

PSC 120
Public Opinion in American Politics
Spring 2006
CRN: 50757
T*Th 11:10-12:25, Duques 255

Professor John Sides
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Office hours: Tuesday and Wednesday, 4-6 pm, and by appt.
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This course examines the nature of public opinion in contemporary American politics. We will discuss how to conceptualize and measure public opinion, where opinions or attitudes “come from,” how people arrived at a vote choice on Election Day, and whether public opinion affects policymaking. In so doing, we will investigate public opinion on a wide variety of topics, from race and racism to gay rights to Monica Lewinsky. One overarching goal is to help you become a more discerning consumer of public opinion data, so that when you encounter references to public opinion in the news or in a campaign or in politics generally, you will be able to evaluate whether these references are truthful, incomplete, fraudulent, *etc.*

Blackboard. The syllabus, PowerPoint presentations, and any other key course documents will be posted on the Blackboard page for this course at <http://blackboard.gwu.edu>. The syllabus is available, unsurprisingly, under “Syllabus.” The PowerPoint presentations are available under “Lectures.”

Required reading. All readings are available on Blackboard. Most are .pdf files. Others are accessible on other webpages. All .pdf files, as well as clickable links to these webpages, are posted on Blackboard under “Readings.”

Attendance. Your attendance in class is important. I will ascertain who is and is not present at every class session. By my count, there are 29 class sessions. You are allowed four (4) absences with no strings attached and no questions asked. If you miss more than 4 classes, you will receive an F for the portion of your grade that comes from participation. This will subtract 5 points from your final grade. If you have less than 4 absences, you will receive bonus points added to your final grade. This is the formula I will use for calculating bonus points:

$$\# \text{ of bonus points} = 2 - (0.5 \times \# \text{ of absences})$$

Thus, if you miss 4 classes, you receive 0 bonus points. If you miss 0 classes, you receive 2 bonus points. Etc. This is not a large bonus, but it could make the difference at the margins.

Here are several important details about this policy:

- If you are planning on missing or if you miss class, you do **not** need to email me telling me why. The policy is “no questions asked.” So I don’t need an excuse.
- These four excused absences *include* any days you may miss for illness, travel, etc. Thus, I expect that if you are healthy and in Washington DC, you should be in class.
- If a serious illness or an emergency will result in your missing more than 4 classes, please communicate with me and provide documentation. We will then make alternative arrangements about the attendance policy.
- If you arrive late to class, I may or may not note that you were present. It is your responsibility to make sure I have marked you as present.

If this policy will be difficult for you to abide by, you should not take this course.

Course assignments. The course assignments will include one paper (8-10 pages in length), a midterm exam, and a final exam. These exams will combine multiple choice, identifications, and short essays. The final exam will **not** be cumulative.

More information about the research paper will be distributed later in the semester. The gist of the assignment is to choose an issue—for example, abortion, gay rights, the death penalty, taxes, and so on—and write a paper discussing the nature of public opinion about this issue, spelling out its nuances (*e.g.*, how it might appear to “change” depending on how the question is asked) and how it has or has not changed over time (where possible). This paper will require outside research, including search engines that locate polling results as well as scholarly and journalistic sources. I will provide you with further information about resources that might be helpful to you.

Some key dates:

Tuesday, March 7	midterm exam
Tuesday, April 11	paper due
some time in May	final exam

Course grades. Your final grade will be a weighted average of the components of the course:

Participation	10%
Research paper	30%
Midterm	30%
Final	30%

I will grade on the following scale: A (93-100), A- (90-92), B+ (87-89), B (83-86), B- (80-82), C+ (77-79), C (73-76), C- (70-72), D (60-69), and F (0-59). Note that there are no +/- grades in the D or F range.

