

Political Science 503: Public Opinion

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Spring Quarter, 2004
M & W, 9:30 - 11:18
RA (Ramseyer Hall) 100

Office Hours: M & W, 11:30 - 1:00, or by appt.

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Derby
Office Hours:

“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 we 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 have come to realize that public opinion ... had become the vital principle underlying American government, society and culture.”

---Gordon Wood, *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 above indicates, the concept of public opinion exerts enormous influence on the political process in the United States. While most of us would probably agree that public opinion ought to exercise a major influence in a democracy, complications arise when we consider questions such as, “How should public opinion be conceptualized and measured?” and “Are ordinary citizens sufficiently informed and thoughtful to play such a pivotal role in shaping public policy and the decisions of our elected leaders?”

We will consider a number of important topics and questions in this course. What do we mean by ‘public opinion’ and why is it important to democratic theory? Because public opinion is now nearly synonymous with polling (although it hasn’t always been), we will spend a fair amount of time considering polling procedures. We will then turn to a discussion of the nature of public opinion: how sophisticated (or unsophisticated) is it, and to what extent can public opinion be manipulated by politicians and other elites? We will consider the state of public opinion on a number of controversial issues, and the extent to which it has evolved over time. Finally, we will consider the political ramifications of public opinion for elections, and representation: how does public opinion influence electoral choices, and to what extent do our elected representatives follow public opinion (and should they)? The course has two central, and related, goals: (1) to help you become more critical consumers of public opinion data and (2) to help you to begin to think like social scientists, by focusing on the empirical measurement, analysis, and interpretation of public opinion data.

Course Requirements and Grading:

There will be two examinations: a midterm during the class period on Wednesday, April 28th, and a final during the scheduled final examination period (Wednesday, June 9th, 9:30 – 11:18). The final exam is noncumulative and so will concentrate on the material covered in the second half of class. **Both exams will be held in rooms other than the regular class room.** There is a paper assignment described elsewhere in the syllabus, that is due Friday, May 28th.

The breakdown of the final grade is as follows:

Midterm Examination	35%	(W, April 28)
Midterm in Newton Hall 172		
Final Examination	35%	(W, June 9 th)
Final locations tba		
Paper	30%	(F, May 28 th) ** see page 7 of syllabus **

I am also likely to make available to you a couple of extra credit research opportunities; I will explain those details as they become available.

Finally, I expect you to attend class, to have done the reading before class and to be able to participate in class discussion. I will give some small consideration to those who are conscientious, active class participants when it comes time to assigning final grades.

Readings

There are two books required for the course, and available for purchase at campus bookstores:

Robert S. Erikson & Kent L. Tedin. (2003). *American Public Opinion*. 6th edition. Longman. This must be the 6th edition marked "Updated Edition" on the cover; the copyright date is 2003. There is an earlier 6th edition with a 2001 copyright date that is not the right text. (Abbreviated E&T on syllabus.)

Barbara Norrander & Clyde Wilcox, editors. (2002). *Understanding Public Opinion*. 2nd edition. CQ Press. (Abbreviated N&W on syllabus.)

In addition there are a small number of additional readings, all available online through the university library website. Four of those are review articles of specific topics, from the *Annual Review of Political Science* or *Annual Review of Psychology* series. To access those:

1. Go to University Library home page (need to log in if you are trying from a non-University computer)
2. Type in title: Annual Review of Political Science (or Psychology, as appropriate)
3. When the results are returned, click on the "online" option and then "connect to the website."
4. Browse either through the appropriate volume by year of publication, or search by the author's name to find the article.
5. PDF (adobe acrobat needed) is a cleaner printout; "Full-text" is the other option.

