
public opinion & political behavior

PSCI 3051: SECTION 001
FALL 2004

T TH 9:30-10:45 A.M.
211 HELLEMS

This class concerns the joy and magic that is the study of public opinion. In many ways, public opinion is the currency of a representative democracy. It is the expression of what people expect, desire, and think of their government. And it is what politicians follow, influence, and are held accountable to. Throughout the course, we will consider the structure and dynamics of public opinion, analyzing both what influences it, as well as how it shapes other aspects of politics and public life. Specifically, the course is structured around four key themes:

- how we measure public opinion.
- how the public forms opinions about politics – what they know about politics, how they organize their beliefs, and why it matters.
- what factors in the political world influence and shape public opinion.
- what the consequences of public opinion are – for citizen participation in politics, for the actions of political leaders, and for representation more generally.

HOW TO CONTACT ME

by e-mail: e-mail is a fine way to contact me: wolakj@colorado.edu

office hours:

My office hours are held in 136 Ketchum Hall on **Tuesdays 2-3 p.m.** and **Wednesdays 9-11 a.m.** If these office hours conflict with your schedule, I am happy to set up other meeting times.

WebCT IS YOUR FRIEND

I will regularly update class information on the website for the class at webct.colorado.edu. This syllabus will be posted there, as well as links to homework assignments and other exciting material.

OBJECTIVES

At its core, this class is about encouraging you to think about public opinion in an analytical way. In part, this will involve reading about the public opinion questions that other researchers have considered, using these to jump off from in developing theoretical questions that interest you. A second part will be gaining some of the skills necessary to analyze public opinion data and explore theories of public opinion. To build these skills, we will study the methodology of public opinion and work hands-on with survey data.

READING MATERIAL

The readings are a core part of the class – to build a working knowledge of the character of public opinion, and also to encourage you to ask questions, develop theories, and think about explanations for political phenomena. Keeping up with assigned readings is important, and you should generally aim to complete the readings listed for a given day before the scheduled class meeting.

required texts

- Asher, Herbert. 2004. *Polling and the Public: What Every Citizen Should Know*. 6th edition. Washington, DC: CQ Press.
- Erikson, Robert A., and Kent Tedin. 2005. *American Public Opinion: Its Origin, Contents, and Impact*. 7th edition. New York: Longman.
- A set of supplementary book chapters and articles.
These are available on the library's e-reserves at libraries.colorado.edu/screens/coursereserves.html

optional

- Johnson, Janet Buttolph, Richard A. Joslyn, and H.T. Reynolds. 2001. *Political Science Research Methods*. 4th edition. Washington, DC: CQ Press.
This book is a highly useful one that is nice to have in your library, particularly if you will be taking more upper level political science courses. We will focus on a smaller subset of chapters from the book, which will be on e-reserves for those who choose not to purchase the text.

REQUIREMENTS

In addition to the readings, you will also be responsible for the following:

assignments *(worth 25% of your final grade)*

This includes some writing exercises in preparation for the research paper assignment and homeworks on analyzing public opinion data.

research paper *(worth 25% of your final grade)*

As demonstration of the vast analytical skills gained in this class, you will prepare an eight to ten page research paper concerning some exciting question about public opinion (of your own choosing, given instructor approval). The paper will give you the opportunity to use survey data to explore said question, and explore a particular aspect of public opinion in greater detail.

midterm exam *(worth 25% of your final grade)*

final exam *(worth 25% of your final grade)*

SPECIAL ACCOMODATIONS

If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, please submit to me a letter from Disability Services in a timely manner so that your needs may be addressed. You can contact the Disability Services office for more information at www.colorado.edu/disabilityservices.

SOME IMPORTANT COMMENTS ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

- Plagiarism and other academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. If you are not familiar with the rules of citing sources in written work or what constitutes plagiarism, you should contact me or refer to the University Honor Code at www.colorado.edu/academics/honorcode.
- All papers are expected to be original work, not previously or simultaneously handed in for credit in another course (unless prior approval of all instructors involved is obtained).

CLASS SCHEDULE

PSCI 3051- public opinion & political behavior - Fall 2004

TU: August 24 First class

MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION

TH: August 26 Why study public opinion; Measuring public opinion
Erikson and Tedin: Chapter 1
Asher: Chapter 1

TU: August 31 Questionnaire wording and design
Asher: Chapters 2-3

TH: September 2 No class

TU: September 7 Questionnaire construction

TH: September 9 Sampling
Asher: Chapters 4-5

TU: September 14 Interviewer effects, Alternatives to polls
Asher: Chapters 6-8

TH: September 16 The process of data analysis and writing hypotheses
Johnson, Joslyn, and Reynolds: Chapter 3

THE CONSTRUCTION OF PUBLIC OPINION

TU: September 21 Information
Erikson and Tedin: Chapter 3

TH: September 23 Values and ideology

TU: September 28 Partisanship
Describing a variable (mean, median, mode, frequency tables)
Johnson, Joslyn, and Reynolds: Chapter 11

TH: September 30 Fall break – class does not meet.

TU: October 5 Opinion formation

TH: October 7 Sophistication and cognition

TU: October 12 Two-variable tables and control tables
Johnson, Joslyn, & Reynolds: Chapter 12 (p. 338-350) & Chapter 13 (p.393-402)

TH: October 14 **Midterm exam**

INFLUENCES ON PUBLIC OPINION

- TU: October 19 Socialization and personal experience
 Erikson and Tedin: Chapter 5
- TH: October 21 Self interest and symbolic politics
- TU: October 26 Social influences
 Mutz, Diana C., and Gregory Flemming. 1999. "How Good People Make Bad Collectives: A Social-Psychological Perspective on Public Attitudes Toward Congress." In Joseph Cooper, ed., *Congress and the Decline of Public Trust*. Boulder: Westview Press. (p. 79-99)
- TH: October 28 The mass media
 Erikson and Tedin: Chapter 8
- TU: November 2 Campaigns and elections
 Erikson and Tedin: Chapter 9
- TH: November 4 Political leaders
 Erikson and Tedin: Chapter 10

EXPRESSIONS OF PUBLIC OPINION

- TU: November 9 Opinion dynamics
 Erikson and Tedin: Chapter 4
- TH: November 11 Democratic values and tolerance
 Erikson and Tedin: Chapter 6
 Inglehart, Ronald. 2003. "How Solid is Mass Support for Democracy – And How Can We Measure It?" *PS* 36:51-57.
- TU: November 16 Institutional support
 Hibbing, John R. and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse. 1996. *Congress As Public Enemy: Public Attitudes Toward American Political Institutions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. chapter 5 (p. 84-105) & chapter 8 (p. 145-162).
- TH: November 18 Trust in government

CONSEQUENCES OF PUBLIC OPINION

- TU: November 23 Political participation and voter turnout
- TH: November 25 Thanksgiving
- TU: November 30 Political participation – social capital
 Putnam, Robert. 1995. "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital." *Journal of Democracy* 6:65-78.
 http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_democracy/v006/6.1putnam.html

- TH: December 2 **Research papers due.**
Political participation – who participates
Brady, Henry E., Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and Laurel Elms. 2002.
“Who Bowls? The (Un)Changing Stratification of Participation.” In Barbara
Norrande and Clyde Wilcox, eds., *Understanding Public Opinion*. 2nd ed.
Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.
- TU: December 7 Representation and responsiveness
Erikson and Tedin: Chapter 11
- TH: December 9 Last day of class
- MO: December 13 **Final exam**