

# Public Opinion in American Politics

POLI 329

Spring 2013

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Office Hours: Weds/Thrs 1:00pm-4:00pm (or by appointment)  
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Course Meetings  
M,W,F (11:00-11:50)  
Maybank 307

Course Objective— The American public is the most studied analytical unit in the world. A natural consequence is that Americans are inundated with information concerning what “they think.” But more than simply an aggregation of stylized facts, information about the public’s preferences have important implications for democratic societies such as our own. How well do we understand the origins of public opinion? How are scholars and pundits able to make such bold claims about what Americans believe? Should we trust the producers of public opinion? Or as the author of one of your textbooks put it, “Americans are major consumers of public opinion research on a wide variety of topics. But are they smart consumers?” (Asher 2012, p. 18).

This course represents a broad survey of politics and public opinion in the United States. Each topic covered could fill a semester. In the first part of the semester we will consider some “big picture” questions concerning the role of public opinion in a democracy. Students are expected to (1) evaluate the impact of public opinion on American democracy in both historical and contemporary context. In the second part of the course we will ask whether Americans have what may be meaningfully called “attitudes” and consider how best to identify and measure opinions. The overarching goal is for the student to leave the class a better “consumer” of public opinion and be able to identify problematic surveys when they encounter them. Students should (2) formulate skills related to the quantitative measurement of public opinion through surveying and (3) develop and analytical, social scientific disposition toward American politics. In this section we will also examine competing theories about where attitudes come from. Students should be able to (4) identify and explain the central elements concerning the origins and nature of public opinion in American politics. The third and final section provides an overview of some important substantive topics in public opinion research. We will focus on the role of the media, public opinion and elections, the formation of party identification and realignments, mass polarization, and group differences in political attitudes. Students should be able to (5) describe and explain trends in American public opinion.

Course Format— I have designed this as a “balanced, research intensive” course. What I mean by this is that, on the one hand, your grade (and more importantly what you *learn*) will be determined by a variety of requirements: a semester-long research paper, two exams and five quizzes, a series of student-led classroom discussions, and a handful of assignments. Students have diverse learning styles and my hope is that this course reflects this diversity. But on the other hand, the central assignment of the semester is a research paper. This paper is not a simple writing assignment: you are expected to conduct a piece of original research.

Required Texts (2)—Robert Erikson and Kent L. Tedin, *American Public Opinion*, 2011 (8<sup>th</sup> ed.)  
Herbert Asher, *Polling and the Public*, 2012, (8<sup>th</sup> ed.)

In addition to the required textbooks, students will be asked to read published research. The goals for these readings include a rudimentary understanding of various literatures (spanning comparative politics, American politics and international relations) and a sense of what political scientists and researchers actually do. While these readings may be viewed as “supplementary,” I cannot stress how important they are. These readings will be especially critical for students working on a bachelor’s essay, those in the Honors College working on collaborative research, or those considering a post-graduate education (M.A., Ph.D. or J.D.).

Course Location—This course meets in Maybank room 307. However, on 4/8 and 4/10 we will meet in the Addlestone Library computer lab, room 122.

OAKS— This course will rely on the OAKS reserve system. The primary purpose of OAKS is to provide students access to a handful of additional readings and other course material in the most efficient manner possible. All additional readings are clearly noted on the syllabus.

Grades—The majority of your grade will be determined by two examinations: a midterm (25%) and a non-comprehensive final (also 25%). The final exam is scheduled for Wednesday, April 22<sup>nd</sup>, during the normal class period (same location as well). Exam material will come from the required readings and class lecture. The next largest element of your grade is a semester research paper (worth 25%). Paper instructions are forthcoming. There will be 5 in class quizzes during the semester worth 10% of your grade. There will also be 2 short assignments over the course of the semester worth a total of 5%. The remainder of your grade will be determined by weekly presentations (5%) and participation (5%). So, in summary, your grade is determined by: Exam 1 (25%), Exam 2 (25%), Research Paper (25%), Quizzes (10%), Assignments (5%), Presentation (5%), Participation (5%).

