

Political Science 422 Public Opinion and Political Behavior  
Fall 2024  
SSPA 212 Wednesday 2-3:15pm

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Office Hours: Office Hours: Thursdays 11-1pm  
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## The Game Plan

This course is an upper division political science course on the topic of Public Opinion and Political Behavior. I assume general knowledge of government institutions, political science concepts, and research methods. However, this course will be accessible to students from all academic majors.

The purpose of this course is to explore issues related to public opinion, including what opinions are and how they are formed, what factors do and do not influence opinion development and change, and what implications these psychological processes have for the role of public opinions in democratic government.

This course has four objectives. We'll learn the organizing structures behind political beliefs: ideology, identity, personality and ambivalence. Second, we'll explore psychological processes of political judgment and evaluation: cognitive ability, informational cues, unconscious response, and emotion. Third, we'll examine how forces outside the individual work to persuade opinions, specifically how framing and media shape opinions. Fourth, we will learn how polling is conducted and scrutinize a lot of polling data.

This course will develop the following student skills: The student will be able to articulate how public opinion polling is conducted. The student will be able to critically evaluate polling data by its methodology and findings. The student will be able to write a critical evaluation of arguments for and against multiple public policy proposals by leveraging polling information. The student will be able to interpret opinion change as a function of external influences like media and rhetorical framing.

## How to Succeed in this Course

**Bring an open mind.** Enlightenment. It's the greatest gift you can give yourself. It's also why you came to sit in this room to the exclusion of other classrooms and activities. Don't deny yourself the opportunity to change your mind about strongly held beliefs.

**Prepare.** Read the assigned readings before each class. I have coordinated readings and lectures so that if you are on schedule, the lecture and reading will synergize. Useful discussions depend on students who have read and thought about the assigned material. Because I will be asking students about the week's readings and concepts, it is integral that you have some familiarity with the assigned readings before we meet.

**Participate.** Political science is about social problems, not solitary ones. Therefore, your participation and that of your classmates will help to enrich your understanding of these problems. Everyone in this course has something to contribute to this learning environment. I expect you will respectfully share your thoughts and ideas with each other. By participation, I mean engaging in conversation, not simply answering questions. My hope is that you will appreciate my Socratic style...it is time worn, old school.

## Major Course Assignments

The final course grade breaks down like this:

- Quizzes (10-12) - 35%
- Polling Series Reports (5-6) - 45%
- Discussion Posts (10-12) - 20%

What are **the types and sequence of assignments** for this class? Great question! There are three types of assignments: quizzes (10-12), reports on election polls and readings (5-6), and discussion posts (200-400 words) (10-12). The sequence follows a pattern throughout the semester. Students read assigned readings and watch lectures, then take a weekly quiz on that material. In class, students work together in small groups to make a discussion post. All dates and deadlines are assigned to students' canvas calendars by the instructor. The basis for assigning grades for submitted work follows a rubric posted in advance on the canvas assignment submission portal. Quizzes are graded according to whether (or not) the correct multiple-choice answer was selected, and qualitative responses are graded using a rubric.

**Late Assignments.** It is a student's responsibility to keep track of assignment due dates. Make-up quizzes and exams will be given only in cases of demonstrated medical emergencies, religious holidays, or university business, and must be arranged in advance. Written or other work submitted after the assigned due date without a university-approved absence will be marked down one grade daily. University excused absences include: 1. Illness or injury to the student; 2. Death, injury, or serious illness of an immediate family member or the like; 3. Religious reasons (California Education Code section 89320); 4. Jury duty or government obligation; 5. University sanctioned or approved activities (examples include: artistic performances, forensics presentations, participation in research conferences, intercollegiate athletic activities, student government, required class field trips).

**Withdrawal Policy.** Students hold the responsibility to withdraw from classes; instructors have no obligation to withdraw those who do not attend. Withdrawal after the first two weeks of instruction requires the signature of the instructor and department chair and is permissible only for serious and compelling reasons. During the final three weeks of instruction, withdrawals are not permitted except in cases such as accident or serious illness where the circumstances causing the withdrawal are clearly beyond the student's control and the assignment of an incomplete is not practical. Ordinarily, withdrawals in this category involve total withdrawal from the university. For deadlines, see: <http://www.csulb.edu/enrollment-services/key-dates-and-deadlines>

### Overall Course Grading Standards

- A = (90-100%) - student demonstrates outstanding proficiency in relevant course objectives
- B = (80-89%) - student demonstrates advanced proficiency in relevant course objectives
- C = (70-79%) - student demonstrates proficiency in relevant course objectives
- D = (60-69%) - student demonstrates partial proficiency in relevant course objectives
- F = (0-59%) - student demonstrates little to no proficiency in relevant course objectives

