Instructor: Dr. Efrén O. Pérez  
Class Meetings: Thursdays, 1:10pm – 3:40pm  
Classroom: Commons 363  
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Course Description

This course focuses on the continued salience of race in U.S. politics and its influence on the political attitudes and behaviors of Americans. Though the United States has always been a racially and ethnically diverse nation, it is becoming increasingly so. Profound demographic changes are once again rapidly transforming the political and social landscape of our nation, a trend most recently underscored by the election of Barack Obama. Yet the topic of race is also one that is charged with controversy, and dogged by misunderstanding. The aim of this course, therefore, is to arm students with the latest social scientific theories to explain and evaluate—in the most rigorous fashion—the nature and consequences of race in American politics. To this end, students will first learn what race is, where it originates from, and how and why it influences the political behavior of individuals—both White and non-White alike. Students will then develop a deeper understanding of the political behavior and attitudes of various racial groups, including African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Arab Americans. Accordingly, students will learn about the dynamics of political participation and opinion that are specific to each of these groups.

Course Structure

Generally, we will meet once per week. Each of those weeks will concentrate on a specific theoretical theme. Each class meeting will consist of a lecture designed to build on—but in no way substitute for—the assigned readings for each week. Toward the end of each class meeting, 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 start of each class. 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. Each student is allowed one (1) absence without any explanation to the professor. Thereafter, I will deduce points from your participation grade for each additional absence.

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 material, 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. Finally, students will occasionally take “pop” quizzes at the instructor’s discretion. These quizzes are meant to provide students with feedback on their class performance in between their short papers (see below).

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

**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. Papers are due at the beginning of class on the due date. Each paper should follow the paper guidelines established by the Vanderbilt political science department. These guidelines can be found at the link below:


**Topic 1 (Due 2/2):** Imagine you are an analyst for the U.S. Census Bureau charged with a review of the questions used to collect data on racial and ethnic groups in the United States (I will provide you with the actual questions used by the Census Bureau). Write a policy paper that argues for one of the following positions: 1) retention of these items as is; 2) a revision of these items; 3) elimination of these items altogether. If you take position 1 or 2, be sure that your answer, at minimum, explains what the assumptions behind these questions are, why the data that they generate is expected to be useful, and what potential problems these questions might raise. If you take position 3, be sure to address, at minimum, what will be gained by eliminating these questions and what will be lost as a result of their deletion.
**Topic 2 (Due 3/15):** Imagine you are a political strategist in Los Angeles, California. You have been hired by an African American Democratic candidate for city council to develop a plan to amass enough electoral votes to defeat the White Republican opponent. The district in contention is 20% White, 35% African American, 30% Latino, and 15% Asian American. Among Whites, 40% are registered Democrats and 20% are self-identified Independents. For the district’s African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans, these figures are, respectively: 88% Democrat and 5% Independent; 60% Democrat and 10% Independent; and 55% Democrat and 15% Independent.

Given what you know about the politics of several racial and ethnic groups, which groups would you target for mobilization? Why and how? Which groups would you be less inclined to mobilize? Why?

**Topic 3 (Due 4/19):** Is the concept of public opinion in the United States singular or plural? In other words, is there public opinion or are there varieties of public opinion? How can we tell the difference between these alternatives? And are these alternatives mutually exclusive? Why or why not?

**Topic 4 (Due 4/19):** Is prejudice a spent force in American politics? In other words, how much of a problem is the influence of prejudice on U.S. politics? How can we tell if it is or is not a challenge anymore? If you think it continues to be a challenge, what, in your view, can we do to mitigate it? If you do not think it is a challenge, are there reasons to think it may become a problem anew in the future—why?

**Final Exam (Tuesday, 5/1 at 3pm)**

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 race and politics in the U.S. 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 3 pm. Students will have until 7 pm 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%
Short Papers 50% (25% each)
Final Exam 30%

Miscellanea

Your focus during class should be on learning the material. Thus, 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

I anticipate distributing selections from a set of core texts to students in the class (i.e., through Blackboard). If my ability to do so changes, I will let you know so that you may purchase a used copy of the needed book(s) through the web.

(1/12): Introduction: Course Overview and Expectations

Week 1 (1/19): What is Race? An Inquiry into its Conceptual and Empirical Underpinnings


Week 2 (1/26): The Interface Between Race and Other Identities: Overlapping?...Distinct?


**Week 3 (2/2): Race and the Conventional Wisdom on Political Behavior**


- FIRST PAPER DUE AT BEGINNING OF CLASS.

**Week 4 (2/9): African Americans and Political Participation**


**Week 5 (2/16): Latinos and Political Participation**


**Week 6 (2/23): Asian Americans and Political Participation**


Week 7 (3/1): The Politics of Multi-Racial Americans (Guest Speaker: Prof. Natalie Masuoka)


• **ENJOY SPRING BREAK!**

Week 8 (3/15): Arab Americans and American Politics


• **SECOND PAPER DUE AT BEGINNING OF CLASS.**

Week 9 (3/22)

• **CLASS DOES NOT MEET. INSTRUCTOR AWAY AT RESEARCH CONFERENCE**

Week 10 (3/29): Black Public Opinion (Guest Speaker: Prof. Niambi Carter)


**Week 11 (4/5): Latino Public Opinion**


**Week 12 (4/12) Public Opinion in the Asian American Community**


**Week 13 (4/19) Racial Minorities as Targets of Public Opinion – Prejudice and Politics**


- **THIRD PAPER DUE AT BEGINNING OF CLASS.**