

**PSC 192W**  
Power to the People? Public Opinion in American Politics  
Fall 2007  
CRN: 66291  
T 11:10-1:00 pm, Monroe 451

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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 arrive at a vote choice on Election Day, and whether and how public opinion affects policymaking. In so doing, we will investigate public opinion on a wide variety of topics, from the estate tax to Monica Lewinsky.

In addition to helping you learn about public opinion, I hope that this course can do the following:

- 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.
- Help you learn to depict and summarize quantitative information from surveys of the public. This will involve learning how to construct meaningful tables and graphs and to write about quantitative information clearly and effectively.
- Help you improve as a writer. This class provides credit for writing-in-the-discipline (WID) and, as such, will involve different kinds of writing relevant to the social sciences (and to other disciplines as well). You will have the opportunity to revise some of these assignments in collaboration with both your peers and me. We will also discuss techniques for good writing.

**Blackboard.** The syllabus and any other key course documents will be posted on the Blackboard page for this course at <http://blackboard.gwu.edu>.

**Required reading.** Four books are assigned for this class:

- Fiorina, Morris. 2006. *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). New York: Pearson Longman.
- Mutz, Diana. 2006. *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wattenberg, Martin P. 2006. *Is Voting for Young People?* New York: Pearson Longman.

All other readings are available on Blackboard or are accessible on other webpages. Clickable links to webpages are also posted on Blackboard.

In addition, I recommend that you regularly pay attention to an excellent blog about polling, authored by Mark Blumenthal: <http://www.pollster.com>. A useful web resource for advice about good writing is Purdue University's Online Writing Lab (OWL): <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>.

**Class participation.** Your participation in class is important. I will ascertain who is present at every class session. Your presence in class obviously affects the “participation” portion of your grade. If you cannot consistently attend this class—because of a recurring conflict, because you are simply prone to missing classes, or whatever—you should not take this class.

**Class meetings.** Because this class is small, it demands more of you. I will “lecture” infrequently. Instead, most of the class time will be given over to discussion. At times, I will structure discussion so that we talk about certain topics or readings. At other times, I hope we can have a more free-flowing discussion in which I play a minimal role. Three things will make our class meetings more enjoyable and edifying. First, before we meet, I expect that you will have completed all of the readings and any other assignments due that day. Second, on the day of class, please bring the readings with you so that we can refer to them. Third, come ready to speak up, to answer questions, and, most importantly, to listen.

**Course assignments.** The course assignments will include 3 very brief “reaction” papers (1 page), 2 short papers (3-5 pages), 1 research paper (approximately 8-10 pages in length), a midterm exam, and a final exam.

Reaction Papers. These papers will ask you to respond to a particular prompt or question that I provide the week before the papers are due. This may have to do with the readings, with a current poll, or some other topic. These papers are intended only to stimulate your thinking and they will not be graded strictly.

Short Paper #1. The first short paper will be based on a series of tables and graphs that I provide you. In these tables and graphs, I will depict public opinion on a particular issue. Your paper will then take the form of a memorandum to a (potential) presidential candidate of your choice. In it, you will summarize opinion on this issue, assuming the candidate cares about what the public thinks. This assignment will help you read and interpret tables and graphs and write intelligently about quantitative data.

Short Paper #2. The second short paper will ask you to respond to this statement, which I’ve deliberately worded to be provocative: “Ethnic and partisan identities are creating a balkanized America. There is little that binds us together anymore.” In responding to this assessment, you will draw on the readings for September 25 (group identity) and October 2 (red and blue America). This assignment will help you synthesize complex readings and construct a cogent and compelling argument.

Research Paper: You will choose a political issue—e.g., abortion, gay rights, the death penalty, taxes, and so on—and then write a paper that accomplishes two tasks. First, it discusses the nature of public opinion about this issue, spelling out its nuances (e.g., how it “changes” depending on question wording, how it has or has not changed over time, etc.). Second, it draws implications from public opinion for political leaders and policymaking. The paper thus builds on the first shorter paper, except that you will do your own outside research, using 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.

Exams. These exams will combine identifications and short essays. Both exams will be take-home exams, for which you may use course readings and class notes, though you may not collaborate with anyone else. The midterm exam will be passed out in class and due the following class. The final exam will be handed out on the last day of class and due on the date of the regularly scheduled final exam. Note: the final exam will not be cumulative.

The short papers and the research paper will entail a first draft, review by me or by a peer, and a final draft. The dates for these various assignments are in the course outline below. **Please be attentive so that no deadline surprises you!**

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

Participation	10%
Reaction papers	10%
Shorter papers	20% (10% each)
Research paper	20%
Midterm exam	20%
Final exam	20%

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. 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

### September 4: Introduction

Here is a list of six important things in this week's readings. In the Key reading, pay attention to these topics: (1) different views about the role of public opinion in a democratic political system (e.g., that of the Progressives, Lippman, the "New Machiavellians"); (2) different conceptions of public opinion; (3) characteristics of public opinion; and (4) his definition of public opinion (p. 14). The Zaller reading provides a fundamental theory about opinion formation and change. Make sure and understand: (4) the definition of "information," "predispositions," and "political awareness"; and (5) the "question-answering" model of survey response.

