

Public Opinion in the Public Sphere
Communication 529 Sec. 3 / Political Science 519 Sec. SA
Tu 2–5, 356 Armory (ACDIS Seminar Room)
Fall 2009

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Primary Office

Cline Center for Democracy
2001 South First Street, Suite 207
Hours: by appointment

Secondary Office

Department of Political Science
256 Computer Applications Building

Location

We will be meeting in the ACDIS seminar room, located in Room 356 of the Armory Building. The easiest way to reach it is to enter the Armory through the northeast entrance (on Armory Avenue near the corner of Sixth Street). Go up the stairs to the third floor, and proceed west down the corridor that parallels Armory Avenue. On occasion students may need to enter through room 359, which is the main entry into the ACDIS suite.

Description

This seminar examines problems in the conceptualization of public opinion as a social phenomenon, in the communication of opinions from mass publics to political elites, and in the interpretation of public opinion as “the will of the people.” It seeks to address what may be the central questions of democratic politics: What is public opinion, how do we know it when we see it, and does it possess the various characteristics that theories of democracy suggest it should? In the process of addressing these questions, the course engages scholarship from multiple disciplines to clarify the roles that “bottom up” communication is supposed to play in the conduct of democratic politics.

We will explore whether the roles and functions that opinion surveys, election results, and other indicators of public opinion have assumed in American politics are appropriate to their limitations as channels of public opinion. The first part of the course will explore three alternative conceptions of public opinion that have become dominant in modern political thought: public opinion as revealed in the aggregation of individual preferences, public opinion as revealed in the competition among groups for political power, and public opinion as “informed” opinion revealed through processes of active deliberation and cognition. The second part of the course will focus on various problems affecting the communication and interpretation of public opinion, including the mass public’s low levels of knowledge about politics, the potential disjunction between expressed opinions and political interests, and the various inequalities in social, economic, and political resources that affect the representation of voices and interests in measures of public opinion.

Objectives

This course is intended to be neither a comprehensive survey of the literature relevant to public opinion research nor an introduction to the study of public opinion. Instead, this course is devoted to exploring some of the problematic theoretical ellipses of public opinion and mass communication research. By the end of this course, students should be able to:

- appreciate the range of alternative concepts and measures of public opinion
- recognize major strengths and weaknesses of the three dominant concepts of public opinion
- identify the varied roles that public opinion plays in different models of democracy
- understand the study of public opinion as an inherently interdisciplinary project

Readings

The following books are required reading for the course. All of the following titles are on reserve at the Communication Library in Gregory Hall:

Althaus, Scott. 2003. *Collective preferences in democratic politics: Opinion surveys and the will of the people*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Price, Vincent. 1992. *Public opinion*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Riker, William. 1982. *Liberalism against populism: A confrontation between the theory of democracy and the theory of social choice*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

Stimson, James. 2004. *Tides of consent: How opinion movements shape American politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

In addition, students unfamiliar with the methodology of modern opinion polling are recommended (but not required) to read a recent edition of Herbert Asher's *Polling and the Public* (the current edition is the 7th), particularly chapters 1-5 and 8-9.

Electronic copies of other assigned readings will be provided by the instructor through a password-protected course Moodle site. This Moodle site will be the primary vehicle for receiving course assignments and distributing course-related materials in electronic form. The Moodle site can be accessed here (access requires an enrollment key):

<https://courses.las.illinois.edu/course/view.php?id=20>

Two important reminders. First, electronic copies of readings obtained through the library system or the course Moodle are **not for redistribution** to persons outside this class. Second, graduate students are not allowed to print these readings for free in departmental computer labs. Students are strongly encouraged to organize themselves so that one person is responsible on a rotating basis for printing out, photocopying, and distributing readings assigned for each week.

