Instructor: Dr. Efrén O. Pérez  
Class Meetings: Thursdays, 9:35 – 10:50 am  
Classroom: Wilson Hall 113  
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Instructor’s Office: Commons 345  
Office Hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11:30am-12:30pm (or by appointment)

Course Description

This course provides students with the fundamental tools and concepts needed to understand public opinion and its influence on American politics. As such, the objective is to draw students into a deeper understanding of public opinion by allowing them to appreciate the promise and perils that inhere in the study of this phenomenon. Students will therefore learn how Americans go about forming their political opinions and how these opinions influence the behavior of American lawmakers and U.S. institutions. To these ends, the course will draw on readings that acquaint students with the roles played by, among other factors, values, ideologies, prejudice, emotions, and identities in shaping Americans’ political attitudes. By familiarizing students with these fundamental concepts and techniques, the course imparts a clearer sense of what public opinion is, how it has been studied, and when we feel its influence in American politics.

Course Structure

We will meet two times per week. Each of those weeks will concentrate on a specific theoretical theme. During each meeting I will deliver a series of lectures meant to build on—but in no way substitute for—the assigned readings for each week. Toward the end of each class, I will strengthen students’ grasp of the material for the week by leading a discussion and debate of the readings and lectures.

Students are expected to complete all of the assigned readings for each theme by the day of discussion. Please do not make the mistaken assumption that lectures will substitute for each week’s readings—they do not. Students are expected to engage in informed discussions about the material they have encountered by, among other things: 1) assessing the quality of evidence marshaled in favor of arguments made by the readings/lectures; 2) teasing out the implications of the readings/lectures for contemporary politics; and 3) identifying linkages across the ideas presented in readings/lectures.

It is therefore imperative that students come prepared to each discussion; which is to say: students are expected to read the material prior to attending class on the day of discussion. This will ensure that dialogue about the material for each theme will revolve around informed assessments, rather than “gut reactions” to the readings and lectures. The two are not the same. The former involves evaluating course material based on what the authors and instructor have actually said and presented; the latter, on speculations or intuitions one has about the readings and lectures. If you complete the assigned readings, you need not worry about meeting this guideline, as your instructor will assist you in achieving it. Thus, each of our class meetings is a collective effort at mastering the material from class. The collective part of that statement means we all come prepared ready to engage in a conversation about the material for a
given theme; thus, part of your class grade will be based on the quality of your participation in class discussions (for further detail see section below on grades).

Each student will be graded according to four criteria. The first is **attendance**. Students are expected to attend each class. Not attending class is akin to missing an important meeting in the “real world”. It does not reflect very well on you or your time management, so try your best to avoid it. I understand that sometimes you will not be able to avoid it. Thus, each student will be allowed to miss two class sessions (i.e., a whole week worth of class) without any penalty (I don’t need to know why you missed class). Thereafter, your attendance grade will be penalized.

The second criterion used to grade you in class is **participation**: You are expected to **actively** contribute to class discussions. The key here is not a student’s volume of participation (i.e., how much one says during class), but the quality of a student’s insights (i.e., the depth of what one says during class). In other words, it is better to share two or three keen insights about the readings, than several obvious observations about what the class has read. In preparing for class participation, students should be less concerned about being “right” or “wrong”, and more with sharing their informed perspectives/views about the readings. To ensure we all come prepared, I will administer **short quizzes** at my discretion. These will be brief and consist of multiple choice and/or short answers. The upside to these quizzes is that they will give you quick and clear feedback on how you are generally doing in the course (something students seem to generally want).

In addition to the preceding criteria, students’ grades will also reflect their performance on two short papers and a final exam (see below).

**Short Papers**

Each student will be responsible for writing two short papers based on topics offered by the professor. It is my view that, in addition to providing you with intellectual moorings, the political science major should also equip you with useful professional skills. In this regard, the ability to write analytically, concisely, and persuasively is a tremendous asset in professional politics. Thus, the objective of these papers is to enable students to sharpen their craftsmanship in the written word. These papers are expected to be 4 to 6 pages in length (double-spaced), and they will be graded in terms of how well-organized, logical, incisive, and persuasive the analysis is. This may sound intimidating, but you will be expected to manage similar expectations in professional political settings (e.g., working for a U.S. Member of Congress). Your choice of topics (along with due dates) are as follows:

**Topic 1 (due 1/30):** The study of public opinion can be a challenging endeavor. Imagine that you are being considered for a position as a survey analyst for the president of the United States. Your job would be to design and monitor surveys that can gauge public support for the president. Convince the president and his staff that you are the right man or woman for this job. What types of survey question(s) would you ask to gauge presidential approval? How often would you ask these survey questions, and who within the American public would be taking your surveys? What process(es) would you employ to design and test the quality of the survey questions that are asked in your polls?