Course Schedule and Readings Assignments

1. M 3/29: *Introduction to the course*
2. W 3/31: *The meaning and importance of public opinion*
 - E&T, Ch. 1, "Public opinion in democratic societies"
3. M 4/5 *Polling and Measurement*
 - E&T, Ch. 2, "Polling: The scientific assessment of public opinion"
 - N&W, Introduction, pp. 9-16
 - N&W, Appendix, "A primer on statistics and public opinion"
 - Survey research and societal change. Roger Tourangeau, *Annual Review of Psychology*. Volume 55, Page 775-801, 4 February 2004 (online access, see p. 2 of the syllabus)
4. W 4/7 *Polling and Measurement, continued*
5. M 4/12 *The Psychology of Opinion Holding*
 - E&T, Ch. 3, "Microlevel Opinion: The psychology of opinion-holding"
 - E&T, Ch. 4, pp. 99-104 (ideological and partisan movement)
 - N&W, Ch. 9, Abramowitz & Saunders, "Ideological re-alignment and U.S. Congressional elections"
 - Preference Formation; James N. Druckman & Arthur Lupia, *Annual Review of Political Science*. Volume 3, Page 1-24, June 2000 (online access, see p. 2 of the syllabus)
6. W 4/14 *The Psychology of Opinion Holding, continued*
7. M 4/19 *The Sources of Public Opinion: Socialization*
 - E&T, Ch 5, "Political socialization and political learning"
8. W 4/21 *The Sources of Public Opinion: Mass Media and Elite Rhetoric*
 - E&T, Ch. 8, "The print and broadcast media and political opinions:
 - N&W, Ch. 12, McGraw, "Manipulating public opinion"
 - The media and democracy: Beyond Myths and Stereotypes. Doris Graber, *Annual Review of Political Science*. Volume 6, Page 139-160, June 2003 (online access, see p. 2 of the syllabus)
9. M 4/26 *The Sources of Public Opinion: Mass Media and Elite Rhetoric, continued*
10. W 4/28 **Midterm Examination**
Newton Hall 172 (on Neil Ave., between 9th and 10th Aves)

11. M 5/3 *Support for Democratic Values*
- E&T, Ch. 6, "Public opinion and democratic stability" (pp. 142-155, 162-168)
 - The psychological underpinnings of democracy: A Selective Review of Research on Political Tolerance, Interpersonal Trust, and Social Capital. J. L. Sullivan & J. E. Transue, *Annual Review of Psychology*. Volume 50, Page 625-650, February 1999. (online access, see p. 2 of the syllabus)
12. W 5/5 *Support for Democratic Institutions*
- E&T, Ch. 6, pp. 155-162 (trust and efficacy)
 - N&W, Ch. 13, Rahn & Rudolph, "Trust in local government"
 - N&W, Ch. 14, Hibbing, "The people's craving for unselfish government"
13. M 5/10 *Public Opinion about Specific Issues*
- E&T, Ch. 4, pp. 83-99 (trends in policy opinions)
 - N&W, Ch. 5, Carmines & Sniderman, "The structure of racial attitudes: Issue pluralism and the changing American dilemma"
 - N&W, Ch. 6, Wilcox & Norrander, "Of moods and morals: The dynamics of opinion on abortion and gay rights"
 - N&W. Ch. 7, Mueller, "American foreign policy and public opinion in a new era: Eleven propositions"
14. W 5/12 *Public Opinion about Specific Issues, continued*
15. M 5/17 *Group Differences in Public Opinion*
- E&T, Ch. 7, "Group differences in political opinions"
 - N&W, Ch. 1, Sapiro, "It's the context, situation, and question, stupid: The gender basis of public opinion"
 - N&W, Ch. 3, Calhoun-Brown, "This side of Jordan: Black churches and partisan political attitudes"
 - N&W, Ch. 4, Uhlaner & Garcia, "Latino public opinion"
 - N&W, Ch. 10, Brady, Scholzman, Verba & Elms, "Who bowls? The (un)changing stratification of participation."
16. W 5/19 *Group Differences in Public Opinion, continued*
17. M 5/24 *Elections and Public Opinion*
- E&T, Ch. 9, "Elections as instruments of popular control"
 - E&T, Ch. 4, pp. 104-110 (presidential approval)
 - N&W, Ch. 11, Brewer, "Public opinion, economic issues, and the vote: Are presidential elections 'all about the Benjamins?'"

