

**PUBLIC OPINION AND ELECTORAL BEHAVIOR**  
Florida State University

POS 3204  
Fall, 2011  
Office Hours, Monday and Wednesday  
9:00 – 11:30 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 research on public opinion questioned the existence of an informed, rational public, raising doubts about the prospects for democracy. In recent years, however, research has been informed by developments in cognitive and social psychology, and our understanding of the origins, manifestations, and consequences of public opinion has been enhanced. 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?”

Elections are the most consequential expression of public opinion in a democracy. Yet, millions of eligible Americans do not vote, suggesting that elections may not reflect the views of all Americans. So, who votes? Do voters and non-voters differ systematically from one another? Is it that non-voters just do not care, or are they expressing displeasure with the choices available to them by simply staying home? To paraphrase the question above, “Can elections play the role we expect of them in a democracy?”

This course is designed to introduce the student to the contemporary study of public opinion and electoral behavior. Regarding the former, we will concentrate our attention on four questions: 1) What is public opinion? 2) What are the forces affecting public opinion? 3) What is the distribution of opinion on major issues and towards government? and 4) What is the impact of public opinion on modern politics? With regard to latter topic, our questions are simple: 1) Who votes? and 2) Why do they vote the way they do? Students will be expected to develop an understanding of the theoretical nature of public opinion and voting and convey this understanding through class participation, a written assignment, and five examinations. 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 both the FSU Bookstore and are required for this course:

Abramson, Paul R., John H. Aldrich, and David W. Rohde. 2011. *Change and Continuity in the 2008 and 2010 Elections*. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press.

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

Fiorina, Morris P., Samuel J. Abrams, and Jeremy C. Pope. 2011. *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Pearson/Longman.

Selected readings also will be placed on Blackboard or may be downloaded directly [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org) or FSU’s Electronic Journal Holdings at <http://www.lib.fsu.edu/index.html>.

### Assignments and Grading:

- 1) Students are to read all required readings *before* the class session for which they are assigned.
- 2) Examinations: Four unit examinations (Each 15% of Final Grade) and a cumulative final examination (20% of Final Grade).
- 3) Writing Assignment: A 2-3 page précis on Fiorina's *Culture War* (10% of Final Grade).
- 4) Class Participation (10% of Final Grade).

Your final grade will be determined by the following scale:

	B+ = 89 – 87	C+ = 79 – 77	D+ = 69 – 67	
A = 100 – 93	B = 86 – 83	C = 76 – 73	D = 66 – 63	F = 59 – 0
A- = 92 – 90	B- = 82 – 80	C- = 72 – 70	D- = 62 – 60	

#### *Examinations*

Examinations are closed book and may consist of some combination of objective, short answer, or essay questions. The unit examinations will cover all the material from lectures, class discussions, and readings on the unit being tested. 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).

#### *Writing Assignment*

The writing assignment is worth 10% of your final grade and will be discussed in greater detail during the semester. The expected length of the paper is 2-3 double-spaced pages (1" margins and standard 10, 11, or 12 point font, such as Times New Roman). The paper is a *précis*, a critical review of the assigned book by Morris Fiorina, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*. The *précis* will articulate the author's research question and why it is important, sketch the theoretical argument (i.e., explanation) made by the author, articulate the author's hypotheses, and summarize the evidence in support of these hypotheses. *Your paper will be evaluated on the quality and clarity of your writing, your ability to understand and summarize the author's research design, and the general grammatical quality of the paper.*

#### *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 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 the makes everyone go "hmmm").

Students are expected to attend every class. Absences from class due to illness and participation in formally sanctioned University events will only be excused with sufficient (e.g., a Thagard Student Health Center excuse form) documentation. Documentation must be provided within 48 hours of the absence. Students who cannot physically provide such documentation within the 48-hour period (due to illness etc.) must do so as soon as possible and must include sufficient documentation supporting the claim that they could not physically deliver the original documentation in the 48-hour period. The instructor reserves the right to determine what is considered "sufficient documentation." Class attendance

sheets will occasionally be passed out during class. If any student is determined to be misrepresenting either their or someone else's attendance in class, all students involved in such misrepresentation shall receive a zero for the semester participation and attendance grade.

#### **LATE ASSIGNMENTS AND MISSED EXAMS**

Written work is to be handed to the instructor at the beginning of the class in which it is 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**

The Florida State University Academic Honor Policy outlines the University's expectations for the integrity of students' academic work, the procedures for resolving alleged violations of those expectations, and the rights and responsibilities of students and faculty members throughout the process. Students are responsible for reading the Academic Honor Policy and for living up to their pledge to "be honest and truthful and... [to] strive for personal and institutional integrity at Florida State University" (Academic Honor Policy).