Assignments and Course Grade

Your final grade for this course will be determined by your performance on the following assignments:

- Final research paper or take-home exam (40% of final grade)
- Weekly participation in class discussions (20% of final grade)
- Discussion guides for assigned readings (approx. 6-7 short papers, 40% of final grade)

Final research paper or take-home exam

Students will be writing a final paper that will be 20-25 double-spaced pages in length. This paper can take either of two forms: a research paper on a topic related to the seminar readings (topic to be determined in consultation with the instructor), or a take-home final exam that requires you to integrate and synthesize the full range of readings from the course. The idea here is to provide you with an opportunity to apply what you have read in the course, either to a substantive research problem, or to stepping back and crystallizing your own perspectives about the theories, research designs, and topics covered in class. All students are encouraged, but not

required, to consider the take-home exam option. Advanced graduate students may elect, in consultation with me, to pursue the research paper option.

Weekly participation in class discussions

In-class discussion will be the primary mode of instruction for this course, and therefore it is vital that everyone participates. Participating means being an active conversation partner and engaging with other students. Participation does not mean dominating the conversation, or trying to impress the professor or one's fellow students with how much you know. Asking questions is a more desirable mode of participation than answering them. Asking good questions that open up lines of inquiry will contribute more to the conversation than providing good answers or merely dissecting a reading's faults and limitations. Criticizing a reading is useful but easy. The more productive but difficult work is intellectually engaging with a reading. Being completely confused about a reading is fine (and candor about such matters is encouraged) so long as you own up to it so that others in the seminar can benefit from the opportunity to test their own understanding of what a reading is about.

Discussion guides for assigned readings

Discussion guides are assigned to provide a collective benefit to all students taking the course. Each week, students will be assigned to write up brief (roughly 1-2 pages, single spaced) discussion guides for particular readings. These guides serve three purposes: (1) they summarize a reading to focus attention on main points and to highlight its relevance to issues of concern in the course, (2) they raise questions about a reading that can be used to stimulate discussion, and (3) they connect new readings to old readings in order to highlight common themes and to point out how current readings raise, address, or underscore questions sparked by previous reading assignments. By the end of the course, each student will possess a discussion guide for every major reading covered during the semester. This collection will prove invaluable for reviewing course material, studying for comprehensive exams, and as a foundation for future engagement with public opinion research.

There is no set format for discussion guides, but they should address the three purposes described above in the process of summarizing and raising questions about each reading. In addition to summarizing main arguments/contributions, these guides will be helpful in drawing connections to other readings. Since the set of readings for a given week is usually chosen to highlight a particular area of controversy, it will be especially helpful when constructing these guides to note how your assigned reading relates to others assigned in a given week. Keep in mind that our interest is not only in exploring the broad theoretical issues at the heart of research on public opinion, but also in exploring the ways that different scholars have attempted to study these issues. Relevant questions therefore include not only theoretical or philosophical issues but also questions related to methodological approaches, research designs, operationalization of key concepts/variables, interpretation of findings, etc.

You are expected to provide enough paper copies of your discussion guides for everyone in the class (one for each student, plus one for me). In addition, you are expected to email me an electronic copy of your discussion guide (formatted for MS Word or Adobe Acrobat) for posting to the course Moodle.

If for some reason you will be unable to attend a class for which you are assigned to provide a discussion guide, it is your responsibility to either trade assigned readings with someone else in the class who can attend, or arrange someone else to distribute your discussion guides at the start of the relevant class period.

Course Schedule

8/25 Introduction and Overview

Weissberg, Robert. 2001. "Democratic political competence: Clearing the underbrush and a controversial proposal." *Political Behavior* 23 (3):257-284.

Marcus, George E. 2008. "Blinded by the light: Aspiration and inspiration in political psychology." *Political Psychology* 28 (3):313-330.

Althaus, Scott L. 2006. "False starts, dead ends, and new opportunities in public opinion research." *Critical Review* 18 (1-3):75-104.

9/1 What Is Public Opinion? What Is It Supposed to Do?

*Price, Vincent. *Public Opinion*. Chapter 2.

Minar, David. 1960. "Public opinion in the perspective of political theory." *Western Political Quarterly* 13(1): 31-44.

Held, David. 2006. *Models of Democracy*, 3rd ed. Cambridge: Polity Press. Chapter 2, "Republicanism: Liberty, self-government and the active citizen," and Chapter 3, "The development of liberal democracy: For and against the state."