**Topic 2 (due 3/13):** Consider the following scenario. You are the polling expert for a Democratic candidate running for a congressional district in Texas. Several independent polls indicate your candidate, who is Mexican-American, has an average 10% margin of public support over his nearest rival, who is Anglo and Republican. The district he is running in is comprised largely of Anglo (40%), African American (40%), and Latino (20%) voters. Within each of these groups, the partisan breakdown is 45% Democrat – 35% Republican – 20% Independent for Anglos; 85%
Democrat – 5% Republican – 10% Independent for African Americans; and 55% Democrat – 25% Republican – 20% Independent for Latinos. How much faith do you have in this margin of support? Depending on your perspective, what might explain it? What additional steps would you take in order to yield greater confidence in these polling numbers? Your assignment is to explain to your candidate, in writing, what your assessment is of these independent polling figures, and what you think the campaign’s polling staff should do in their wake.

**Topic 3 (due 4/3):** Imagine the following situation: A recent poll revealed that 60% of White Americans, 50% of African Americans, and 50% of Latinos support placing a moratorium on immigration (i.e., a suspension of immigration). What factors do you think explain these figures for these groups of Americans? Is it the same factors for both groups? What further evidence would increase (or decrease) your confidence in these polling data, and why?

**Final Exam (Monday, 4/28 at 12pm)**

The final examination will consist of a take-home essay exam. I will develop a thorough list of questions pertaining to the course material. You are expected to answer two questions in total. The first essay endeavors to test your breadth of knowledge regarding public opinion. That is, can you bring together various strands of literature from the different weeks in a nuanced way? The second essay aims to assess your depth of knowledge regarding a specific module in the course. That is, can you thoroughly explain a specific body of literature that we covered during the semester? I will distribute the exam electronically on the scheduled date by 12pm. Students will have until 4pm that afternoon to return the exam to me via email (and a hard copy if the student wishes). The exam is open-note and open-book. It is not, however, open-consultation with your classmates. If I suspect any collaboration between students during the final exam, you can bet I will deal with it swiftly and strongly.

**Study Participation – Mandatory Extra Credit**

In order to inject some flexibility into the grading process, each student will receive 2 extra credit points for participating in a Political Science Study here on campus (details are forthcoming). You may use these points, in total sum, to boost your lowest grade on an assignment—including your final exam (but not your participation grade). For instance, let’s say you receive an 88 (B+) on one of your papers. But you think your performance on the paper was better than that. By applying your two points toward this paper, your (B+) is now an (A-). The additional benefit of this extra credit is that, by earning it through your participation in an actual study, you will learn about one crucial tool that political scientists use to study inter-group dynamics. If you do not tell me what assignment you want your extra credit points applied to, I will default to applying them to your lowest grade in the class.

**Grading**

Attendance and participation in class discussions 20%
Quizzes (at instructor’s discretion) (10%)
Short papers 40% (20% each)
Final exam 30%

**Miscellanea**

I expect you to silence your cell phones and refrain from texting during class. I also expect you to use your laptops during class for strictly academic purposes. Hence, you should refrain from checking your email, Facebook account, etc. Violation of these expectations is both rude and distracting, and I will deduct points from your participation grade for any detected infraction.
Course Books (required)


(1/7): Introduction: Course Overview and Expectations

Week 1 (1/9): Detecting and Studying Public Opinion – Methods and Techniques


Chapter 3 in Glynn et al. 1999. Public Opinion

Week 2 (1/14) and (1/16): Does Public Opinion Really Exist? How Do We Know?


Week 3 (1/21) and (1/23): Does Public Opinion Matter for Politics?


Week 4 (1/28) and (1/30): The Individual Ingredients in Public Opinion: Core Values


- First short paper due at the beginning of class on 1/30

Week 5 (2/4) and (2/6): The Individual Ingredients in Public Opinion: Heuristics


Week 6 (2/11) and (2/13): The Individual Ingredients in Public Opinion: Explicit and Implicit Prejudice


Week 7 (2/18) and (2/20): The Individual Ingredients in Public Opinion: Emotions


Week 8 (2/25) and (2/27): Racial Minorities and Public Opinion


- **ENJOY SPRING BREAK!!!**
- Second short paper due at the beginning of class on 3/13


**Week 10 (3/18) and (3/20): Beyond the Individual: Context and Public Opinion**


**Week 11 (3/25) and (3/27): The News Media and Public Opinion**


**Week 12 (4/1) and (4/3): Collective Rather Than Individual Opinions: The Macro Polity**


- Third short paper due at the beginning of class on 4/3
Week 13 (4/8) and (4/10): Controversies in Public Opinion: Tracking Polls, Exit Polls and Politics


Week 14 (4/15) and (4/17): Tying Up Loose Ends and Formal Review

- NO ASSIGNED READINGS FOR THIS WEEK.