

Political Science 230: Public Opinion in American Democracy

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Office hours: Wednesdays 9:30-11:00 a.m.

Fall Semester, 2005
Mondays, 2:00-4:50 pm
103 McNeil & UDAL in 108 McNeil
Section 301

"Public opinion is so much a part of our politics that it is surprising that we have not incorporated it into the Constitution. We constantly use the term, seek to measure whatever it is and to influence it, and worry about who else is influencing it. Public opinion exists in any state, but in our democracy it has a special power. . . .By the early years of the nineteenth century, Americans had come to realize that public opinion, "that invisible guardian of honour--that eagle-eyed spy on human actions--that inexorable judge of men and manners--that arbiter, whom tears cannot appease, nor ingenuity soften--and from whose terrible decisions there is not appeal," had become "the vital principle" underlying American government, society and culture."

--Gordon Wood in *Moral Foundations of the American Republic*, 1978, p. 125

Course Description:

This course is an introduction to the nature and role of public opinion in American political life. As the quotation from Gordon Wood indicates, the concept of public opinion exerts enormous influence on the political process in the United States. Most Americans agree in principle that public opinion should exercise major influence in a democracy, but there remain difficult questions about how to conceptualize and measure the phenomenon, the capacity of the citizenry to develop and apply reasoned opinions, and whether the emphasis on public opinion necessarily produces wise public policy. These are among the questions we will explore in the course.

We will examine American public opinion from a wide variety of viewpoints, including the perspectives of political scientists, sociologists and psychologists, and those interested in public opinion for more practical reasons, such as political activists who want to change mass opinion, or members of the opinion polling industry who want to provide candidates with the information they need to win a campaign.

The course is also designed to satisfy Penn's Quantitative Data Analysis requirement for those who need it. Toward that end, students will be required to do a series of assignments involving the analysis of quantitative data on public opinion. Four homework exercises will teach students how to analyze survey data in order to answer substantive questions about American public opinion. For purposes of the homework assignments, the entire class will use The American National Election Studies (ANES) public opinion survey from the 2000 presidential election. Toward the end of the semester, students will complete one additional take-home assignment in which they draw on data from public opinion data on a topic that is of interest to them, and then ask and answer a series of questions based on those data. In addition to analyzing quantitative data on public opinion, students will also learn the basics of research design, hypothesis testing and causal inference, and use these skills to critique interpretations of public opinion.

The course is organized into three parts that represent three major substantive areas in academic research on public opinion. Below I describe each of these topics in greater depth, and outline the general requirements for the course.

Part I. Polls as Public Opinion. When the term "public opinion" is used today, what usually comes to mind first are poll results. But polls are only one, relatively recent, way of thinking about public opinion. Nonetheless, for this reason, our point of departure in studying public opinion will be the analysis of polls as one possible representation of public opinion. The first section of the course is designed to make students well informed consumers of polls by giving them a practical appreciation of how and why public opinion polls are done. Emphasis will be on using this knowledge to critique popular interpretations of the "meaning" of poll results. In addition, we will spend time learning about the major methodological approaches to studying public opinion, in preparation for the final class project.

Part II: Case Studies in Controversy of Over the "Meaning" of Public Opinion. During these weeks we will talk about specific case studies that have prompted contemporary controversies over the interpretation of public opinion. These include the "crisis of confidence" and declining trust in the United States government, controversies over whether political tolerance has increased in the U.S., the analysis of racial attitudes using public opinion data, and the role of self-interest in influencing American public opinion.

Part III: The Dynamics of Public Opinion. The third and final part of the course focuses on what moves public opinion; that is, what contributes to the formation of opinions and how and why do they change? During these weeks we will talk about what is known about the many and varied ways that people, media and institutions influence public opinion. We will focus on this topic from the perspectives of 1) a person trying to apply principles of persuasion toward a certain goal (e.g., encouraging teenagers to practice safe sex, or encouraging voters to support a particular candidate), 2) someone trying to evaluate a claim about public opinion that he or she comes across in media coverage, and 3) from the broader perspective of the role that public opinion plays in structuring the social and political world.