Urbinati, Nadia, and Mark E. Warren. 2008. "The concept of representation in contemporary democratic theory." *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (1):387-412.

Price, Vincent, and Peter Neijens. 1997. "Opinion quality in public opinion research." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 9 (4):336-360.

9/8 How Shall We Study Public Opinion?

Allport, Floyd. 1937. "Toward a science of public opinion." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 1(1): 7-23.

Key, V.O. 1960. "The politically relevant in surveys." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 24 (1):54-61.

Lazarsfeld, Paul F. 1957. "Public opinion and the classical tradition." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 21 (1):39-53.

[Following these readings we will have an optional discussion about survey methods, so please read Asher's book and plan to ask questions if you're unfamiliar with survey research techniques, assumptions, and methodological problems]

9/15 What is the Public Sphere and How Shall We Recognize It?

Manin, Bernard. 1997. *The Principles of Representative Government*. Chapter 6. (New York: Cambridge University Press)

Habermas, Jürgen. 1974. "The public sphere: An encyclopedia article." *New German Critique* 3:49-55.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1996. "Three normative models of democracy." in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*. Benhabib, S. ed. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

Habermas, Jürgen. 2006. "Political communication in media society: Does democracy still enjoy an epistemic dimension? The impact of normative theory on empirical research." *Communication Theory* 16 (4):411-426.

Hauser, Gerard A. 2007. "Vernacular discourse and the epistemic dimension of public opinion." *Communication Theory* 17 (4):333-339.

Bohman, James. 2007. "Political communication and the epistemic value of diversity: Deliberation and legitimation in media societies." *Communication Theory* 17 (4):348-355.

9/22 Alternative Roles of Public Opinion in Governance

Madison, James. 1982 [1787-1788]. "Federalist No. 10." In *The Federalist Papers*, edited by G. Wills. New York: Bantam Books.

Bryce, James. 1891. *The American commonwealth*. New York: Macmillan. Selected chapters.

Key, V.O. 1961. *Public opinion and American democracy*. New York: Knopf. Chapter 21, "Public Opinion and Democratic Politics"

Arnold, R. Douglas. 1993. "Can inattentive citizens control their elected representatives?" In *Congress Reconsidered*, edited by L. Dodd and B. Oppenheimer. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly.

Noelle-Neumann, Elisabeth. 1979. "Public opinion and the classical tradition: A re-evaluation." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 43 (2):143-156.

Cho, Hyunyi. 2000. "Public opinion as personal cultivation: A normative notion and a source of social control in traditional China." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 12(3): 299-323

9/29 Surveyed Opinion as Public Opinion

*Price, Vincent. *Public Opinion*. Chapters 3 and 4.

Gallup, George and Saul Rae. 1940. *The Pulse of Democracy*. New York: Simon and Schuster. Chapters 2 and 21.

Blumer, Herbert. 1948. "Public opinion and public opinion polling." *American Sociological Review* 13 (5):542-554. Read also the responses by Woodward and Newcomb.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1979. "Public opinion does not exist." In *Communication and Class Struggle*, edited by A. Mattelart and S. Siegelau. New York: International General.

Converse, Philip E. 1987. "Changing conceptions of public opinion in the political process." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 51 (5):S12-S24.

10/6 The Effects of Opinion Polling on Perceptions of Public Opinion

Herbst, Susan. 1993. *Numbered voices: How opinion polling has shaped American politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chapter 3, "Techniques of opinion expression and measurement," and chapter 4, "Partisan politics and the symbolic use of straw polls, 1856-1936."

Geer, John G. 1996. *From tea leaves to opinion polls: A theory of democratic leadership*. New York: Columbia University Press. Chapters 1 ("Politicians, Information, and Leadership: A Theory") and 2 ("Information and Opinion Polls").

Kernell, Samuel. 2000. Life before polls: Ohio politicians predict the 1828 presidential vote. *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33 (3):569-574.

