

# public opinion & political behavior

PSCI 3051.001  
FALL 2007  
T TH 9:30-10:45 A.M.  
E417 MUENZINGER

DR. JENNIFER WOLAK  
136 KETCHUM HALL  
wolakj@colorado.edu  
HOURS: W 1 P.M – 3 P.M.  
& BY APPOINTMENT

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, particularly the methodology of public opinion polling.
- How the public forms opinions about politics – what people know about politics, how they organize their beliefs, and why it matters.
- What factors in the political world influence and shape public opinion, including the effects of the media, political rhetoric, and social forces.
- The consequences of public opinion – for citizen participation in politics, for the actions of political leaders, and for representation more generally.

## CULEARN IS YOUR FRIEND

I will regularly update class information on the website for the class at [culearn.colorado.edu](http://culearn.colorado.edu). This syllabus will be posted there, as well as links to assignments and other exciting material.

## OBJECTIVES

At its core, this class is about encouraging you to think about public opinion in an analytical way. This will include reading about the public opinion questions that other researchers have considered, and using these to develop theoretical questions that interest you. In particular, a major component of the class will be to acquire 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.

## EXPECTATIONS

You are encouraged to be an active participant in class. Please feel free to raise questions at any point during lectures, including matters of clarification, theoretical points, or topics to address in class discussion. You should also keep in touch by e-mail or by visiting office hours if you have any questions about course expectations or the material covered in class.

The reading assignments 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. You should complete readings listed for a given day before the scheduled class meeting.

You are also expected to maintain proper classroom etiquette. This includes respecting the opinions of others even if you disagree, not talking out of turn, putting away newspapers and crossword puzzles during lecture, turning off cell phones before class, and not disrupting the class if arriving late.

## READING MATERIAL

- Asher, Herbert. 2007. *Polling and the Public: What Every Citizen Should Know*. 7<sup>th</sup> edition. Washington, DC: CQ Press.
- Erikson, Robert S., and Kent L. Tedin. 2007. *American Public Opinion: Its Origin, Contents, and Impact*. Updated 7<sup>th</sup> edition. New York: Longman.
- A set of journal articles and book chapters, which can be linked to from CULearn.
  - Some are accessible on JSTOR, an archive of social science journals: [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org)
  - Some are available in the library's e-reserves: [libraries.colorado.edu/screens/course reserves.html](http://libraries.colorado.edu/screens/course reserves.html)
  - Some are articles from journals available online through the library's e-journal archives.
  - *Note:* In some cases, you may be blocked from accessing online journals from off-campus computers. See information on the website of the University Library for instructions on remote access from off-site: [ucblibraries.colorado.edu/research/offcampusaccess.htm](http://ucblibraries.colorado.edu/research/offcampusaccess.htm)

## REQUIREMENTS

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

### **participation, quizzes, and homework assignments** (worth 25% of your final grade)

This includes quizzes on the readings, in-class assignments, participation in class discussions, and homework projects on the skills associated with analyzing public opinion data.

### **research paper** (worth 30% of your final grade)

As demonstration of the vast analytical skills gained in this class, you will prepare a ten to fifteen 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.

### **three exams** (each worth 15% 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](http://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](http://www.colorado.edu/academics/honorcode). Additional information about avoiding plagiarism, citation style, and writing in political science is also posted on CULearn. Academic dishonesty will result in an F in the course and referral to the Honor Council for additional non-academic sanctions.
- 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: FALL 2007**

# **PSCI 3051 – public opinion & political behavior**

### **First class**

*Tuesday, August 28*

### **Class does not meet.**

*Thursday, August 30*

## **MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION**

### **Why study public opinion, Measuring public opinion, Questionnaire wording and design**

*Tuesday, September 4 and Thursday, September 6*

- Erikson and Tedin: Chapter 1.
- Asher: Chapters 1-3.

### **Questionnaire construction, Sampling**

*Tuesday, September 11 and Thursday, September 13*

- Asher: Chapter 4-5.

### **Interviewer effects, Other ways to measure public opinion**

*Tuesday, September 18 and Thursday, September 20*

- Asher: Chapter 6-8.

## **THE CONSTRUCTION OF PUBLIC OPINION**

### **Information, values, ideology, and partisanship**

*Tuesday, September 25 and Thursday, September 27*

- Erikson and Tedin: Chapter 3

### **Exam 1**

*Tuesday, October 2*

### **Opinion formation**

#### **Survey analysis: research questions**

*Thursday, October 4*

### **Sophistication and cognition, Self interest and symbolic politics**

#### **Survey analysis: Reading academic articles and writing a literature review**

*Tuesday, October 9 and Thursday, October 11*

- Schudson, Michael. 2000. "America's Ignorant Voters." *The Wilson Quarterly* 24(2):16-23.

# **INFLUENCES ON PUBLIC OPINION**

**Socialization and personal experience, Media effects**  
**Survey analysis: Writing hypotheses**

*Tuesday, October 16 and Thursday, October 18*

- Erikson and Tedin: Chapter 5.

**The mass media, Social influences**

**Survey analysis: Looking at survey responses**

*Tuesday, October 23 and Thursday, October 25*

- Erikson and Tedin: Chapter 8.
- Fishkin, James S. 2006. "The Nation in a Room: Turning Public Opinion into Policy." *Boston Review* 31(2):10-12.

**Social influences, Campaigns and elections**

**Survey analysis: Analyzing survey data**

*Tuesday, October 30 and Thursday, November 1*

- Stimson, James A. 2004. *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 4 (p. 96-136).
- Erikson and Tedin: Chapter 9.

**Exam 2**

*Tuesday, November 6*

# **EXPRESSIONS OF PUBLIC OPINION**

**Opinion dynamics and change over time, Presidential approval**

*Thursday, November 8*

- Erikson and Tedin: Chapter 4.

**Democratic values and tolerance**

**Survey analysis: Crosstab analysis**

*Tuesday, November 13 and Thursday, November 15*

- 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.

**Fall break. Class does not meet.**

*Tuesday, November 20 and Thursday, November 22*

**Opinions about government, Trust in government**

**Survey analysis: Writing a research paper**

*Tuesday, November 27 and Thursday, November 29*

- Fenno, Richard E. 1975. "If, as Ralph Nader Says, Congress Is 'the Broken Branch,' How Come We Love our Congressmen So Much?" In Norman J. Ornstein, ed., *Congress in Change: Evolution and Reform*. New York: Praeger.

# **CONSEQUENCES OF PUBLIC OPINION**

## **Voter turnout, Political participation**

*Tuesday, December 4 and Thursday, December 6*

- Zukin, Cliff, Scott Keeter, Molly W. Andolina, Krista Jenkins, and Michael X. Delli Carpini. 2006. *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen*. New York: Oxford University Press. p. 14-15 and Chapter 4.

## **Research papers due**

*Tuesday, December 11*

## **Social capital, Representation and responsiveness**

*Tuesday, December 11 and Thursday, December 13*

- Putnam, Robert. 1995. "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital." *Journal of Democracy* 6:65-78.
- Erikson and Tedin: Chapters 10-11.

## **Final exam**

*Monday, December 17th, 4:30 p.m. - 7:00 p.m.*