- **Materials for Paper #1 will be handed out.**
- V.O. Key. 1961. *Public Opinion and American Democracy*. New York: Knopf. pp. 3-18.
- Gallup, George. 1948. *A Guide to Public Opinion Polls*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. pp. 3-13.
- Zaller, John. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. pp. 6-39.

### September 11: Measuring Public Opinion with Surveys

These readings concern various aspects of the survey process. First, see pp. 3-13 of Gallup (the name should ring a bell!) on how surveys contribute to democracy. The second major topic is sampling, or drawing a "sample" of "respondents" from a "population" (learn those words). See Gallup pp. 14-20 and pp.73-75. (Gallup refers to the *Literary Digest* poll of 1936 on pp.73-75. If you need more information about that poll, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary\\_Digest](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary_Digest).) The readings about response rates (Langer, Keeter et al.) and cell phones involve the quality of the sample as well. The third topic is question wording and ordering (Asher, ch. 3). The fourth topic is analyzing and interpreting polls (Asher, ch. 8). The fifth topic is the merits of on-line polling. The Zukin reading ties together these and a few more issues in discussing election polling.

- **FIRST DRAFT OF PAPER #1 DUE IN CLASS.**
- Gallup, George. 1948. *A Guide to Public Opinion Polls*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. pp. 14-20, 73-75.
- On response rates:
  - Langer, Gary. 2003. "About Response Rates." *Public Perspective* (May/June): 16-18. On-line at: <http://abcnews.go.com/images/pdf/responserates.pdf>
  - Keeter, Scott et al. 2006. "Gauging the Impact of Growing Nonresponse on Estimates from a National RDD Telephone Survey." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 70(5): 759-779.
- On the consequences of cell phones for phone polling:
  - [http://www.pollster.com/blogs/cell\\_phones\\_and\\_political\\_surv.php](http://www.pollster.com/blogs/cell_phones_and_political_surv.php) (no need to click on all of the links in this blog post, but do click on the picture)
  - <http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/276.pdf> (pp. 1-12 only)
- Asher, Herbert. 2001. *Polling and the Public: What Every Citizen Should Know*. Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly Press. Chapters 3 and 8.
- Taylor, Humphrey. "The Case for Publishing Some On-Line Polls." On-line at: [http://www.pollingreport.com/ht\\_online.htm](http://www.pollingreport.com/ht_online.htm)
- Zukin, Cliff. "Sources of Variation in Public Election Polling: A Primer." On-line at: <http://www.aapor.org/pdfs/varsource.pdf>

### September 18: Measuring Public Opinion with Surveys (cont'd)

We will continue to discuss topics related to survey research, including the readings from the previous week.

- **FIRST REACTION PAPER DUE.**
- **First draft of Paper #1 returned with comments.**

### September 25: Group Identities and the “Circle of We”

Numerous violent examples—Bosnia, Rwanda, Iraq—illustrate how group identities influence politics. We will examine cases that are, at least as of today, less dramatic: ethnic and partisan identities in the United States. Kinder and Sanders focus on white and black Americans. Citrin examines Asians and Latinos in addition to whites and blacks. Green and co-authors focus on partisanship. In these readings, is there evidence of ethnic and partisan divisions? Is there evidence of ethnic and partisan similarity?

- **FINAL DRAFT OF PAPER #1 DUE IN CLASS.** Attach first draft as well.
- Kinder, Donald R., and Lynn M. Sanders. 1996. *Divided by Color: Racial Politics and Democratic Ideals*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp. 12-34.
- Green, Donald, Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler. 2002. *Partisan Hearts and Minds: Political Parties and the Social Identities of Voters*. New Haven: Yale University Press. Chapter 2.
- 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.

### October 2: Red & Blue America—Are We Really Divided?

The David Brooks article introduced the idea of red and blue America—an idea that has metastasized throughout political discourse. But is it accurate? Fiorina says no. Is his contrarian perspective persuasive? What does the Jacobson reading suggest about how, and on which issues, the American public is polarized.

- **Paper #1 will be returned.**
- Brooks, David. 2001. “One Nation, Slightly Divisible.” *Atlantic Monthly* (December).
- Fiorina, Morris. 2006. *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). New York: Pearson Longman. Especially pp. 1-78.
- Jacobson, Gary. 2006. *A United, Not a Divider: George W. Bush and the American People*. New York: Pearson Longman. Chapter 1 and pp. 119-151.

