

PUBLIC OPINION AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY
University of Georgia

POLS 4510
Fall, 2006
Office Hours, Tuesday and Thursday
9:30 – 11:00 a.m. or by appointment

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Public opinion is an essential ingredient for the success of a representative democracy. For the people to govern themselves (through their representatives), they must possess some degree of knowledge about the issues of the day and the performance of the government that represents them. Yet, early empirical research on mass beliefs questioned the existence of an informed, rational public, and raised considerable doubts over the prospects for creating a more “deliberative democracy.” Research over the last fifteen years, which has been greatly informed by cognitive and social psychology, has greatly enhanced our understanding of the origins, manifestations, and consequences of public opinion. Today, though the public still exhibits low levels of political knowledge, we have a much better understanding of how citizens put the knowledge they do possess to good use. Nevertheless, the question remains, “Can public opinion play the role we expect of it in a democracy?”

This course is designed to introduce the student to the contemporary study of public opinion. Though potential topics for this course are vast, we will concentrate our attention on four main questions: 1) What is public opinion? 2) What are the forces affecting the formation of public opinion? 3) What is the distribution of opinion on major issues and towards government? and 4) What are the consequences of public opinion in modern politics? Students will be expected to develop an understanding of the theoretical nature of public opinion and convey this understanding through class participation, written assignments, and two examinations. In order to stimulate class discussion and learning, you will be expected to complete the assigned readings *before* class sessions (I have no problem with calling on people to participate).

REQUIREMENTS:

Texts: The following texts have been ordered through the UGA bookstore and are required for this course:

Brooker, Russell, and Todd Schaefer. 2006. *Public Opinion in the 21st Century: Let the People Speak?* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Fiorina, Morris P., Samuel J. Abrams, and Jeremy C. Pope. 2006. *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, 2nd ed. New York: Pearson/Longman.

Stimson, James A. 2004. *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Selected readings also will be placed on E-Reserves at the main library or may be downloaded directly from the electronic journals found at www.jstor.org or UGA's Electronic Journal Locator at www.libs.uga.edu/ejournals.

Assignments and Grading:

- 1) Students are to read all required material *before* the class session for which the reading is assigned.
- 2) Examinations: Midterm (30% of Final Grade) and Final (30% of Final Grade).
- 3) Writing Assignments: Two 5-8 page papers (each worth 15% of Final Grade).
- 4) Class Participation (10% of Final Grade).

Your final grade will be determined by the following scale: A = 90-100, B = 80-89, C = 70-79, D = 60-69, and F = 59 or lower.

Examinations

Examinations are closed book and may consist of some combination of objective, short answer, and essay questions. The midterm examination will cover all the material from lectures, class discussions, and readings up to the day of the exam. The final exam, which will be given during the examination period scheduled by the university, will be cumulative (covering lectures, class discussions, and readings from the entire semester), though some weight will be given to material covered in the latter half of the semester.

Writing Assignments

Each of the two writing assignments is worth 15% of your final grade and will be discussed in greater detail during the semester. The expected length of the paper is between 5-8 double-spaced pages (1 inch margins and standard 10 or 12 point font, such as Times New Roman). Your paper will be evaluated on the quality and clarity of your argument, your ability to provide evidence in support of your claims, and the general grammatical quality of the paper.

The first paper is a critical review of the assigned book by Morris Fiorina and colleagues, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*. The second paper will ask you to provide a *theoretically informed* explanation of the dynamics of presidential approval. You will be allowed to choose between two cases upon which to write your paper: 1) Explain President William J. Clinton's approval during the Monica Lewinsky scandal, or 2) Explain President George W. Bush's approval in the post-9/11 period. Further details about these writing assignments will be given during class and on the class website.

Class Participation

Your class participation grade will be based on the quality of your class participation, not simply the quantity. Your class participation should be aimed toward raising the level of class discussion and in-class learning. Good class participation should be informed by the readings (or perhaps what you've learned in other classes). Good participation may come in the form of a point of criticism (remember to be kind to others), your own interpretation of the issue at debate, or even a question (you know, the kind that makes everyone go "hmmm").

There is no official attendance policy for this class. However, you should note that the university bulletin states that "students are expected to attend classes regularly." In general, students benefit themselves by attending every class and preparing accordingly beforehand. My experience suggests that there probably is a strong, positive correlation between reading before class and a student's final grade.

LATE ASSIGNMENTS AND MISSED EXAMS

All written work is to be handed to the instructor at the beginning of the class in which they are due. I will *not* accept written assignments via email unless explicit *prior* permission has been granted by me. Late assignments will be penalized one full letter grade for each day that they are late. (Of course, this means that all assignments received after five days automatically will receive a failing grade.) Please inform the instructor as soon as possible if you find it necessary to turn in an assignment late.

Missed exams will receive a grade of zero except in cases of demonstrated, appropriate, and verifiable emergencies or tragedies or where the student has *prior* approval from the instructor. In cases of missed exams excused by the instructor, a makeup exam will be rescheduled at the convenience of the instructor.

POLICY ON ACADEMIC HONESTY

All students are responsible for maintaining the highest standards of honesty and integrity in every phase of their academic careers. The penalties for academic dishonesty are severe and ignorance is not an acceptable defense. All academic work must meet the standards contained in “A Culture of Honesty.” Students are responsible for informing themselves about those standards before performing academic work.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities that have been certified by the UGA Disabilities Services office will be accommodated according to university policy. For more information contact Disabilities Services at 542-8719.