#### **STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

Students with disabilities needing academic accommodation should: (1) register with and provide documentation to the Student Disability Resource Center; (2) bring a letter to the instructor indicating the need for accommodation and what type. This should be done during the first week of class. For more information about services available to FSU students with disabilities, contact the Student Disability Resource Center, 874 Tradition Way, 108 Student Services Building, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306-4167, 850-644-9566 (voice) or 850-644-8504 (TDD), via email [sdrc@admin.fsu.edu](mailto:sdrc@admin.fsu.edu), or on the web at <http://www.disabilitycenter.fsu.edu/>

#### **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.

### REQUIRED READINGS

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

- 29 Aug About the Course: Public Opinion and Voting Behavior
- 31 What is Public Opinion?  
▪ Brooker and Schaefer, Ch. 1  
▪ Lippman, Ch. 1 (Blackboard)
- 02 Sep NO CLASS – ANNUAL MEETING OF THE AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION
- 05 NO CLASS – LABOR DAY HOLIDAY!
- 07 Public Opinion Polling and Survey Response  
▪ Brooker and Schaefer, Ch. 2-3  
▪ Norrander and Wilcox, “Appendix: A Primer on Statistics and Public Opinion” (Blackboard)
- 09 Public Opinion Polling and Survey Response, cont.  
▪ Brooker and Schaefer, Ch. 2-3  
▪ Norrander and Wilcox, “Appendix: A Primer on Statistics and Public Opinion” (Blackboard)
- 12 Public Opinion Polling and Survey Response, cont.  
▪ Brooker and Schaefer, Ch. 2-3  
▪ Norrander and Wilcox, “Appendix: A Primer on Statistics and Public Opinion” (Blackboard)
- 14 Survey Research in Practice  
▪ No Reading; Lecture Notes Will be Provided (Blackboard)
- 16 Survey Research in Practice  
▪ No Reading; Lecture Notes Will be Provided (Blackboard)
- 19 **Unit Examination #1 – Survey Research in Theory and Practice**
- 21 The Psychology of Opinion: A Brief Overview  
▪ Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, Ch. 1 (Blackboard)
- 23 The Psychology of Opinion: A Brief Overview  
▪ Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, Ch. 1 (Blackboard)
- 26 The Psychology of Opinion: The “Innocence of Ideology” Thesis  
▪ Brooker and Schaefer, Ch. 4  
▪ Optional Reading: Converse, “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics” (Blackboard)

- 28            The Psychology of Opinion: The “Innocence of Ideology” Thesis
- Brooker and Schaefer, Ch. 4
  - Optional Reading: Converse, “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics” (Blackboard)
- 30            The Psychology of Opinion: Knowledge and Heuristics
- Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, Ch. 2 and 6 (Blackboard)
- 03 Oct        The Psychology of Opinion: Knowledge and Heuristics
- Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, Ch. 2 and 6 (Blackboard)
- 05            The Psychology of Opinion: Core Values
- Feldman. 1988. “Structure and Consistency in Public Opinion: The Role of Core Beliefs and Values” *American Journal of Political Science* 32:416-440 (JSTOR)
- 07            The Psychology of Opinion: Core Values
- Feldman. 1988. “Structure and Consistency in Public Opinion: The Role of Core Beliefs and Values” *American Journal of Political Science* 32:416-440 (JSTOR)
- 10            Divided We Stand? American Political Preferences
- Fiorina, *Culture Wars?*
- WRITING ASSIGNMENT DUE**
- 12            Divided We Stand? American Political Preferences
- Fiorina, *Culture Wars?*
- 14            **UNIT EXAMINATION #2 – THE PSYCHOLOGY OF OPINION**
- 17            Influences on Public Opinion: Political Socialization or “Something Else to Blame on Mom and Dad”
- Brooker and Schaefer, Ch. 5
- 19            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)
- 21            Influences on Public Opinion: Emotions
- Sullivan and Masters. 1988. “‘Happy Warriors’: Leaders’ Facial Displays, Viewers’ Emotions, and Political Support.” *American Journal of Political Science* 32:345-368 (JSTOR)
- 24            Influences on Public Opinion: The Media and Framing
- Brooker and Schaefer, Ch. 6
- 26            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* (Blackboard)

- 28 Expressions of Public Opinion: Racial Attitudes, cont.  
▪ Sears, et al., “Race in American Politics: Framing the Debates,” Ch. 1 in Sears, Sidanius, and Bobo, eds. *Racialized Politics* (Blackboard)
- 31 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)
- 02 Nov Opinion Flows: The Power of the Whole  
▪ Stimson, *Tides of Consent*, Ch. 3 (Blackboard)
- 04 Presidential Approval  
▪ Brooker and Schaefer, Ch. 13  
▪ Stimson, *Tides of Consent*, Ch. 5 (Blackboard)
- 07 **UNIT EXAMINATION #3 – EXPRESSIONS OF OPINION**
- 09 The 2008 Presidential Election  
▪ Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde, *Change and Continuity*, Ch. 1-3
- 11 NO CLASS – VETERANS’ DAY!
- 14 The 2008 Presidential Election, cont.  
▪ Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde, *Change and Continuity*, Ch. 1-3
- 16 Who Votes?  
▪ Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde, *Change and Continuity*, Ch. 4
- 18 NO CLASS – HOMECOMING! GO NOLES! (NO CLASSES AFTER 1:10 P.M.)
- 21 Who Votes?, cont.  
▪ Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde, *Change and Continuity*, Ch. 4
- 23 NO CLASS – *Happy Thanksgiving!!!*
- 25 NO CLASS – *Happy Thanksgiving!!!*
- 28 The Sociological Approach to Vote Choice  
▪ Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde, *Change and Continuity*, Ch. 5
- 30 The Socio-Psychological Approach to Vote Choice  
▪ Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde, *Change and Continuity*, Ch. 8
- 02 Dec A Rational Choice Approach to Vote Choice  
▪ Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde, *Change and Continuity*, Ch. 6-7

- 05            A Rational Choice Approach to Vote Choice  
              ▪            Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde, *Change and Continuity*, Ch. 6-7
- 07            **UNIT EXAMINATION #4 – VOTING BEHAVIOR**
- 09            Last Day of Classes – Review for the Final Examination

**FINAL EXAMINATION:** Friday, December 16, 7:30 – 9:30 a.m.