I abide by the following grading scale: A = 93+, A- = 90-92.9, B+ = 87.5-89.9, B = 83-87.4, B- = 80-82.9, C+ = 77.5-79.9, C = 73-77.4, C- = 70-72.9, D+ = 67.5-69.9, D = 63-67.4, D- = 60-62.9

Student Responsibilities—You will notice that there will be no “de jure” attendance taken. However, your presence in class is absolutely crucial to earning a good grade in this course. On the one hand, you cannot simply review the required readings a day or two before the exam and expect to earn a good grade. On the other hand, if you miss an in class quiz your grade will automatically drop by 2.5%. Thus, the quizzes and participation count as a “de facto” attendance grades. There will be one, and only one, “bonus quiz” given during the semester (also unannounced). That quiz will take the place of your lowest quiz grade.

Due Dates—Assignment and exam dates are firm. If you are unable to turn an assignment in during class, I reserve the right to deduct 1% from your grade for every hour that it’s late. If an illness or other circumstance forces you to be absent, your first responsibility is to your own health or condition. However, you are still required to fill out an absence memo with Student Affairs (that is, if you missed an assignment or exam and would like the opportunity to make the work up). Moreover, you should contact me immediately. Special circumstances will only be given if there is a documented and compelling reason for your absence. Also, if you are going to be absent for a College function (sport, club, etc.), you must let me know in advance (in addition to getting an absence memo).

Academic Honesty— As with any course at the College of Charleston, you are required to do your own work and abide by the academic honesty guidelines. Cheating of any kind will not be tolerated. For any questions please consult the Student Honor Code.

Students with Disabilities— The Center for Disability Services assists students with disabilities. They provide a number of services including academic advisement and exam assistance. Please feel free to discuss any concerns with me.

## Course Overview

→ denotes the required reading(s) which are to be read prior to the start of the day or week (though see any notes). I will assume you have read, and understood, the material to be discussed each day. Note that these readings will be the subject of the unannounced quizzes. I advise you to review the objectives listed before, during, and after class. If you can answer these questions or topics you should do well on the exams (and more importantly understand something about Public Opinion in the United States).

### Part I. Introduction to Public Opinion

Date(s)

#### Introduction and Course Overview

W  
1/9

#### Normative Arguments: Democracy and Public Opinion

- Verba, The Citizen as Respondent: Sample Surveys and American Democracy 1/11 & 1/14  
→ Madison, Federalist #10  
→ Madison, Federalist #63  
**Assignment #1 Due on Friday (1/11).** Free Response Essay. Instructions are available on my website; see the document "Assignment #1."

#### Objectives

- What role do you think public opinion plays in our nation?  
What role *should* public opinion play in our nation?  
How is our government designed to respond to the public's preferences?

#### Empirical Evidence: Democracy and Public Opinion

- Erikson and Tedin Ch. 10 1/16 & 1/18  
→ Erikson and Tedin Ch. 11

#### Objectives

- Are our elected leaders responsive to the public?  
What is the evidence in favor of your answer to the first question?  
Do elected leaders *need* to follow public opinion?  
What is the effect of public opinion on policy outcomes?

#### NO CLASS (MLK JR. Day)

M  
1/21

#### What is Public Opinion? A Short History of Polls and Polling

- Erikson and Tedin Ch. 1 (7-22) 1/23 & 1/25

#### Objectives

- What do we mean by the term "public opinion"?  
What are the origins of public opinion polls in the United States?  
How has the use and method of surveying evolved over U.S. history?

## Part II. Theory and Method: What Are “Attitudes,” Where Do They Come From, and How can we Measure Them?

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### **Conceptualization: The “Problem” of Non-Attitudes**

→ Asher Ch. 2 (37-55)

M  
1/28

#### Objectives

What are “attitudes” and do people have them?

How can we reduce response instability on surveys?

How do we explain opinion change? Is opinion change a measurement problem of something meaningful?

### **Measurement: Survey Research**

#### **Sampling**

→ Asher Ch. 4 (91-112)

W  
1/30

#### **Miscellaneous Forms of Survey Bias**

→ Krosnick, Response Strategies for Coping with the Cognitive Demands of Attitude Measures in Surveys

→ Gernstein, A Pollster Under Oath (see link below)

<http://politi.co/P7D7ly>

F  
2/1

#### **Modes and Mode Effects**

→ Asher Ch. 5 (117-123)

M  
2/4

#### **Interviewer and Respondent Effects**

→ Asher Ch. 5 (123-135)

W  
2/6

#### **Question Wording, Design, and Order Effects**

→ Asher Ch. 3

→ Sides, Did you Watch or Listen to the GOP Debate? (see link below)

<http://wapo.st/tYwgwC>

F  
2/8

#### Objectives

The overarching objective is for you to develop your skills related to surveying and develop an analytical disposition toward American politics. Specific questions include...