OFFICE HOURS AND AVAILABILITY

Undoubtedly, some of you will find the material covered in this class difficult to grasp. The readings, lectures, discussions, and assignments have been compiled to make understanding public opinion an easier (and interesting) task. However, if at any time you feel confused by the material, please feel free to seek my help during office hours or by appointment.

Please note: My time on campus will be very limited this semester. So, please make every effort to speak with me during office hours. If you have a question that can be answered relatively quickly, I encourage you to send me an email (gomezbt@uga.edu). I will make every effort to respond quickly to your email query.

WEBPAGE

A web page has been created for this course. It contains a copy of the syllabus, as well as information that might be useful for the completion of your writing assignments. It can be accessed using the “classes” link found on my home page, <http://www.arches.uga.edu/~gomezbt>.

REQUIRED READINGS

(The course syllabus is a general plan for the course; deviations announced to the class by the instructor may be necessary.)

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| 17 Aug | About the Course: Public Opinion and American Democracy |
| 22 | What is Public Opinion? <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Brooker and Schaefer, Ch. 1▪ Lippman, Ch. 1 (E-Reserve) |
| 24 | Public Opinion Polling and Survey Response <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Brooker and Schaefer, Ch. 2-3▪ Norrander and Wilcox, "Appendix: A Primer on Statistics and Public Opinion" (E-Reserve) |
| 29 | Public Opinion Polling and Survey Response, cont. <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Brooker and Schaefer, Ch. 2-3▪ Norrander and Wilcox, "Appendix: A Primer on Statistics and Public Opinion" (E-Reserve) |
| 31 | NO CLASS – AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION MEETING |
| 05 Sep | Public Opinion Polling and Survey Response, cont. <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Brooker and Schaefer, Ch. 2-3▪ Norrander and Wilcox, "Appendix: A Primer on Statistics and Public Opinion" (E-Reserve) |
| 07 | The Psychology of Opinion: A Brief Overview <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, Ch. 1 (E-Reserve) |
| 12 | The Psychology of Opinion: The "Innocence of Ideology" Thesis <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Brooker and Schaefer, Ch. 4▪ Optional Reading: Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" (E-Reserve) |
| 14 | The Psychology of Opinion: The "Innocence of Ideology" Thesis <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Brooker and Schaefer, Ch. 4▪ Optional Reading: Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" (E-Reserve) |
| 19 | The Psychology of Opinion: Knowledge and Heuristics <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, Ch. 2 (E-Reserve) |
| 21 | The Psychology of Opinion: Core Values <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Feldman. 1988. "Structure and Consistency in Public Opinion: The Role of Core Beliefs and Values" <i>American Journal of Political Science</i> 32:416-440 (JSTOR) |

- 26 NO CLASS – PROFESSOR OUT OF TOWN
- 28 Divided We Stand? American Political Preferences
▪ Fiorina, *Culture Wars?*
WRITING ASSIGNMENT #1 DUE
- 03 Oct Divided We Stand? American Political Preferences
▪ Fiorina, *Culture Wars?*
- 05 **MIDTERM EXAMINATION**
- 10 Influences on Public Opinion: Political Socialization or “Something Else to Blame on Mom and Dad”
▪ Brooker and Schaefer, Ch. 5
- 12 Influences on Public Opinion: Economic Interests
▪ Gomez and Wilson. 2001. “Political Sophistication and Economic Voting in the American Electorate: A Theory of Heterogeneous Attribution.” *American Journal of Political Science* 45: 899-914 (JSTOR)
- 17 Influences on Public Opinion: Emotions
▪ Marcus and MacKuen. 1993. “Anxiety, Enthusiasm and the Vote: The Emotional Underpinnings of Learning and Involvement during Presidential Campaigns.” *American Political Science Review* 87:688-701 (JSTOR)
- 19 Influences on Public Opinion: The Media and Framing
▪ Brooker and Schaefer, Ch. 6
- 24 Expressions of Public Opinion: Opinion Flows
▪ Stimson, Preface and Ch. 1
▪ Brooker and Schaefer, Ch. 7
- 26 NO CLASS – *Fall Break!!!*
- 31 Expressions of Public Opinion: What the Public Wants
▪ Stimson, Ch. 2
▪ Brooker and Schaefer, Ch. 9
- 02 Nov Expressions of Public Opinion: Issue Evolution
▪ Stimson, Ch. 3
▪ Brooker and Schaefer, Ch. 8
- 07 Expressions of Public Opinion: Racial Attitudes
▪ Sears, et al., “Race in American Politics: Framing the Debates,” Ch. 1 in Sears, Sidanius, and Bobo, eds. *Racialized Politics* (E-Reserve)

- 09 Expressions of Public Opinion: Abortion Attitudes
- Alvarez and Brehm. 1995. "American Ambivalence Toward Abortion Policy: A Heteroskedastic Probit Method for Assessing Conflicting Values." *American Journal of Political Science* 39:1055-82 (JSTOR)
- 14 Public Opinion and Electoral Choice
- Stimson, Ch. 4
- 16 Presidential Approval
- Brooker and Schaefer, Ch. 13
 - Stimson, Ch. 5
- WRITING ASSIGNMENT #2 DUE**
- 21 Trust (of Should I Say "Distrust") in Government
- Hetherington. 1998. "The Political Relevance of Political Trust." *American Political Science Review* 92:791-808 (JSTOR)
- 23 NO CLASS – *Happy Thanksgiving!!!*
- 28 Should Government Listen?
- Brooker and Schaefer, Ch. 11
- 30 Does Government Listen?
- Brooker and Schaefer, Ch. 12
- 05 Dec Public Opinion and Democracy
- Brooker and Schaefer, Ch. 14

FINAL EXAMINATION: Thursday, December 14, 12:00-3:00p.m.