### For Those with Disabilities

The Bob Murphy ACCESS Center (BMAC) provides support services for students with deaf or hearing impairments, communication disabilities, learning disabilities, visual limitations, mobility limitations and other functional disabilities. Prior to a student receiving assistance, documentation from a qualified professional source must be submitted to BMAC: (562) 985-5401, [BMAC@csulb.edu](mailto:BMAC@csulb.edu); <http://web.csulb.edu/divisions/students/dss/> Any student who has a need for specific accommodations because of a disability should contact BMAC and the instructor promptly to make necessary arrangements.

## Required Text

Herb Asher. 2017. *Polling and the Public: What Every Citizen Should Know* (9<sup>th</sup> Ed.)

## Course Schedule

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### Introduction and Theories of Attitude Formation

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#### Week 1: August 26-September 1 Introduction and Opinion

- Ch. 1 pg. 1-18 Polling and the Public (Asher)
- Complete discussion exercise

#### Week 2: September 2-8 Opinion and Psychology

- Ch. 1 p. 19-40 Polling and the Public (Asher)
- [The Undecided Voters](#)

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### Structures of Belief

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In public opinion research, as in popular opinion, ideology was initially the main organizing principle. The key question is whether ideology is a distinct causal factor or simply a label for clusters of beliefs. Another organizing source is social groups, where group identities may shape beliefs, or it could be that we associate with like-minded individuals. From a psychological perspective, personality types might structure beliefs. Authoritarianism is a popular framework for understanding certain belief clusters, though it faces criticism for being ad hoc and not causal. Lastly, we'll explore how individuals handle inconsistent, unstructured and conflicting beliefs. Our polling book by Asher will describe the nitty gritty of polling, including samples, question wording, the data collection process, and the premier concern of pollsters *Nonattitudes*.

#### Week 3: Ideology (September 9-15)

- Ch. 2 The Problem of Nonattitudes (Asher)

#### Week 4: Identity (September 16-22)

- Ch. 3 Wording and Context of Questions (Asher)

#### Week 5: Personality (September 23-29)

- Ch. 4 Sampling Techniques (Asher)

#### Week 6: Ambivalence (September 30-October 6)

- Ch. 5 Interviewing and Data Collection Procedures

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## Cognitive Processes and Limitations

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Over the past two weeks, we've explored detailed psychological mechanisms behind belief formation and change. This section focuses on decision-making processes, examining how beliefs are created and influence behavior. We'll use experimental methods to study how individuals think with limited or flawed information, handle flawed memories, and rationalize decisions. We'll also delve into heuristics—shortcuts used in decision-making when perfect rationality isn't possible—and explore unconscious biases and instinctive judgments suggested by recent literature. Our polling book by Asher will help us to interpret polls, observe how the media uses polls, and examine the import of polls on elections.

### Week 7: Catch Up (October 7-13)

- Ch. 6 The Media and the Polls (Asher)

### Week 8: Catch Up (October 14-20)

- Ch. 7 Polls and Elections (Asher)

### Week 9: Cognitive Limits (October 21-27)

### Week 10: Heuristics (October 28- November 3)

- Ch. 8 Analyzing and Interpreting Polls (Asher)

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## Persuasion

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In the concluding weeks of the course, we turn from analysis to synthesis, examining the real-world interplay of the various factors we have previously explored. We begin with the fraught question of the effect of the news media on consumers: how large is it, and is bias a problem given the vulnerabilities we have already thoroughly documented? Delving deeper into a specific mechanism here leads to the burgeoning field of “framing,” where external sources affect not people's beliefs per se, but the relative importance ranking of the issues before them.

### Week 11: Unconscious Bias (November 4-10)

- Ch. 9 Polling and Democracy (Asher)
- Lauren Feldman. The opinion factor: The effects of opinionated news on information processing and attitude change. *Political Communication*, 28(2):163–181, 2011.

### Week 12: Emotion (November 11-17)

- Nicholas Valentino et. al. Cues That Matter: How Political Ads Prime Racial Attitudes During Campaigns. *American Political Science Review*, 96(01):75–90, 2004

### Week 13: Post Election Polling Reports (November 18-24)

- To be assigned

### Week 14: Thanksgiving Break (November 25 – December 1)

Week 15: Catch Up and Post Election Reflection (December 2-8)

- To be assigned

Final Exam Time Wednesday December 18, 2:45-4:45pm