18. W 5/26

Representation

- E&T, Ch. 10, "The public and its representatives"

*****Paper due Friday, May 28th, at noon, either my office (Derby 2066) or my mailbox in Department office (Derby 2140). See next page of syllabus for description of paper options.*****

19. W 6/2

Parties and Interest Groups; Conclusion

- E&T, Ch. 11, "Parties and interest groups: mediating institutions and representation"
- E&T, Ch. 12, "Public opinion and the performance of democracy"

20. W 6/9 9:30 - 11: 18

Final Examination

Location tba

Note: If you need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability, you should contact me to arrange an appointment as soon as possible. At the appointment, we can discuss course format, anticipate your needs, and explore potential accommodations. I rely on the Office for Disability Services for assistance in verifying the need for accommodations and developing accommodation strategies. If you have not previously contacted the Office for Disability Services, I encourage you to do so.

Options for Paper Assignment

General guidelines and rules for the assignment:

1. There are three options for the final paper, you are to choose one of them. All of them are empirically based, meaning that you will be gathering data, summarizing the data, and interpreting the results. Absolutely no statistical expertise, other than being able to count and calculate percentages, is required. If you are comfortable with basic statistical procedures, you can do a more advanced analysis, but you also must describe those analyses clearly and competently in your paper.

2. Regardless of your choice, the final paper is due **no later than Friday, May 28th, at noon.** (Early papers are welcome). The paper can be dropped off to me in my office (Derby 2066; if I'm not in, leave it under my door), or in my mailbox in the department office (Derby 2140). **Late papers will be penalized.**

3. You must turn in a hard copy of your paper, I will not accept emailed submissions.

4. I do not have hard and fast page limits for the text of your paper in mind. However, they should be long enough for you to sufficiently detail the procedures you used, summarize the results and **discuss the implications of the results as they relate to the relevant theories and empirical findings discussed in class.** Probably 10-15 pages, but quality trumps quantity.

5. It isn't necessary to do additional reading (beyond the readings assigned in class, and the relevant class lectures), but if you do, you must be sure to cite those outside references.

6. As always, you should feel free to ask me for advice or clarification as you proceed.

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Option 1: An empirical investigation into bias in the news media.

We will spend some time discussing evidence on the question of bias in news media coverage of politics (E&T, pp. 211-215, and the Graber 2003 article deal with this topic). For this paper, you will monitor media coverage of the presidential campaign for **ten consecutive days**. (It doesn't matter which ten days, other than they need to be ten days in the current spring quarter.) It can either be newspaper coverage or television news coverage (in which case you would need to videotape the news). If newspaper, which is probably more feasible, you need to choose a major newspaper with substantial circulation (e.g., at the level of the *Columbus Dispatch* or higher).

You are to focus on the content of news coverage of the Bush and (presumably) Kerry campaigns, tabulating according to clearly specified criteria the nature of that coverage. (Please note: virtually any coverage of the president counts as campaign coverage in an election year.) You can be creative in terms of the coverage criteria: among the relevant criteria, you might tabulate: (1) the number of articles, up to 3 per day (if there are more than 3 articles, you should

choose the most prominent/ lengthy); (2) the prominence of the articles, ie, front page coverage versus buried in the back; (3) the 'tone' of the story, ie, does it reflect positively or negatively on the candidate or campaign, or is the story neutral; (4) the use of visuals; (5) whether the article is a newstory or opinion piece. You might think of others.

In the paper, you must be clear about your coding decisions (eg, what indicators lead you to conclude that the tone of coverage was positive or negative?) The data 'product' you will end up with will be a matrix for each candidate, as illustrated by the Table below (this is just a suggestion, you might arrange yours differently). After you tabulate the results, your goal in the paper is to interpret them: do you find evidence of media bias, and if so, on what dimensions of coverage? Do these results conform to the conclusions reach in the readings or class, or are your results inconsistent? If inconsistent, what accounts for those inconsistencies? What implications for the 2004 elections do you draw from these results?

Data coding matrix for newspaper coverage of Pres. Bush

	Topic	Prominence (front page?, length?)	Tone (+, - or neutral)	Visuals (+, - or neutral)	Oped or News article	??
Day 1, Story 1						
Day 1, Story 2						
Day 1, Story 3						
Day 2, Story 1						
Day 2, Story 2						
Day 2, Story 3						

and so on, for Days 3-10. You would have a separate coding matrix for Kerry/Democratic candidate. If there were not 3 stories in a given day, or if you were coding television news coverage, than some of the rows would be blank.

