badger Poll (see [http://www.uwsc.wisc.edu/bpoll.php](http://www.uwsc.wisc.edu/bpoll.php)) and a qualitative source of opinion. You must decide what this other source of info should be, and go about gathering it (e.g. in-depth interviews of types of people who are of special interest in your analysis, focus groups of such people, content analysis of information that you believe is a useful indicator of public opinion, or interviewing public officials). Providing good advice about what the public wants and how to market your proposed policy will require that you explain some of the basics behind the formation of opinion. In other words, you should draw on course material to explain in easily digestible terms why the public is expressing the opinions that it is, and why a particular strategy for selling your proposed policy will work. This memo should therefore contain references just as in any other research paper, and should discuss scholarship on public opinion. Think of yourself as an expert in public opinion research and theory who has been asked to provide advice to this person or group.

Attached to your policy memo, you are to provide a 3 to 4 page appendix explaining the methods you used to obtain your data (Badger Poll data and the qualitative method you chose), your justification for using those methods, and your justification for investigating the particular people that you did. You should also make suggestions about future procedures for keeping track of public opinion on this issue. This may mean suggesting questions to ask in surveys, which populations to study, or recommending an additional method through which the official, candidate, or group can use to listen to public opinion (e.g., a town hall meeting? Some type of discussion session? A content analysis of a news source?). The point of this part of the assignment is to provide an opportunity for you to demonstrate your knowledge about the tradeoffs in using different methods of measuring public opinion. You should draw on course materials in your discussion of the relative merits of polling and other sources of opinion information.

The point of the assignment as a whole is to enable you to apply the scholarship you learn in class to actual data from the state in which you are obtaining your college degree in the process of producing knowledge about public opinion. You do not need specialized knowledge of Wisconsin state politics in order to earn an A on this assignment.

**How will I use Badger Poll data?**

Your memo should address an issue that has been covered by the Badger Poll since June of 2006 (so including Badger Poll #22). On the Badger Poll website (http://www.uwsc.wisc.edu/bpoll.php), beneath the date of each poll is a link to the press releases relevant to that poll. At the end of these press releases are the results broken down by different demographic groups. You should use these results and the other results provided throughout the press release to write your memo. If you are skilled in statistical analyses and would like to run analyses on the data yourself, I encourage that and can easily arrange for you to get the data.

**What kind of library research should I do to write this paper?**

Besides your own qualitative research and quantitative analysis of Badger Poll data I am expecting that you will do additional background research on your issue in order to provide excellent advice to the official, candidate, or group to whom you are writing your memo. For this portion of the assignment, it will be worthwhile to research archived issues of *The Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel, The Capitol Times, The Wisconsin State Journal*, and other news sources throughout the state through the LexisNexis database available through MCAT. (Go to library.wisc.edu, click on “Databases” tab, type LexisNexis Academic,
and enter your search in the Search the News engine. Use the Browse Sources function to discover other Wisconsin news sources, from small town newspapers to blogs.)

It would also be very worthwhile for you to draw on additional scholarly research on public opinion on your issue topic. For example, if you are interested in opinions on stem cell research, it would be worthwhile to search for journal articles about public opinion on stem cell research, or perhaps research on public opinion about scientific issues that invoke moral questions.

**Additional considerations for writing the paper**

I want to underscore the importance of making an argument. Do not just describe the shape of public opinion on the issue (e.g. “people in Wisconsin are deeply divided on the issue of same sex marriage.”) You should explain why opinion is as it is on the topic you choose and argue for a plan of action.

Please feel free to talk to me about your topics and data sources. I encourage you to begin thinking about and researching your papers as soon as possible so that you can enjoy the warmer weather when it gets here.

The paper should use 10 to 12 point type, and use reasonable margins. The pages should be numbered and stapled. Use any standard method of documentation (e.g., APA, Chicago). For a very useful guide on proper methods of citing sources, see the UW Writing Center web page “FAQs About Documenting Sources” (http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/Documentation.html).

Finally, **do not plagiarize**. If you are not sure about what constitutes plagiarism, please see the UW System Academic Misconduct Guide [here](http://students.wisc.edu/saja/misconduct/UWS14.html#definition) for definitions, or [here](http://students.wisc.edu/saja/misconduct/academic_misconduct.html) for academic misconduct in general), consult the Writing Center ([http://writing.wisc.edu](http://writing.wisc.edu)) and/or ask me or Dimitri Kelly for help. Plagiarism is a serious academic offense, punishable by suspension or expulsion from the University.

**CLASS EMAIL LIST**
The email address for our course is: polisci473-1-s10@lists.wisc.edu. I may occasionally use this for course announcements, but I will also repeat these announcements in class. You are welcome to post course-related emails to this address.

**COURTESIES**

I expect that you will be on time for class and turn off cell phones before class starts. Please do not read newspapers, do crossword puzzles, etc. during class, and do not talk when I or anyone else in the class is speaking (unless, of course, we are engaged in a small group discussion activity!)

**OUTLINE OF THE COURSE**

**I. PUBLIC OPINION AND DEMOCRATIC THEORY: WHAT IS THE “PUBLIC” IN “PUBLIC OPINION”**?

* T 1/19: Introduction and Overview
  
  **Glynn et al pp. 3-33.**
  

* T 1/26: Definitions of “public” and “public opinion” in historical perspective
  
  **Glynn et al. chapter 2.**
  

* R 1/28: continued


**T 2/2: Competing visions of public opinion in democracy**


**II. Measuring Public Opinion**

**R 2/4: Sampling and collecting data**


**T 2/9: Reading survey results; alternative methods**

Glynn et al. chapter 3.


**III. The Structure of Public Opinion**

**R 2/11: Rational ignorance and ideological reasoning**

Glynn et al. pp. 119-125 and chapter 8


**T 2/16: Rational ignorance and ideological reasoning, continued**


**R 2/18: Elite-driven model of mass opinion**


**T 2/23: Opinion ingredients: core values**


**R 2/25: In-class review**

**T 3/2: **MIDTERM EXAM**

In-class essay exam.

**R 3/4: Opinion ingredients: self-interest**

T 3/9: **Opinion ingredients: social identity**  

R 3/11: **Social bases of public opinion: Socialization and social context**  
Glynn et al. pp 211-220, 244-247.

T 3/16: **Social bases of public opinion: The construction of opinion through conversation**  

IV. **PUBLIC OPINION AND ELECTIONS**

R 3/18: **Basis of the Vote**  

T 3/23: **Do campaigns matter?**  
Glynn et al. pp 439-447.

**SPRING BREAK**

R 3/25: **Polls and elections**  

V. **THE MASS MEDIA, POLITICAL ELITES, AND ATTITUDE CHANGE**

T 4/6: **Persuasion and Attitude Change**  
Glynn et al.pp.130-165.

R 4/8: **Mass media effects**  
Glynn et al. pp. 405-439.

T 4/13: **Mass media effects, continued**  

VI. **THE ROLE OF PUBLIC OPINION IN PUBLIC POLICY**

R 4/15: **Does public opinion lead or follow?**  
Glynn et al. chapter 9.

T 4/20: **The reading of public opinion**  

R 4/22: **Representation**  

T 4/27: **Example: health care**  
VII. DISCUSSION, DELIBERATION, AND DEMOCRACY

R 4/29: Direct democracy and deliberative opinion polls

T 5/4: What role should citizens play?

R 5/6: semester wrap-up

F 5/7: TERM PAPERS DUE BY 5PM TO MY MAILBOX IN NORTH HALL

FINAL EXAM: 10:05am, Thursday, May 13th. Room to be announced.