**Does Public Opinion Matter?**

ECTS: 10

Period: Autumn semester 2013

Level: Master

Capacity limits: Each module consists of a maximum of about 20 students. The students need to register for the module.

Language of teaching: English

Location: Aarhus

Primary programme: Master in Political Science

Institute: Department of Political Science and Government

**Qualification description**

The course module offers a more extensive and more thorough analysis of a topic from within political science. To this end, the course module provides an overview and a critical discussion of the literature and the issues relevant for the topic of the seminar. The specific objectives for this module are that the participants:

* Understand the variety of factors that influence the formation and updating of political opinions.
* Understand the conditions under which public opinion influences and does not influence the behavior of political actors and institutions.
* Understand methodological challenges related to the measurement of opinions, their causes, and their effects.
* Are able to critique and apply normative questions about citizenship and democracy to empirical public opinion research, and vice versa.
* Are able to assess the validity of contemporary claims about public opinion in light of psychological, political, and normative perspectives on public opinion.

**Course objective**

Does public opinion matter? At its core, democracy is often defined as government by the people. Yet, most citizens are not directly part of the public policy process and considerable skepticism exists regarding the capacity of citizens to form and act on their political opinions. How, then, do citizens' views get represented? Should they be represented? How do people think and reason about political issues? Are democratic institutions able to reflect public views effectively and translate those views into policy? And are the public's preferences --- individually or in aggregate --- sufficiently informed, meaningful, coherent, stable, and/or responsive to external events to merit being the basis for the democratic form of government?

The course is structured as a dialog between empirical research on public opinion formation, representation, and political influence and literature assessing the democratic implications of that evidence, as well as a debate between views about the importance, value, and relevance of public opinion and skeptical positions about the incoherence or irrelevance of public opinion in contemporary democratic politics. As examples, the course will help students understand the relationship between citizens' opinions and their vote choices in elections in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, the dynamics of public opinion surrounding European Union policies (such as enlargement), the influence of media, social networks, and genetics on political viewpoints, and more. The course thus provides a thorough examination of issues related to public opinion --- what psychological research tells us about what opinions are and how they are formed, how opinions shape citizens' political behavior, and how legislatures and other governmental institutions respond (or do not respond) to citizens' preferences.

**Teacher**

Thomas J. Leeper

**Recommended prerequisites**

Master in Political Science

**Teaching Methods**

Class teaching and seminar discussion

**Comments on teaching**

The seminar module requires active participation of students. At the beginning of the seminar module the lecturer and the students agree on specific "activity requirements" that the students have to fulfill.

**Assessment**

7-day written home examination

**Literature**

Literature used in the course will include:

* Anthony Downs. *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. Harper & Row, New York, 1957.
* Benjamin I. Page, Robert Y. Shapiro, and Glenn R. Dempsey. What Moves Public Opinion? A*merican Political Science Review*, 81, 1987.
* James A. Stimson, Michael B. Mackuen, and Robert S. Erikson. Dynamic Representation. *American Political Science Review*, 89:543–565, 1995.
* Jane Mansbridge. Rethinking Representation. *American Political Science Review*, 97:515–528, 2003.
* John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse. *Stealth Democracy: Americans’ Beliefs about How Government Should Work*. Cambridge University Press, New York, 2002.
* John Sides and Jack Citrin. European Opinion About Immigration: The Role of Identities, Interests and Information. *British Journal of Political Science*, 37:477–504, 2007.
* John T. Jost, Christopher M. Federico, and Jaime L Napier. Political Ideology: Its Structure, Functions, and Elective Affinities. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 60:307–37.
* John Zaller. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Cambridge University Press, New York, 1992.
* Kevin Smith, John R. Alford, Peter K. Hatemi, Lindon J. Eaves, Carolyn L. Funk, and John R. Hibbing. Biology, Ideology, and Epistemology: How Do We Know Political Attitudes Are Inherited and Why Should We Care? *American Journal of Political Science*, 56:17–33, 2012.
* Martin Gilens. Political Ignorance and Collective Policy Preferences. *American Political Science Review*, 95:379–396, 2001.
* Michael B. Mackuen, Robert S. Erikson, and James A. Stimson. Macropartisanship. *American Political Science Review*, 83:1125–1142, 1989.
* Philip E. Converse. The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics. In David Apter, ed., *Ideology and Discontent*. Free Press, New York, 1964.
* Richard R. Lau and David P. Redlawsk. Voting Correctly. *American Political Science Review*, 91:585–598, 1997.

**Syllabus**

The module compendium consists of about 1,200 pages.