Course Objectives:

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The three main objectives of the course are 1) to familiarize you with theory and research on public opinion in the United States, 2) to improve your ability to critically evaluate claims about public opinion, and 3) to provide you with the basic skills you need to ask and answer your own research questions using public opinion data. This combination of skills will, in turn, serve purposes that will go well beyond the demands of this course. These include:

- (1) Enabling you to understand and evaluate the political or social science results presented in other courses and in books and journals.
- (2) Helping you better understand and evaluate political and public policy debates, which often rest on empirical claims and involve the use of statistics and causal reasoning.
- (3) Helping you develop the ability to do research and to make reasonable decisions on the basis of quantitative evidence.
- (4) Familiarizing you, at an introductory level, with some statistical methods and the use of computers for data analysis.

No particular prerequisites are required, but students who have had previous courses in statistics or research design should consult with me to see if the class is appropriate. In this course we will not be concerned with memorizing formulas or doing extensive mathematical computations by hand, but I will expect students to learn how to use quantitative reasoning skills to translate questions from everyday language into quantitative analyses. If you learn ways to *think* about quantitative issues, you'll still be using this class 10 years from now. If you memorize formulas, you won't be using it 10 *months* from now. My goal is for you to learn some skills and habits that you will use for a long time to come.

Course Requirements:

There are several required activities for this course. First, all students are expected to attend classes and to participate in class discussions. In order to facilitate discussion, you should come to class having read that week's assignments *in advance* of class meetings. Because class only meets once a week and often involves topics not covered in the readings, it is essential that you attend regularly. Regular contributions to class discussion are expected.

Second, all students must take a cumulative final examination covering class readings and discussions. A third component of your grade is based on the four homework assignments that ask you to analyze and interpret public opinion data. These exercises are designed to make certain you have an adequate grasp of data analysis techniques taught in the course before you do your own original analysis of public opinion data.

The fourth course requirement is a project involving original data analysis on a public opinion topic of your choosing. **These topics must be agreed upon with me before you pursue them.** Because you will spend a fair amount of time on this project, you should be certain to pick something that genuinely interests you. I can be of help in locating appropriate data once you have found an appropriate research question. Students may turn in a one page paper proposal any time on or before the fifth week of class, and I will read it and make suggestions or alterations as needed **before** you obtain and analyze data, and then write the paper. Please do not write a paper without having the topic approved by me in advance. You could end up receiving no credit for all of your work. A separate handout will suggest some possible options for the final paper in greater detail.

Grading Breakdown and Important Dates to Remember:

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	When & Where	% of Grade
Original Data Analysis proposals	To me <i>no later than</i> October 10th ; <i>Earlier submissions welcomed!</i>	0
Four short homework assignments	As assigned in class. Always due at the next class, 5% each Due dates: 9-26; 10-10; 10-31; 11-21	20%
Original Data Analysis Paper	Due in class, December 5 th	35%
Final Exam	Tentatively scheduled for Wednesday, December 21 st , 12-2 pm (Open Book)	35%
Class Discussion and Participation	I am happy to tell you what your tentative grade is at any time after the 3 rd week of class	10%

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Due no later than
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Required Course Readings:

- Pollock, Philip H. 2005. *The Essentials of Political Analysis, 2nd edition*. Washington, DC: CQ Press.
- Pollock, Philip H. 2005. *An SPSS Companion to Political Analysis, 2nd edition*. Washington, DC: CQ Press.
- Cialdini, Robert B. 2001. *Influence: Science and Practice, 4th Edition*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Erikson, Robert S. , and Tedin, Kent L. 2005. *American Public Opinion: Its Origin, Contents, and Impact, 7th Edition*. New York: Pearson-Longman.
- Norrander, Barabara, and Clyde Wilcox. Eds. 2002. *Understanding Public Opinion, 2nd edition*. Washington, DC: CQ Press.
- Large packet of articles available via Blackboard

TOPICS BY WEEK

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Page Break

September 12: Course Introduction and Overview: Public Opinion in Theory and Practice

- Syllabus overview
- “Requirements for Original Data Analysis Projects.”
- [“Good Sources of Public Opinion Data”](#)
- “Getting Started with Data Analysis.”
- “Introduction: The Diverse Paths to Understanding Public Opinion.” In Norrander and Wilcox.
- “Appendix: A Primer on Statistics and Public Opinion.” In Norrander and Wilcox.
- In class viewing of *Prisoners of Silence*, Television Program on Facilitated Communication.