Here are several important details of my policy on course grades:

- If you have questions about the grade you received on an assignment, I encourage you to come talk to me. I am happy to answer any questions and suggest ways that you can do better.
- If you would like me to re-grade an assignment, you must submit to me a formal appeal in writing, explaining why you think the grade you received is not a fair reflection of the quality of your work.
- If you do not complete an assignment, I will give you a 0 for the assignment.
- I do not tolerate late assignments. I will lower your grade one-half of a letter grade for each day it is late. That is, if the assignment is due on Tuesday and you complete it on Wednesday, the highest grade you can make is a B+. If you complete it on Thursday, the highest grade you can make is a B-. And so forth.
- The only acceptable excuses for not completing an assignment on time are illness or family emergency. If either circumstance arises, I will give you extra time, but **only** if you (1) communicate with me **before** the assignment is due, and (2) provide documentation of the circumstance. You **must** do both of these things in order to avoid penalties for a late assignment.
- There are no opportunities to re-do assignments or to do extra-credit work in this course.
- I do not “curve” grades. At the end of the semester, I will calculate your grade as described above and then round to the nearest whole number (*e.g.*, an 86.5 becomes an 87). That grade becomes your final grade. I will not increase any person’s grade solely to change their letter grade. So if you make an 89.4, you will make a B+, not an A-. No amount of pleading will change this outcome.

Academic dishonesty. In the Code of Academic Integrity, the University defines academic dishonesty as “cheating of any kind, including misrepresenting one’s own work, taking credit for the work of others without crediting them and without appropriate authorization, and the fabrication of information.” Scholastic dishonesty also includes, but is not limited to, providing false or misleading information to receive a postponement or extension on a test, quiz, or assignment, and submission of essentially the same written assignment for two different courses without the prior permission of faculty members.

By accepting this syllabus and participating in the course, you have agreed to abide by this Code. Students who violate the Code are subject to disciplinary penalties, including failure on the assignment in question, failure in the course, and other penalties imposed by the University. For more information, please see: <http://www.gwu.edu/~ntegrity/index.html>

Medical needs, illnesses, and other emergencies. As noted above, if a medical need will result in your missing or completing assignments, please communicate with me. I am willing to be accommodating but communication and documentation is necessary.

Special needs. George Washington University provides appropriate academic accommodations for qualified students with disabilities. To determine if you qualify, contact the Disability Support Services at (202) 994-8250 (V/TDD). If they certify your needs, I will work with you to make arrangements.

Religious holy day observance. If an assignment or exam is due on a day when you are observing a religious holy day, I will work with you to find an acceptable alternative time to complete the assignment.

Course Plan

I. Introduction

Jan. 17

- Green, Joshua. 2001. “The Other War Room.” *Washington Monthly*, February 4, 2001. On-line at: <http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2001/0204.green.html>
- Hitchens, Christopher. 1992. “Voting in the Passive Voice.” *Harpers*, Volume 284 (April): pp. 45-53.

II. What is Public Opinion?

Jan. 19, 24

- V.O. Key. 1961. *Public Opinion and American Democracy*. New York: Knopf. pp. 3-18.
- Entman, Robert M., and Susan Herbst. 2001. “Reframing Public Opinion as We Have Known It.” In W. Lance Bennett and Robert M. Entman (eds.), *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

III. How Can We Measure Public Opinion?

Jan. 24, 26

- Asher, Herbert. 2001. *Polling and the Public: What Every Citizen Should Know*. Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly Press. Chapters 3 and 8.
- Zaller, John. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. New York: Cambridge University Press. pp. 28-39.
- “Pre-election Polls Largely Accurate.” Press release from Pew Center for People and the Press. On-line at: <http://people-press.org/commentary/display.php3?AnalysisID=102>

IV. Where Do Attitudes “Come From”?

Jan. 31

- Zaller, John. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. pp. 6-28

Socialization

Jan. 31, Feb. 2, 7

- Jennings, M. Kent, and Richard G. Niemi. 1968. “The Transmission of Political Values from Parent to Child.” *American Political Science Review* 62 (1): 169-184.
- Wilcox, Clyde, and Barbara Norrander. 2002. “Of Moods and Morals: The Dynamics of Opinion on Abortion and Gay Rights.” In Barbara Norrander and Clyde Wilcox (eds.), *Understanding Public Opinion*. Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly Press.
- Putnam, Robert D. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster. Chapter 14.

A Nation Divided or “Ideological Innocence”?

Feb. 9, 14, 16

- Brooks, David. 2001. “One Nation, Slightly Divisible.” *Atlantic Monthly* (December).
- Converse, Phillip. 1966. “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics.” In David E. Apter (ed.), *Ideology and Discontent*. New York: Free Press. pp. 206-261.

