Public Opinion in American Politics
Spring 2015
CRN: 46871
TTh 12:45-2:00, Monroe 115

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In a democracy, the views of citizens are expected to guide government activity and public policy. That makes public opinion a central concern in the study of democratic politics. This course examines public opinion in contemporary American politics. We will discuss how to conceptualize and measure public opinion, where opinions “come from,” the nature of opinion about several salient issues, and whether public opinion affects policymaking. The course has four learning objectives:

1) You will comprehend how surveys are conducting and how to interpret their results.

2) You will evaluate theories of how people form opinions and answer to survey questions.

3) You will understand—and reflect on—debates about the “competence” of the public and how much public opinion should affect public policy.

4) You will become a savvier consumer of public opinion data, which you’ll see in the news for the rest of your life.

Blackboard. The syllabus, PowerPoint presentations, and other course documents will be posted on the Blackboard page for this course.

Required reading. There is one required book for this course, available at the GW Bookstore:


Other readings are available on Blackboard. In addition, I recommend that you read the polling blog Pollster. My own blog, The Monkey Cage, also comments on polling and public opinion from time to time.

Class meetings. I will always begin class on time and you should arrive on time. While we are in class, laptops, smart phones, and other electronic devices are not allowed, except for the purpose of taking quizzes.

There are two reasons for this policy. First, studies of electronic devices in classrooms show that a student with the ability to browse on a laptop will remember less of what occurred during class. Moreover, a student who does not have a laptop but can see another student’s laptop also remembers less. Electronic devices tend to distract both the user and those around them.1

Second, at least one study suggests that taking notes on laptops leads to less learning than taking notes by hand. Taking notes on a laptop creates a tendency to transcribe information verbatim, while taking notes forces you to process and reframe the information, which contributes to learning.²

**Course requirements.** Your grade will reflect the following components:

- **Quizzes.** There will be regular quizzes given at the beginning of class. The quizzes will cover material from the previous class and/or the readings due in class that day. Typically, they will be composed of 5 multiple choice questions.

  Frequent quizzes have been shown improve students’ learning significantly. In one recent study in a large introductory class in psychology, instituting on-line quizzes appeared to improve students’ performance (especially among students whose families were less wealthy).³ Moreover, students taking this class also did better in their other classes that semester, and in the classes they took the next semester. This suggests that frequent assessment helps students develop study habits that are beneficial in other courses, not just the course that assigns quizzes. Frequent quizzes also help me ascertain how well concepts are understood, so that I can adjust the content accordingly.

  There will be 18 quizzes total. I will drop your 3 lowest quiz grades and average the remaining 15. You will receive a 0 for any quiz that you miss because of an unexcused absence. The dates of the quizzes are indicated in the course schedule below.

- **Participation.** Your attendance and participation in class is required. Everyone begins with a participation grade of 100. Everyone is allowed 2 unexcused absences for any reason. Five points will be deducted from your participation grade for any of these reasons:

  1) Any unexcused absence beyond the two you are allowed. Absences are excused only for reasons of documented illnesses, family emergencies, or observance of a religious holiday.

  2) If you are in class on 1/27 but do not turn in the short paper due that day.

  3) If I call on you in class and you are not prepared to answer the question.

  Simply coming to class having done the reading and assignments ensures that you will get a 100 for this portion of the course.

- **Research paper.** You will choose a topic and investigate public opinion about that topic, drawing on historical and current polls, scholarly research, and any other relevant material. You will write a 10-page paper that fully describes the nature of public opinion and its implications for politicians and public policy. Different components of that paper will be due throughout the semester.

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**Course grades.** Your grade in the course will be a weighted average of the requirements: quizzes (50%), participation (20%), and research paper (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 am happy to answer those questions and to suggest ways that you can do better.

- If you do not think that the grade you received reflects the quality of your work, you may ask for the assignment to be graded again. To do so, submit a formal appeal in writing, explaining why you think the grade you received is not a fair reflection of the quality of your work. The new grade, whether higher or lower, will then become your final grade on this assignment.

- If you do not complete an assignment, you will receive a 0 for the assignment.

- Late assignments will be penalized one-half of a letter grade for each day that the assignment 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. You may also communicate directly with the Dean of Students and that office can notify faculty of your absence.

- 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-.

**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](http://www.gwu.edu/~ntegrity/index.html)

**Medical needs, illnesses, and other emergencies.** If a medical need will affect your work, please communicate with me. I can accommodate this 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.
PART I. WHAT IS PUBLIC OPINION? AND HOW CAN WE MEASURE IT?

Jan. 13, 15  What Is Public Opinion?
- Clawson and Oxley, Chapter 1.

Jan. 20  The Basics of Survey Research
- QUIZ
- Clawson and Oxley, pp. 27-40.

Jan. 22  Survey Mode, Non-Response, and Representativeness
- QUIZ

Jan. 27  Questionnaire Design
- Short paper (1 page): Find a poll question that was asked on an actual survey and critique the question wording or response options.

Jan. 29  Interpreting Surveys
- Paper topic due.
- Zukin, Cliff. “Sources of Variation in Public Election Polling: A Primer.”

PART II. WHERE DO ATTITUDES COME FROM?

Feb. 3  Developing a Political Self
- QUIZ
- Clawson and Oxley, Chapter 2.

Feb. 5  Developing a Political Self
- QUIZ
Feb. 10  The Impact of Self-Interest

- QUIZ
- Clawson and Oxley, pp. 173-179.

Feb. 12  Political Symbols


Feb. 17  Racial and Ethnic Identities

- QUIZ
- Clawson & Oxley, Ch. 7 and pp. 284-291.

Feb. 19  Racial and Ethnic Identities

- QUIZ

Feb. 24  Media Influence

- QUIZ
- Clawson and Oxley, Chapters 3 and pp. 118-125 (the discussion of Zaller’s Receive-Accept-Sample model).

Feb. 26  Media Influence

- Research paper outline and bibliography due.
- QUIZ
Mar. 3 Media Influence

- QUIZ

Mar. 5 Ideology and “Ideological Innocence”

- QUIZ
- Clawson and Oxley, Chapter 5.

Mar. 17 Political Information

- QUIZ
- Clawson and Oxley, Chapter 8.

Mar. 19 Heuristics

- QUIZ

PART III. THE CONTOURS OF CONTEMPORARY U.S. OPINION

Mar. 24, 26 Political Polarization

- QUIZ

Mar. 31 War and Foreign Policy

- QUIZ
April 2  Climate Change and Global Warming


April 7  Gun Control and Gun Rights

- See the findings here.

April 9  Civil Liberties

- RESEARCH PAPER DUE IN CLASS. You must also upload an electronic copy to SafeAssign on Blackboard so that I can check for plagiarism.

April 14  Trust in Government

- QUIZ
- Clawson & Oxley, Chapter 11.

April 16  NO CLASS

PART IV: IS THE GOVERNMENT LISTENING? SHOULD IT?

April 21  Public Policy

- QUIZ
- Clawson & Oxley, Chapter 12

April 23  Public Policy

- QUIZ