I. POLLS AS PUBLIC OPINION

September 19: What is Meant by *Public Opinion*?

- Lippmann, Walter. Excerpt from Chapter III, “The Public and Its Role.” In *The Essential Lippmann*, C. Rossiter and J. Lare (eds.), Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Noelle-Neumann, E. 1979. “Public Opinion and the Classical Tradition: A Re-evaluation.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 43: 143-56.
- Tilly, Charles. 1983. “Speaking Your Mind without Elections, Surveys or Social Movements.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 47: 461-78.
- Ginsberg, Benjamin. 1986. “Polling and the Transformation of Public Opinion,” Chapter 3 in *The Captive Public: How Mass Opinion Promotes State Power*. New York: Basic Books.
- Erikson and Tedin, Chapter 1.
- Introduction through Chapter 2, [plus Chapter 4](#) in Pollock, *Companion*.

September 26: An Introduction to Polling, Sampling, and the Analysis of Public Opinion Data

Note: Analysis Assignment #1 Due

- "The Sins of Shere Hite." Chapter 1 in D. W. Moore, *The Superpollsters: How they Measure and Manipulate Public Opinion in America*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows.
- Pollock, *Essentials*, Chapter 5.
- Erikson and Tedin, Chapters 2 and 3.
- Feldman, S. 1991. "What Do Survey Questions Really Measure?" *The Political Methodologist* 4: 1-5.
- Fishkin, J.S. 1992. "The Idea of a Deliberative Opinion Poll." *The Public Perspective* (Jan./Feb. 1992).
- Traugott, M. W. 1992. "The Deliberative Opinion Poll is a Well-Intended, But Flawed Idea." *The Public Perspective* (Jan./Feb. 1992).

Deleted: <#>Schudson, M. 1993. "Was There Ever a Public Sphere? If So, When? Reflections on the American Case." Chapter 6 in C. Calhoun (Ed.), *Habermas and The Public Sphere*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.¶

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October 3: Basics of Research Design

- Pollock, *Essentials*, Chapters 1 through 3, and Chapters 6 and 7.
- Chapters 3 and 6 in Pollock, *Companion*.
- Schudson, M. 1993. "Was There Ever a Public Sphere? If So, When? Reflections on the American Case." Chapter 6 in C. Calhoun (Ed.), *Habermas and The Public Sphere*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

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October 10: Formulating and Testing Hypotheses with Public Opinion Data

Note: Analysis Assignment #2 Due

Note: Original Project Ideas Due

- Chapter 4 in Pollock, *Essentials*
- Chapter 11 in Pollock, *Companion*.

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FALL BREAK

II: CASE STUDIES IN CONTROVERSY OVER THE MEANING OF PUBLIC OPINION

October 24: Is There (or Has There Ever Been) a "Crisis" of Confidence?

- Miller, A.H. 1974. "Political Issues and Trust in Government: 1964-1970." *American Political Science Review* 68: 951-972.
- Citrin, J. 1974. "Comment: The Political Relevance of Trust in Government." *American Political Science Review* 68: 973-88.
- Miller, A.H. "Rejoinder to "Comment" by Jack Citrin: Political Discontent or Ritualism?" *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 68, No. 3. (Sep., 1974), pp. 989-1001.
- Part 5 In Norrander and Wilcox.
- Hetherington, Marc J. 2005. *Why Trust Matters: Declining Political Trust and the Demise of*

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American Liberalism. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Excerpt.

