

POS 3710: Public Opinion and Polling in American Democracy

Instructor: Rich Clark, Ph.D.
Office: LVH 108
Office hours: By appointment
Office Phone: 802-468-1306
Email: Rich.Clark@castleton.edu

“In this age, in this country, public sentiment is everything. With it, nothing can fail; against it, nothing can succeed. Whoever molds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes, or pronounces judicial decisions.”

– Abraham Lincoln

Since the election of Andrew Jackson, Americans have engaged in straw polls and other means for predicting the outcome of elections. Americans have also developed a penchant for expressing their opinions and a curiosity about the opinions of their fellow citizens. The American media has created a cottage industry to conduct and discuss opinion polls, but American’s have a limited capacity to judge the quality of the polls that they encounter. In fact, most social science students have only a limited ability to assess the strengths and deficiencies of survey research data despite the fact that it is generally the most common source of data for their respective disciplines.

Course Description

This course will examine the rise of election and public opinion polling, elucidate modern methods of polling, delve into the complexity of managing error in polls, and discuss the roles that polls and public opinion play in our public life today. Students will explore the problems with modern polls from both a methodological perspective (problems with which survey research professionals grapple) as well as a political perspective (problems with how polls are used by leaders and the media).

The course begins with a general overview of what public opinion is and then delves into the methods of measuring public opinion. After an exploration of methodology, we’ll address the questions of the skeptics, and review the status of public opinion on several policy and issue areas.

The course is basically divided into the following five learning units:

1. What is public opinion and why should it matter
2. Polling, Survey Research, and measuring public opinion
3. Limits of and alternatives to polling
4. Public opinion in our democracy
5. The status of public opinion in policy or issue areas

POS 3710: Public Opinion and Polling in American Democracy

It is important the students do all the reading and that they read critically. The lectures of this course will not reiterate the readings; instead, the readings will provide students with the basic knowledge to help understand the lectures and put the material in context. In addition, we will use class time to reinforce what is covered in the lectures and readings; that class time is useful only if students have done the necessary reading and attended the lectures.

Learning Goals

At the conclusion of this course, students should be able to

1. Critically assess survey research instruments (Units 2 & 3);
2. Articulate the role of public opinion in American democracy in broad terms (Unit 4);
3. Discuss the state of public opinion in several issue areas (Unit 5);
4. Find resources to understand or update their understanding of public opinion in contemporary issue areas (Units 1 & 5); and
5. Be intelligent consumers of public opinion data (Units 2, 3, & 5).

Readings

The course will employ two following text books:

Required texts:

Asher, Herbert. *Polling and the Public*, Eighth Edition. (CQ Press: Washington, DC, 2012).

Clawson, Rosalee A. and Zoe M. Oxley. *Public Opinion: Democratic Ideals, Democratic Practice*, Second Edition. (CQ Press: Washington, DC, 2013).

In addition to the required texts, the course will draw from readings from the following sources:

Bishop, George F. *The Illusion of Public Opinion: Fact and Artifact in American Public Opinion Polls*. (Rowman & Littlefield: New York, 2005).

Fishkin, James S. *The Voice of the People: Public Opinion & Democracy*. (Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, 1995).

Heith, Diane J. *Polling to Govern: Public Opinion and Presidential Leadership*. (Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2004).

Newport, Frank. *Polling Matters: Why Leaders Must Listen to the Wisdom of the People*. (Wagner Books: New York, 2004).

POS 3710: Public Opinion and Polling in American Democracy

We will also be using the archive at the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research to explore public opinion data. Students will be required to search the online, question-level database (iPOLL) as well as learning to download complete datasets of public opinion data.

Grading and Assignments

Students will be graded on their ability to demonstrate comprehension and application of the course material throughout the semester.

Reading assessment quizzes

Because it is critical for students to read critically, there will be ten short quizzes given throughout the semester. The quizzes will be based entirely on the reading assignments. There will be no make ups for the quizzes (barring extreme circumstances), although the two lowest grades will be dropped.

Unit exams

At the conclusion of every learning unit, there will be an online exam. Students are free to use their notes, books, and any resources available to complete these exams. The lowest exam score will be dropped from the student's course grade.

Assignments

There will be 5 assignments throughout the semester (listed in the table below). Assignment will be graded based on the completeness and quality of the responses. Students will be given a detailed set of instructions for each assignment the week it is assigned, and the assignments will be due the following week. Assignments handed in late will be marked down a full grade for every course session after the due date.

<i>Assignment</i>	<i>Description</i>
Assignment #1: finding public opinion (1)	Searching the public opinion archives at the Roper Center to find opinion about gun control. Students will (a) report on their findings and (b) write a two page essay on the ambiguities in the data and how they interpret the data.
Assignment #2: survey design	Students will design a survey process by (1) identifying the population of interest, (2) identifying a sample frame for reaching the population of interest, and (3) assess the potential problems or limitations with the sample frame and what those problems/limitations will mean for the ability to generalize findings.
Assignment #3: writing questions	Students will draft a questionnaire to find the public's attitudes about a specific policy issue (TBD). The instructor will list five questions that the data will need to address.
Assignment #4: assessing questions	Students will assess a questionnaire and provide advice for improvement.
Assignment #5: finding public opinion (2)	Students will again search the public opinion archives at the Roper Center to find opinion about gun control. This time, however, students will use crosstabs to explore differences in attitudes by party and gender. Students

POS 3710: Public Opinion and Polling in American Democracy

will then (a) report on their findings and (b) write a two page essay to interpret and explain those findings.

Final Exam

There will be a final exam given on the college's assigned date. The exam will be comprised of essay questions which the students will receive in advance of the exam. The final exam will count for 15 percent of the student's final grade.