Heuristics

Feb. 16, 21

- Lupia, Arthur. 1994. “Shortcuts versus Encyclopedias: Information and Voting Behavior in California Insurance Reform Elections.” *American Political Science Review* 88 (1): 63-76.
- Kuklinski, James H., and Paul J. Quirk. 2000. “Reconsidering the Rational Public: Cognition, Heuristics, and Mass Opinion.” In Arthur Lupia, Mathew D. McCubbins, and Samuel L. Popkin (eds.), *Elements of Reason: Cognition, Choice, and the Bounds of Rationality*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Information and Deliberation

Feb. 23

- Brady, Henry E., James S. Fishkin, and Robert C. Luskin. 2003. “Informed Public Opinion about Foreign Policy: The Uses of Deliberative Polling.” *Brookings Review* 21 (3): 16-19.
- Ackerman, Bruce, and James S. Fishkin. 2004. *Deliberation Day*. New Haven: Yale University Press. Chapters 1 (“Imagine”) and 2 (“The Holiday”).

Self-Interest vs. Symbols

Feb. 28, March 2

- Citrin, Jack, and Donald Green. 1990. “The Self-Interest Motive in American Public Opinion.” *Research in Micropolitics* 3: 1-28.
- Larry Bartels. 2004. “Unenlightened Self-Interest: The Strange Appeal of the Estate Tax Repeal.” *The American Prospect* 15 (6): A17-A19.
- Sears, David O. 1993. “Symbolic Politics: A Socio-Psychological Theory.” In Shanto Iyengar and William J. McGuire (eds.), *Explorations in Political Psychology*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

MIDTERM EXAM

TUESDAY, MARCH 7

Class, Race, and Gender

March 9, 21, 23

- Kinder, Donald R., and Lynn M. Sanders. 1996. *Divided by Color: Racial Politics and Democratic Ideals*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp. 12-34.
- Uhlaner, Carole Jean and F. Chris Garcia. 2002. "Latino Public Opinion." In Barbara Norrander and Clyde Wilcox (eds.), *Understanding Public Opinion*. Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly Press.
- Citrin, Jack. 2001. "The End of American Identity?" In Stanley A. Renshon (ed.), *One America? Political Leadership, National Identity, and the Dilemmas of Diversity*. Washington DC: Georgetown University Press.

The Media

March 28, 30, April 4, 6

- Phillips, David P. 1979. "Suicide, Motor Vehicle Fatalities, and the Mass Media: Evidence toward a Theory of Suggestion." *American Journal of Sociology* 84 (5): 1150-1174.
- Sears, David O., and Richard Kosterman. 1994. "Political Persuasion." In Sharon Shavitt & Timothy C. Brock (eds.), *Persuasion: Psychological Insights and Perspectives*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon. pp. 251-278.
- Zaller, John. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Chapters 3 and 6.
- Bosso, Christopher. 1989. "Setting the Agenda: Mass Media and the Discovery of Famine in Ethiopia." In Michael Margolis and Gary A. Mauser (eds.), *Manipulating Public Opinion: Essays on Public Opinion as a Dependent Variable*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing.
- Iyengar, Shanto, Mark D. Peters, and Donald R. Kinder. 1993. "Experimental Demonstrations of the 'Not-So-Minimal' Consequences of Television News Programs." In Neil J. Kressel (ed.), *Political Psychology: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. New York: Paragon House.

Campaigns, Elections, and Voting

April 11, 13, 18

- Zaller, John. 2001. "Monica Lewinsky and the Mainsprings of American Politics." In W. Lance Bennett and Robert M. Entman (eds.), *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press. pp. 252-278.
- Stimson, James. 2004. *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 4 ("The Great Horse Race: Finding Meaning in Presidential Campaigns").

NO CLASS ON THURSDAY, APRIL 20**V. Does Public Opinion Affect Policymakers?****April 25, 27, May 2**

- Glynn, Carroll, *et al.* 2004. *Public Opinion* (2nd edition). Boulder, CO: Westview Press. Chapter 9 ("Public Opinion and Policymaking").
- Jacobs, Lawrence R., and Robert Y. Shapiro. 2000. *Politicians Don't Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chapter 8.
- Schlozman, Kay Lehman. 2003. "Vox Populi: Public Opinion and the Democratic Dilemma." *Brookings Review* 21 (3): 4-7.