

POSC XXX: Public Opinion and Voting Behavior

Department of Political Science

Instructor: Nick Jenkins

Fall 2020

Office Location: Sproul Hall 2228

Classroom: CHASS 1020

Office Hours: W: 4-5pm; TH: 1:30-3:30pm

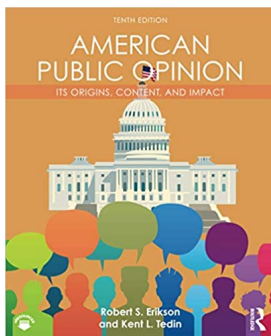
Class Times: MW: 9 - 10:15am

Email: nicholas.jenkins@email.ucr.edu

Course Description

Why were the 2016 and 2020 presidential election polls so off target? Do voters opinions really change how politicians behave? In this course, we will learn how the public forms opinions, whether or not they act on those opinions, and how those opinions affect the decisions that elected officials make (if at all!). We will also learn how public opinion is measured and how it is used to make predictions about election outcomes. We'll have multiple opportunities to work with real opinion data and you will use you knowledge and experience with this data to make a persuasive and informed prediction about how a particular county will vote in an upcoming election. This class will introduce you to the world of polling and let you have a little taste of what it is like to work as a professional pollster or data journalist.

Required Materials



I've tried to mitigate the problem of boring and expensive textbooks by reading reviews of books on public opinion and voting behavior. I picked a book that had high ratings and wasn't crazy expensive. Here's the winner: [American Public Opinion \(10th Edition\)](#)

The 10th edition of *American Public Opinion* contains the exact chapters that we will cover in class so you're not paying for a bunch of chapters that we won't be discussing. You can get a used copy on Amazon for around \$50 but know that **older editions are perfectly acceptable**. You can buy the [9th Edition](#), [8th Edition](#), [6th Edition](#), or 7th Edition if you can find it..

Throughout the course, we'll also get some experience working with real opinion data so that you can make a more concrete connection with the material. In addition, we'll explore some of the main polling data websites (like [FiveThirtyEight](#) and [Pew Research](#)) to learn how they report on and use public opinion data. These articles will be mixed in with lecture content and may involve in-class activities. All of the material for these additional topics will be posted on iLearn.

Course Promises

In this course, I will make the following promises to you. By the end of the semester, you should be able to:

1. Explain the role of public opinion in the behavior of elected officials.
2. Describe how public opinion is measured and understand why polls can be inaccurate.
3. Use public opinion data to make predictions about election outcomes.
4. Explain how individual form their political beliefs and how they change over time.
5. Describe American's general level knowledge about politics.
6. Research, prepare, and deliver a professional report that uses you understanding of public opinion data to make an informed prediction about an upcoming election.

Course Expectations

This course will only fulfill these promises if you promise the following in return:

1. **To attend class.** I have designed this class for the readings and lectures to complement one another. As a result, attending lecture will be an essential component for your to develop a mastery of the course material.
2. **To read the assigned materials.** Similar to the lectures, the readings will provide additional details on each topic that may not be covered in lecture. They will also give you an opportunity to practice applying your knowledge of American government to understand real world decisions that have been made.
3. **To be attentive and participate in class.** Participation does not only mean speaking aloud in class. Students should participate by actively following class discussions and engaging with lecture activities.

4. **To complete the required assignments in a timely fashion.** The assignments in this course are designed for you, and me, to measure your progress on meeting the course promises. Each assignment will give you practice at mastering these promises and I will give feedback to help guide you in your journey. Providing feedback is time consuming, however, so you will get the most useful feedback, and therefore the most use out of each assignment, only if you turn in your work on time.

Assignments and Evaluation

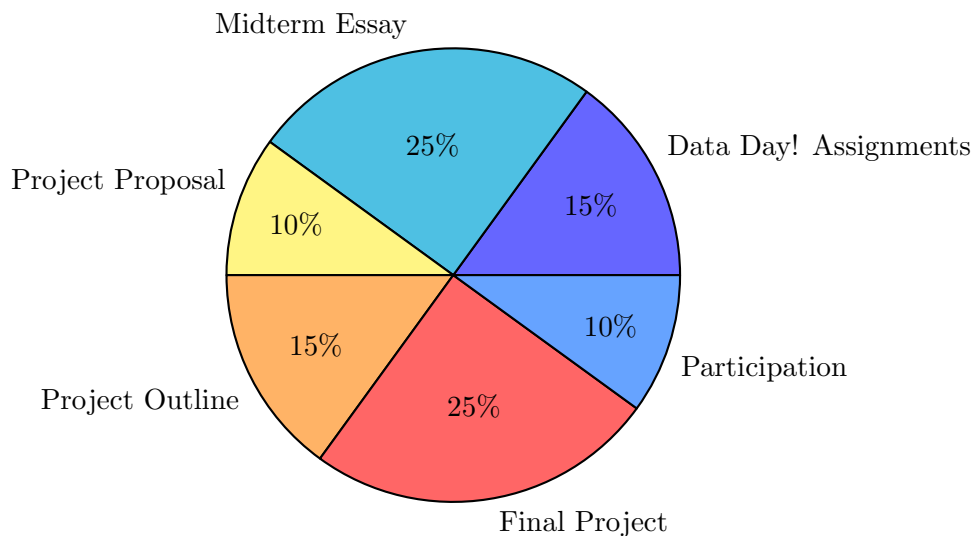
Because writing is an essential component of nearly all career paths (and learning to write well is hard!) we will have several short writing assignments in the course. These assignments are designed to help you become a better writer, to develop your skills as a pollster and data journalist, and how to use evidence to support an argument. Below is a list of the writing assignments that we will complete in the course and their requirements.