Option 2: A review of public opinion trends about President Bush (including his handling of the economy), and their implications for his re-election chances.

We will spend some time discussing public opinion and elections (the readings for May 24, in particular). For this paper, you will gather temporal trend data on public opinion about Pres. Bush. As will be clear from the readings, and certain to be a prominent issue in the 2004 campaign, the state of the economy is important (or not...). So one of the trends you look at must be approval of Pres. Bush's handling of the economy. In addition to the economy, you will choose two other topics or dimensions. For example, his handling of Iraq or terrorism is another obvious dimension. Opinion about his character (eg, leadership) is also important and discussed in the readings.

Fortunately, there is a database that has compiled and organized all of this for you: **Polling the Nations**. To access, and gather the data:

1. Go to University Library homepage
2. Click "Research Databases"
3. Click "P" and then "Polling the Nations"
4. In the left column, "topics", click "B", and then scroll down to Bush, George W. (Please note that the "W" is critical, plain old "Bush, George" is his father).
5. There you will see more than 80 categories of opinion about the President. Again, you must look at public opinion about his handling of the economy, but are free to choose two other dimensions.
6. For Bush and the economy: if you click that option you will get 475 (at this writing!) survey questions. Do not look at and tabulate all of them! Rather, choose those that ask explicitly for "approve or disapprove" of his handling of the economy. You might want to limit the search to a specific polling organization (eg, Gallup, Harris, CNN, New York Times, Washington Post). And you will want to have results across the period of his administration, monthly or every other month.
7. You should record the results of each question, in terms of the distribution of opinion, as well as the date the survey was conducted.
8. More generally, you want to compile data for questions that are asked in a similar fashion, and that are asked over the course of his administration, so that you have data points for the full period.

In the paper:

- (1) you must describe and justify the dimensions of public opinion (beyond the economy) that you choose to examine;
- (2) describe the questions that you selected (this must include an appendix listing the dates and the survey organization for all of the questions you use);
- (3) graph the trends over time, as in numerous examples in the texts. Time period is on the X, or horizontal axis; % of the public approving [or whatever the response option is] on the Y, or vertical axis. You will want to capture as much of the period of the current administration (ie, 2001-2004) as possible. Do not limit the data to just 2004.
- (4) interpret the results – how has public opinion about the President fluctuated?; what might account for those fluctuations; putting on your prognosticating hat, what do these public opinion trends tell you about the President's chances in the 2004 election? In answering these questions, you will be drawing the class readings and discussion.

Option 3: An original pre-election survey of the 2004 Presidential race.

For this paper, you are to conduct an original survey on the topic of the 2004 Presidential election. This requires you to:

(1) create a survey instrument. You can use questions that have been used in existing surveys, but you must acknowledge the source. You will need to be able to justify the content of your questions, as well as the general design of the survey.

(2) administer the survey instrument to **at least 20 people** (and 20 is fine), 18 years of age or older.

(3) tabulate the results

(4) analyze and interpret the results. This should focus on (a) which candidate has the most support in your sample and more importantly (2) what factors or characteristics seem to be most important in predicting that support (ie, who are the Bush supporters and who are the Kerry supporters). Your explanatory variables must go beyond partisan and ideological identification (eg, demographic characteristics, policy preferences, values). Are the results of your survey generally consistent or inconsistent with the literature? What if anything is surprising in your results? If you were asked to advise the Bush and Kerry campaigns (in turn), how would the results of your survey inform your advice?

(5) you must include a copy of the survey instrument with your paper.

Two Important Notes:

First, if you choose this option, **you must have me screen the instrument for content before you conduct the survey.** I need to do this to insure that the questions are not offensive or overly sensitive.

Second, for this paper option (and this paper option only), students can work in pairs to develop and administer the survey instrument (the required sample size remains 'at least 20'). However I expect the paper --the analysis and interpretation of the results to be done individually. **If you intend to work with another student on this paper, you must let me know in advance.**