Graded Category	Percent of total grade
Reading Quizzes (top 8 scores each worth 3.75 percent of total grade)	30%
Unit Exams (top four scores each worth 7.5 percent of total grade)	30%
Class Assignments (each worth 5 percent of total grade)	25%
Final Exam	15%
Total	100%

Tentative Semester Schedule

Date	Unit	Topic	Readings / Preparation	Assignment
Tuesday, January 21, 2014	Unit 1	Introduction to the course and thinking probabilistically		
Thursday, January 23, 2014	Unit 1	What is Public Opinion?	Clawson & Oxley, Chapter 1	
Tuesday, January 28, 2014	Unit 1	How do we measure Public Opinion: an overview of methods	Asher, Chapter 1	
Thursday, January 30, 2014	Unit 1	Public Opinion Matters (?)	Newport (handout)	
Tuesday, February 04, 2014	Unit 1	Polling and Survey Research as professions	(handout) [Bring an example of data that can only be acquired through survey research]	
Thursday, February 06, 2014	Unit 1	Lab Day: finding public opinion data	[Searching the Roper Center archive, find some data that illustrate public attitudes about either (a) the Clinton impeachment (b). What did the	#1
Tuesday, February 11, 2014	Unit 2	Survey research and Error Management		
Thursday, February 13, 2014	Unit 2	Coverage Error and the Problems of Identifying the Target Population	Asher, Chapter 2	
Tuesday, February 18, 2014	Unit 2	Sampling Error and the Necessity of Probability	Asher, Chapter 4	#2

POS 3710: Public Opinion and Polling in American Democracy

		Sampling		
Thursday, February 20, 2014	Unit 2	Non-response Error and the Problem of Non-Attitudes	Clawson & Oxley, Chapter 5	
Tuesday, February 25, 2014		Winter break		
Thursday, February 27, 2014		Winter break		
Tuesday, March 04, 2014	Unit 2	Measurement Error: an overview of the psychology of survey response	Asher, Chapter 3, Clawson & Oxley, Chapter 6	
Thursday, March 06, 2014	Unit 2	Writing Questions & Testing Questionnaires	Asher, Chapter 5, Clawson & Oxley, Chapter 7	
Tuesday, March 11, 2014	Unit 2	Writing Questions & Testing Questionnaires	[Bring your Assignment #3 questionnaire to class]	#3
Thursday, March 13, 2014	Unit 3	Polls gone wrong	Asher, Chapter 9	
Tuesday, March 18, 2014	Unit 3	Push Polls and the Deliberative Poll	Fishkin, Chapter 5 & Afterward (handouts)	
Thursday, March 20, 2014	Unit 3	Focus Groups and Semi-Structured Interviews		
Tuesday, March 25, 2014	Unit 3	The Illusion of Public Opinion: the skeptic's perspective	Clawson & Oxley, Chapter 2	#4
Thursday, March 27, 2014	Unit 3	An informed citizenry	Clawson & Oxley, Chapter 8	
Tuesday, April 01, 2014	Unit 4	Polls and the media	Asher, Chapter 6; Clawson & Oxley, Chapters 3	
Thursday, April 03, 2014	Unit 4	Polls and the President	Heith, Conclusion (handout)	
Tuesday, April 08, 2014		Spring break		
Thursday, April 10, 2014		Spring break		
Tuesday, April 15, 2014	Unit 4	Polls and electoral politics	Asher, Chapter 7; Clawson & Oxley, Chapter 4	
Thursday, April 17, 2014	Unit 4	Polls and the economy	[Find survey data online that show the current state of the economy; be prepared to articulate in your own words what the data you found say about the economy today]	
Tuesday, April 22, 2014	Unit 4	Polls and public health	[Find a survey in the Roper Center data base, no more than two years old, that provide some insight into public health issues. Please keep in mind that we are not looking for attitudes about health care.]	
Thursday, April 24, 2014	Unit 5	Polls and race in America	Clawson & Oxley, Chapter 10	
Tuesday, April 29, 2014	Unit 5	Public opinion and trust in government	Clawson & Oxley, Chapter 11	

POS 3710: Public Opinion and Polling in American Democracy

Thursday, May 01, 2014	Unit 5	Public opinion on law and order: the death penalty, gun control, and crime	Clawson & Oxley, Chapter 9	#5
Tuesday, May 06, 2014	Unit 5	Public opinion and abortion	Clawson & Oxley, Chapter 12	
Thursday, May 08, 2014	Unit 5	Public opinion and foreign affairs	Clawson & Oxley, Chapter 13	
Tuesday, May 13, 2014		FINAL EXAM		

Academic Integrity and Student Conduct:

As part of the academic community, students will be held to a high standard of academic honesty. All work submitted by a student or group must be the original work of that student or group. Any ideas or phrases referenced within a paper must be duly attributed to the original author, and all references must be properly cited. Cheating or plagiarism will not be tolerated.

Students are expected to conduct themselves in class in a manner that is respectful of the college, the instructor, and all fellow students. Disruptive behavior will not be tolerated. Please consult the Castleton College Handbook for a thorough enumeration of the Code of Conduct and for proper classroom decorum.

Special Needs:

Students with disabilities who believe that they may need accommodations for this class are encouraged to contact the Learning Specialist in the Academic Support Center (468-1428) for assistance. Anyone who feels as if they will need help should take action as early in the semester as possible to ensure that accommodations are implemented.

Instructor's Expectations:

This is a 3000-level course. As such, the instructor expects all students to come to class prepared to engage in the scheduled topic. The college handbook explicitly states that "students are expected to attend one hour of class and to work at least two hours a week out of class for each academic credit they receive." Apart from a few graded and ungraded assignments, the majority of the out-of-class workload involves reading. It is expected that you read actively, taking notes and contemplating the content before coming to class.