1. **Data Day! Group Assignments (3):** Throughout the quarter, we will have an opportunity to work with public opinion data first-hand. On these Data Days! we will spend time in class looking at different types of polling data and you will use it to answer short problem sets with your group. The goal of these assignments is to prepare you for the final election prediction project. The dates for these activities are shown in the course schedule below.
2. **Midterm Essay:** The midterm will consist of short essay questions that ask you to apply your knowledge of public opinion polling and voting behavior to make and justify predictions about various scenarios that I provide. **Please bring a Blue Book to use for the exam.** **The midterm essay will be on November 9th.**
3. **Election Prediction Project:** The final project will be a **5 page double-spaced (maximum)** paper that uses public opinion and demographic data to make an informed prediction about how a particular county will vote in an upcoming election. This assignment will be completed in stages that mimic how data journalists use data to make predictions about elections. This project is an effort to get you involved with using polling data and teach you how to be a polling expert. This project will be completed in the following 3 stages:
 - **Project Proposal:** you will submit a project proposal that addresses the following questions: (1) what election are you focusing on (Congressional or presidential), (2) what county you are going to analyze, (3) what issues you suspect will be important for the county and why, (4) how you think the county voted in the last election, and (5) what data you think you will need to support your prediction. Answer these questions in about a **half of a page (single spaced)**. **This is due in-class on November 18th.**

- Project Outline: In a **maximum of 2 double-spaced pages**, you will create an outline of your paper. This outline should contain the questions in your proposal plus the actual data sources that you will use. Your project must include the following statistics: (1) age demographics, (2) employment demographics, (3) education demographics, (4) income demographics, and (5) the vote shares in previous elections in addition to data on at least 5 different issue opinions in the county. When thinking about what issue data you will use, you should think about what data would convince your fellow political strategists that you are right? **Your project proposal will be submitted via iLearn on December 2nd.**
- Final Project: Write your most convincing case for why your answer to your research question is the right one in a **maximum of 5 double-spaced pages**. If you have done the previous stages correctly, this will involve transforming your outline into a complete paper. **The final paper will be submitted via iLearn on December 16th.**

In addition to these assignments, you will also be evaluated based on your participation in class activities. This involves being engaged during partner or group work, contributing to class discussions, and completing in-class participation assignments. You will also be asked to complete a short self-assessment of your participation in class at the end of the quarter. **This assessment will be completed online and is due on December 16th.**

These assignments will constitute your grade in the course and the weight of each of assignment are as follows:



The letter grades will be assigned according to these percentages:

A+	97-100%	B+	87-89%	C+	77-79%	D+	67-69%	F	0-59%
A	93-96%	B	83-86%	C	73-76%	D	63-66%		
A-	90-92%	B-	80-82%	C-	70-72%	D-	60-62%		

Classroom Decorum and Academic Discourse

I believe very strongly that the classroom is a place to expand our knowledge and experiences safely, while being respected and valued. I support the values of UCR to the urgent, sustained, and comprehensive work of creating a campus climate of mutual respect and communal vision at the University of California, Riverside. I strive to uphold the values articulated by the Office of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: We value a deep, collective understanding that an institutional and personal commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion is a true commitment to meaningful, lifelong learning. Not only are these values vital for building a better society, they extend into every aspect of our political life. For more information, please visit: <https://diversity.ucr.edu>.

For everyone to have the best possible learning experience, we will strive to create a classroom environment that supports respectful, critical inquiry through the free exchange of ideas. As part of learning, it is essential to discuss topics with individual who have different viewpoints than your own and the only way we can better understand one another is if we can carry on a collegial discussion of the topic. Remember, the goal is to become better critical thinkers. To do so we must learn to listen to others and articulate our views in respectful ways. As such, the following principles will guide our discussions:

- Treat every member of the class with respect, even if you disagree with their opinion;
- Bring light, not heat;
- Reasonable minds can differ on any number of perspectives, opinions, and conclusions;
- Because constructive disagreement sharpens thinking, deepens understanding, and reveals novel insights, it is not just encouraged, it is expected;
- No ideas are immune from scrutiny and debate;
- You will not be graded on your opinions;
- Arguments and evidence should be judged *independently* of who offers such arguments and evidence.