### October 9: Economics or Emotions? The Impact of Self-Interest and Symbols

Do people base their political attitudes on their self-interest? Both Citrin and Green and Bartels say, essentially, “no.” What is their evidence? Sears presents an alternative theory of opinion formation and change. Be able to outline in general terms his theory and the notion of “symbolic predispositions.”

- **FIRST DRAFT OF PAPER #2 DUE IN CLASS.** In class, I will ensure that everyone has completed a credible first draft. Then you will exchange papers with a designated peer editor. In the next week, you must meet with your peer editor, discuss your comments on each other’s papers, and make revisions.
- 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.

### October 16: A “Dunce Cap Nation”?

How much do Americans know about politics? Do Americans even have real beliefs about political issues? Both readings this week suggest that the answers to these questions are “not much” and “not really.” Is there cause for concern? Is the public capable of fulfilling the requirements of democratic citizenry?

- **FINAL DRAFT OF PAPER #2 DUE IN CLASS.** Attach the first draft with your peer editor’s comments.
- **Midterm exam will be distributed.**
- Read this discussion of a *Newsweek* survey about political knowledge. Be sure and click through to the *Newsweek* story and the results of the poll. On-line at: [http://www.pollster.com/blogs/newsweek\\_knowledge\\_survey.php](http://www.pollster.com/blogs/newsweek_knowledge_survey.php)
- Bartels, Larry M. 2003. “Democracy with Attitudes.” In Michael B. MacKuen and George Rabinowitz (eds.), *Electoral Democracy*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

### October 23: Can Heuristics Save an Inattentive Public?

The readings from last week portrayed public opinion unfavorably. Lupia attempts to redeem the public by demonstrating the apparent success of “heuristics.” What are “heuristics”? What heuristics does the public “use” in his study? How does he judge whether heuristics “worked”? Kuklinski and Quirk present a more skeptical view of heuristics. Why are they skeptical?

- **MIDTERM EXAM IS DUE IN CLASS.**
- **Paper #2 will be returned.**
- **Materials for longer research paper will be distributed.**
- 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.

### October 30: Expanding the “Circle of We”—Does It Help or Hurt?

Here is a statement that few would find controversial: people benefit from having friends and acquaintances with diverse political views. Diana Mutz puts that statement to the test. First, what does she find about the level of diversity in social networks? Are we generally surrounded by like minds or by potential antagonists? Second, what are the two contrasting effects of diversity?

- **REACTION PAPER #2 DUE IN CLASS.**
- **SHORT DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH PAPER TOPIC DUE IN CLASS.**
- **Midterm exam will be returned.**

- Mutz, Diana. 2006. *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### **November 6: Boob Tube, Youtube, A Bunch of Tubes—Are We Prisoners of the Media?**

We consume enormous amounts of information from the print, broadcast, and web-based media. But how much do these media affect our political attitudes? In doing the readings below, focus first on the different kinds of effects the media can have—e.g., Phillips’ theory of suggestion, Zaller’s account of opinion change, and Bosso’s account of agenda-setting. Second, try to identify the factors that determine when media messages will affect us. Sears and Kosterman, as well as Zaller, discuss this issue.

- 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.

### **November 13: Do Campaigns Matter?**

During campaign season, candidates, parties, and outside groups spend a lot of money to affect what citizens think and do. But ask yourself this: What would it have taken to switch your vote from Bush to Kerry (or Kerry to Bush) in 2004? Could anything have changed your mind? I’ll wager that most of you would say “no.” That’s why we need to ask the question in this week’s title. Zaller presents a skeptic’s account of both media and campaign effects. How does the Lewinsky scandal illustrate his point? What are the “mainsprings of American politics” and why do they matter? Stimson attempts to specify more precisely the extent of campaign effects. According to him, when and how do campaigns matter?

- **FIRST DRAFT OF RESEARCH PAPER DUE IN CLASS.**
- 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”).

### **November 20: Are Young People Ruining Democracy?**

The kids these days! Wattenberg and Putnam provide evidence that younger generations are less politically engaged and less civically active. Do you find their case persuasive? Why or why not?

- **REACTION PAPER #3 DUE IN CLASS.**
- **Research paper drafts returned with comments.**
- Wattenberg, Martin P. 2006. *Is Voting for Young People?* New York: Pearson Longman.
- Putnam, Robert D. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster. Chapter 14.

**November 27: What Do People Want from Government?**

Standard theories of democratic government emphasize ways to get citizens more involved in politics. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse suggest that this is wrong-headed. What is their argument? What is “stealth democracy”? Do you find it a persuasive model for government?

- **FINAL DRAFT OF RESEARCH PAPER DUE IN CLASS.** Attach first draft as well.
- Hibbing, John R. and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse. 2002. *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 85-159.

**December 4: Conclusion**

We will tie up loose ends and postulate some answers to the fundamental questions underlying this entire course. What are the appropriate ideals of democratic citizenship? What must citizens do for democracy to function? How much power should citizens have in democratic political systems?

- **Research paper will be returned. Final exam will be distributed.**