- [Chapters 7 and 8 in Pollock, *Companion*.](#)
- [Erikson and Tedin, Chapter 6.](#)

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October 31: Public Opinion on Political Issues I: Political Tolerance and Civil Liberties

Note: Analysis Assignment #3 Due

- Corbett, M. 1982. "Tolerance and the First Amendment." Ch. 2 in *Political Tolerance in America: Freedom and Equality in Public Attitudes*. New York: Longman.
- Sullivan, J.L., J. Piereson, G.E. Marcus. 1979. "An Alternative Conceptualization of Political Tolerance: Illusory Increases 1950s-1970s." *American Political Science Review* 73: 781-94.
- Mueller, John. 1988. Trends in Political Tolerance. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 52 (1): 1-25.
- Sullivan, J.L., and G. Marcus. 1988. A Note On "Trends in Political Tolerance." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 52 (1): 26-32.
- [Norrander and Wilcox, Part 2.](#)

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November 7: Public Opinion on Political Issues II: Race-related Policies

- Bobo, L.D., Krysan, M., Schuman, H. and C. Steeh. 1998. *Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations*, Revised Edition. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Excerpt.
- Sniderman, P.M., Piazza, T., Tetlock, P.E. and A. Kendrick. 1991. The New Racism. *American Journal of Political Science* 35(2): 423-447.
- Sniderman, P.M.. *Reaching Beyond Race*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Excerpt.

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2) Is Public Opinion Driven By Self-Interest?¶
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III. THE DYNAMICS OF PUBLIC OPINION

November 14th: Investigating the Origins of Mass Opinion: Self-interest, Group Interests, and Ideology

- [Norrander and Wilcox, Parts 1 and 3.](#)
- Sears, D.O., and Funk, C.A. 1990. "Self-Interest in American Public Opinion." *In Beyond Self-Interest*, Jane J. Mansbridge (ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Green, D.P., and A.E. Gerken. 1989. "Self-interest and Public Opinion Toward Smoking Restrictions and Cigarette Taxes." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 53: 1-16.
- [Erikson and Tedin, Chapters 5 and 7.](#)

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III. THE DYNAMICS OF PUBLIC OPINION¶
November 14th: ¶
November 21st: Origins and Processes of Opinion Change . (Assignment #4 Due)¶
Cialdini, Robert. 1988. *Influence: Science and Practice*. Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman and Co. ¶
November 28th: Presentation and Discussion of Data Analysis Projects¶
Erikson and Tedin, Chapters 10-12.¶
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November 21st: Processes of Opinion Change

Note: Analysis Assignment #4 Due

- Cialdini, Robert. 1988. *Influence: Science and Practice*. Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman and Co.
- Erikson and Tedin, Chapters 4 and 8.

November 28th: Presentation and Discussion of Data Analysis Projects

Note: Highlights of Original Projects presented and discussed in class

December 5th: Media, Public Opinion, and Policy Makers

Note: Original Projects Handed in

- Schudson, M. 1995. The Illusion of Ronald Reagan's Popularity. Chapter 6 in *The Power of News* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Patterson, Thomas. *Out of Order*. New York: Knopf. Excerpt.
- Norrander and Wilcox, Part 4.
- Erikson and Tedin, Chapters 9-11.

FINAL EXAM: Tentatively scheduled for Wednesday, December, 21st, 12-2pm

Overview of Four Homework Assignments (Handouts in Class):

1. Intro and Descriptive Statistics: Due in class, September 26th
2. Testing for Differences in Means: Due in class, October 10th
3. Measures of Association: Due in class, October 31st
4. Introduction to Multivariate Analysis: Due in class, November 21st

Deleted: Davison, W.P. 1983. The Third Person Effect in Communication. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 47: 1-15.¶
Schudson, M. 1995. The Illusion of Ronald Reagan's Popularity. Chapter 6 in *The Power of News* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).¶
Zillmann, D. and H. Brosius. 2000. Exemplification Effects of Fiction and Quasi-Fiction. Chapter 5 in *Exemplification in Communication*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.¶

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Vallone, R., Ross, L., and M. Lepper. The Hostile Media Phenomenon. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 49: 577-585.¶
Iyengar, S.

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FINAL EXAM: Tentatively scheduled for Wednesday, December, 21st, 12-2pm¶

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Overview of Four Homework Assignments (Handouts):¶

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<#>Introduction to Multivariate Analysis- Due in class, March 31¶