Additionally, to build a classroom environment that maximizes everyone’s ability to master the course material please be mindful to not distract your fellow learners with your phone, tablet, or

computer. It's perfectly fine if you would like to use these devices to take notes during class, but don't use them to distract yourself or your peers! Similarly, if you come late (or must leave early) please to enter/depart the classroom in the least disruptive manner possible. This includes sitting near the door if you anticipate leaving early or taking a seat as near to the door as possible if you arrive late.

Academic Honesty

I expect that all work you produce for this course will be your own. If you plagiarize any material from outside sources for your written work or presentation in this course, or on the final exam, **it will result in a failure of the entire course.** There are no exceptions to this, and no second chances. Please refer to the university's [Academic Integrity Policies & Procedures](#) if you have questions about these standards.

Special Accommodations

If you need particular accommodations to help you succeed in mastering this course's material, please contact the [Student Disability Resource Center](#) on campus in Costo Hall 125 to get a personalized accommodation plan.

Course Outline

This syllabus is a working document. I reserve the right to make changes to the assigned readings (additions or deletions) or to the order of topics we cover as I deem necessary. Announcements regarding schedule changes will be made in class, in discussion sections, or on iLearn.

Also note that this schedule lists the topics of discussion for each class. To master the course material, you should finish each meeting's readings before we discuss them in class. This schedule also indicates which course promise(s) each class contributes to. They are listed as **CP** followed by the specific promise's number (listed above).

Tentative Schedule:

MONDAY	WEDNESDAY
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MONDAY		WEDNESDAY	
Aug 31st	1	Sep 2nd	2
CP 2 Course Introduction; What do we mean when we say “public opinion?”		CP 1 & 2 American Public Opinion Ch. 1: Why is public opinion important for democracy?	
7th		9th	3
Labor Day - No Class :(CP 2 & 3 American Public Opinion Ch. 1: Where does polling come in?	
14th	4	16th	5
CP 1 & 2 American Public Opinion Ch. 2: Does public opinion affect the decisions that elected officials make? How confident can we be with polling data?		CP 2 & 3 American Public Opinion Ch. 2: Can question wording affect responses? How do you run a pre-election poll?	
21st	6	23rd	7
CP 3 & 6 Data Day!		CP 4 American Public Opinion Ch. 3: How much do Americans actually know about politics?	
28th	8	30th	9
CP 4 American Public Opinion Ch. 3: Where do our political opinions come from? What do conservatives think about politics? What do liberals think about politics?		CP 4 American Public Opinion Ch. 4: What are the national trends in public opinion?	
Oct 5th	10	7th	11
CP 3 & 6 Google Docs Essay Due Data Day!		CP 1 & 4 American Public Opinion Ch. 4: What matters most for voter’s opinions of the president?	

MONDAY	WEDNESDAY
12th 12 CP 4 American Public Opinion Ch. 5: Are you a member of that party because your parents are? Or maybe because of the school you went to?	14th 13 CP 4 American Public Opinion Ch. 5: Are your political beliefs determined by your genes??
19th 14 CP 5 American Public Opinion Ch. 6: How much does the public support democratic values?	21st 15 CP 5 American Public Opinion Ch. 6: Is there any consensus on public opinion? Does the public trust the government?
26th 16 CP 4 American Public Opinion Ch. 7: Are political opinions consistent across social class? What about race and ethnicity?	28th 17 CP 4 American Public Opinion Ch. 7: How does political opinion differ by religious groups? Are there differences between men and women?
Nov 2nd 18 CP 4 American Public Opinion Ch 8. Is the media biased?	4th 19 CP 4 American Public Opinion Ch. 8: Does the media report on public opinion or influence it? <i>Last day of midterm content</i>
9th 20 1, 2, 3, 4, & 5 Midterm Essay	11th 21 CP 2 & 4 American Public Opinion Ch. 9: Do informed voters vote differently than uninformed voters?
16th 22 CP 4 American Public Opinion Ch. 9: Do voters vote based on policy issues or just political party?	18th 23 Project Proposal Due CP 1 & 4 American Public Opinion Ch. 10: Do political parties represent our policy preferences?

MONDAY	WEDNESDAY
23rd Thanksgiving! - No Class :(25th Thanksgiving! - No Class :(
30th 24 Data Day!	Dec 2nd 25 Project Outline Due CP 1 American Public Opinion Ch. 10: Are politicians responsive to public opinion? Should they be?
7th 26 CP 1 American Public Opinion Ch. 11: Does public opinion matter for the performance of democracy?	9th 27 CP 1 American Public Opinion Ch. 11: What role does the public really play in democracy?
14th 28	16th 29 Final Project Due on iLearn (CP 3 & 6) Participation Self-assessment Due