What are the main sources of bias on surveys?

What are the various survey modes? What are their tradeoffs vis-à-vis one another?

How can we ask “good” survey questions? What are common question wording problems?

How can interviewers both enhance and detract from the quality of survey responses?

### **Theory: The Origin of Public Opinion**

#### **Sociology: The Transmission of Politics**

→ Erikson and Tedin Ch. 5

M, W  
2/11 & 2/13

#### **Economics: The Rational Voter**

→ Popkin, The Reasoning Voter (7-17)

→ Marcus et al., Coming to Rational Choice (1-11)

F, M  
2/15 & 2/18

## Genetics and Social Networks

W, F  
2/20 & 2/22

## Psychology: Public Opinion at the Individual Level

- Erikson and Tedin Ch. 3
- Zaller, Converting Information Into Public Opinion (40-52)

M, W  
2/25 & 2/27

### Objectives

The overarching objective for this section is for you to understand competing theories on the origin and nature of public opinion in American politics as well as develop and analytical disposition toward American politics. Specifically, you should be able to compare and contrast the paradigms detailed above as well as apply them in new situations.

## Midterm Exam

F  
3/1

## No Class (Spring Break)

M,W,F  
3/4, 3/6, 3/8

## Part III. Substantive Issues in Public Opinion Research

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### Party Identification and Party Realignments

- Erikson and Tedin Ch. 4
- Campbell et al., The Development of Party Identification
- Burnham, Toward A Definition of Critical Realignment
- Sundquist, Party Realignment: What? When? How? (Ch. 1 only)

M, W, F  
3/11, 3/13, 3/15

Notes: read Erikson and Tedin & Campbell et al. for Monday and the remaining readings for Wednesday and Friday. Also note that the Sundquist PDF has additional chapters included to help with your research papers. Use these as needed.

### Objectives

- What is party identification, theoretically?
- In what ways can macropartisanship change over time?
- What factors have led to party realignments throughout U.S. history?

### Introduction to Political Data Analysis / Writing a Good Research Paper

- Asher Ch. 8
- Assignment #2 Due on Friday (4/5).** Data Analysis Exercise. Instructions are available on my website; see the document "Assignment #1."

M, W, F  
3/18, 3/20, 3/22

### Objectives

The objective is to develop your skills related to secondary data analysis.

### Campaigns, Elections, and Voting

- Erikson and Tedin Ch. 9

M, W  
3/25 & 3/27

### Polarization

- Hetherington, Putting Polarization in Perspective
- Carsey and Layman, Party Identification, Party Polarization, and "Conflict Extension" in the American Electorate

F, M  
3/29 & 4/1

Objectives

To what extent is the U.S. polarized? What does this term mean?  
Does polarization differ at the elite and mass level?  
What has caused the increase in polarization over time?  
What is meant by “conflict extension”?

**The Media in Politics and Public Opinion**

→ Erikson and Tedin Ch. 8

**HWK #2 Due on Friday**

W, F  
4/3 & 4/5

Objectives

What role should the media play in a democracy?  
What role does the modern media play in U.S. politics?  
What effects does the media have on individuals’ political information and behavior?

**Computer Lab Time for Research Papers**

Notes: we will meet in the Addlestone Library computer lab, Room 122.

M, W  
4/8 & 4/10

**Group Differences in Public Opinions**

→ Erikson and Tedin Ch. 7

→ Lopez and Taylor, Latino Voters in the 2012 Election

M, W, F  
4/15, 4/17, 4/19

Objectives

What are the major political differences in American politics?  
Where do these differences come from?

**Trust in Government**

→ Gronke, Hicks, and Cook, Trust but Verify

M  
4/22

Notes: We have come full circle. We began the semester talking about democracy and public opinion so it’s altogether fitting that we end the semester talking about democracy and public opinion.

Objectives

Why do people distrust government?  
What factors explain variation in trust in government?

**Final Exam (during normal class hours)**

W  
4/24

**Research Papers Due Wednesday May 1 at noon**

Notes: A hard copy is due to me in my office

W  
5/1