Core Course 1.0.2.A – Advanced Political Behavior:  
The Causes and Consequences of Public Opinion Formation  

Fall 2018  

Content description:  
Political scientists (as civil servants or consultants) offer advice to national and local politicians including the general public. To accomplish this task effectively, political scientists must have an adequate understanding of the nuts and bolts of citizens’ opinions and reactions. In particular, under what circumstances do ordinary citizens respond negatively or positively to government policies? How do ordinary citizens cope with important information about policy issues – are they objective or deeply partisan? Are ordinary citizens responsible voters concerned with the well-being of the nation or simply focused on their own narrow interests? To what extent can interethnic relations be improved?  

These important questions clearly show that understanding how citizens respond to events and form opinions is fundamental to understanding contemporary politics. Fortunately, our knowledge about these issues is extensive. Political scientists use a variety of different theories and explanations to understand mass behavior, from work focused on stable influences such as citizens’ biological and psychological dispositions and their location in the social structure to dynamic factors such as key messages from the mass media and political elites.  

This core course provides a comprehensive, updated overview of the literature from the major approaches and the classic works to standing debates on perennial topics like voting and tolerance, to current controversies such as the relative weight of current experiences, past socialization and biology in influencing opinion formation. This means that the course covers and combines major insights from leading disciplines, among these political sociology, political psychology, social psychology and evolutionary biology. Hence, the course goes far beyond any simple notion of ‘economic man’. Rather, Aristotle’s complex notion of human beings as political animals is more adequate.
The insights and approaches of the course have great relevance both outside and inside Academia. For students contemplating careers in the public or private sectors, the course offers essential insights into key factors defining the social environment in which any politically oriented organization operates: public opinion, electoral behavior and intergroup relations. Such insights are key to providing solid advice on everything from the content of new laws to the timing of information campaigns targeting the public. In the shorter run, the course gives participants an ideal vantage point from which to pursue more specialized questions and interests in other seminars and/or in their MA thesis (speciale), but it is also relevant for those who are primarily interested in an overview of the field.

The course is structured in three blocks. First, we cover five major approaches to the study of public opinion and political behavior: The biological approach, the sociological approach, the psychological approach, the rational choice/economic approach, and the communication approach. Readings for this block will be a combination of classic studies and more recent critiques and/or updates. In the second block, we address topics that both in the past and more recently have attracted attention. The list of topics includes ethnic and political tolerance, voting behavior, support for the welfare state, effects of social networks and the nature of political ideology. In the final block, we delve into current debates about such topics as the relative weight of socialization and biology for attitude formation, the role of self-interest and experiences in political attitudes, the extent to which citizens are competent for democracy, the effects of ethnic diversity and the relationship between affect and reason in political behavior. Throughout each of the blocks, we will discuss potential topics for the final synopses as well as the strengths and weaknesses of empirical analyses of political behavior.

A substantial number of the classes will be taught in Danish, if the enrolled students’ language proficiencies allow it. The exam, however, will be held in English for everyone.

**Learning objectives:**

After completion of the course, students should be able to:

- Systematically explain the contents of classical and modern theories about the causes and consequences of public opinion.
- Critically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of classical and modern theories about public opinion.
- Critically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of empirical analyses of the causes and consequences of public opinion.
- Critically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different types of research designs aimed at examining research questions about the causes and consequences of public opinion.
- Independently identify gaps in existing knowledge about the causes and consequences of public opinion.
- Independently develop and clearly present a theoretically grounded research question applying classical and/or modern theories about public opinion that advances our knowledge about the topic.
- Independently develop and clearly present a research design addressing a research question about the causes and consequences of public opinion.

Course organization:
The course runs for 15 weeks with two weekly classes of three hours each. Students must read the assigned texts prior to each class so that focus in the class can be on discussion and elaboration of the contents of the assigned readings as well as related materials. The classes combine presentations by students and teachers as well as group work and other activities aimed at furthering student participation and engagement with the subjects discussed.
Course plan and readings:

**Week 36**

Class 1, Thursday. September 6th: Introduction to the Course and the Field of Political Behaviour


Week 37

Class 1, Monday, September 10th: The Sociological Approach I: Interests


Class 2, Thursday, September 13th: The Sociological Approach II: Primary and Secondary Socialization

Week 38

Class 1, Monday, September 17th: The Economic Approach I: Redistributive attitudes
- Downs, Anthony. 1957. An Economic Theory of Democracy. Boston: Addison-Wesley: Ch. 1, p. 3-10; Ch. 3, p. 36-40; Ch. 13, p. 238-259

Class 2, Thursday, September 20th: The Economic Approach II: Voting behavior
Week 39

Class 1, Monday, September 24th: Political Cognition, I: Information Processing


Class 2, Thursday, September 27th: Political Cognition, II: The Role of Affect and Emotions


Week 40

Class 1, Monday, October 1st: The Social Psychological Approach: Social Identity Theory


Class 2, Thursday, October 4th: The Communication Approach: Framing and Priming

Week 41

Class 1, Monday, October 8th: The Biological Approach I: The Origins of Politics


Class 2, Thursday, October 11th: The Biological Approach II: Evolved thinking.

Week 42:

NO CLASS
Week 43

Class 1, Monday, October 22\textsuperscript{nd}: Nature, Nuture and the power of Personalities


Class 2, Thursday, October 25\textsuperscript{th}: Information, Constraint, and Citizen Competence

  Critical Review 18(1-3): Selections: p. 3-26; p. 29-34; p. 44-52


Week 44

Class 1, Monday, October 29th: Shortcuts to the Rescue?


Class 2, Thursday, November 1st: Aggregation to the Rescue?

Week 45:

Class 1, Monday, November 5th: The Structure of Political Predispositions


Class 2, Thursday, November 8th: Party Identification - Unmoved Mover or Sum of Preferences

Week 46

Class 1, Monday, November 12th: Testing the Competing Theories of Party Identification


Class 2, Thursday, November 15th: Voting I: Class Voting

Week 47

Class 1, Monday, November 19th: Voting II: Issue Voting


Class 2, Thursday, November 22nd: Determinants of Radical Right-Wing Voting

Week 48

Class 1, Monday, November 26th: Intergroup Contact Effects – Harmony and Disharmony


Class 2, Thursday, Nov. 29th: Retrospective Voting

Week 49

Class 1, Monday, December 3rd: Biases in Retrospective Decision-Making


Class 2, Thursday, December 6th: Partisan Motivated Reasoning

Week 50

Class 1, Monday, December 10th: Limits to partisan motivated reasoning?


Class 2, Thursday, December 13th: Immigration as a Threat – But What Type of Threat?

Week 51

Class 1, Monday, December 17th. Out-Group Responses and Attitudes Toward Welfare


Class 2, Thursday, December 20th: Presentation and Discussion of Synopses