Jacobs, Lawrence. 1992. "The recoil effect: Public opinion and policymaking in the U.S. and Britain." *Comparative Politics* 24:199-217.

Jacobs, Lawrence R., and Robert Y. Shapiro. 1996. "Presidential manipulation of polls and public opinion: The Nixon administration and the pollsters." *Political Science Quarterly* 110 (4):519-38.

10/13 Assessing the Impact of Public Opinion on Policy

Miller, Warren, and Donald Stokes. 1963. "Constituency influence in Congress." *American Political Science Review* 57 (1):45-56.

Page, Benjamin, and Robert Shapiro. 1983. "Effects of public opinion on policy." *American Political Science Review* 77:175-190.

Stimson, James A., Michael B. MacKuen, and Robert S. Erikson. 1995. "Dynamic representation." *American Political Science Review* 88 (3):543-565.

Burstein, Paul. 2005. "Why estimates of the impact of public opinion on public policy are too high: Empirical and theoretical implications." *Social Forces* 84:2273-2289.

Druckman, James N., and Lawrence R. Jacobs. 2006. "Lumpers and splitters: The public opinion information that politicians collect and use." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 70 (4):453-476.

10/20 Channels of Influence

*Stimson, *Tides of Consent* (all)

Jacobs, Lawrence R., Eric D. Lawrence, Robert Y. Shapiro, and Steven S. Smith. 1998. "Congressional leadership of public opinion." *Political Science Quarterly* 113 (1):21-41.

Entman, Robert M., and Susan Herbst. 2001. "Reframing public opinion as we have known it." In *Mediated politics: Communication in the future of democracy*, edited by W. L. Bennett and R. M. Entman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

10/27 On the Need for an Informed Citizenry

Delli Carpini, Michael and Scott Keeter. 1996. *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*. Chapter 1, "From democratic theory to democratic practice: The case for an informed citizenry." (New Haven: Yale University Press)

Schumpeter, Joseph. [1942] 1976. *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. Chapters 21, 22, and 23. (New York: Harper)

Cutler, Fred. 1999. "Jeremy Bentham and the Public Opinion Tribunal." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 63 (3):321-346.

Ciepley, David. 1999. "Democracy despite voter ignorance: A Weberian reply to Somin and Friedman." *Critical Review* 13 (1-2):191-227.

Lupia, Arthur. 2006. "How elitism undermines the study of voter competence." *Critical Review* 18 (1):217-232.

11/3 Political Information and the Rationality of Collective Opinion

Downs, Anthony. 1957. *An economic theory of democracy*. New York: Harper Collins. Chapters 11, 12, and 13.

Lupia, Arthur. 1994. "Shortcuts versus encyclopedias: Information and voting behavior in California insurance reform elections." *American Political Science Review* 88 (1):63-76.

Page, Benjamin, and Robert Shapiro. 1992. *The rational public: Fifty years of trends in Americans' policy preferences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chapter 1, "Rational Public Opinion"

*Althaus, Scott. *Collective Preferences in Democratic Politics*. Chapters 1–6. [Focus on chapters 1–4, skim chapters 5 and 6.]

11/10 Social Choice Perspectives on Preference Aggregation

*Riker, *Liberalism Against Populism* [Focus on chapters 1, 3, 5, 9, and especially 10; read pages 169-181 of chapter 7; skim the rest of the chapters, focusing on introductions and conclusions]

Miller, David. 1992. "Deliberative democracy and social choice." *Political Studies* XL:54-67.

Bartels, Larry M. 2003. "Democracy with attitudes." In *Electoral democracy*, edited by M. B. Mackuen and G. Rabinowitz. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

11/17 Political Interests

Bachrach, Peter. 1975. "Interest, participation, and democratic theory." In *Participation in Politics*, edited by J. R. Pennock and J. Chapman. New York: Lieber-Atherton.

Sunstein, Cass R. 1991. "Preferences and politics." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 20 (1):3-34.

Connolly, William E. 1993. *The terms of political discourse*. Third ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Chapter 2, "Interests in Politics".

Lau, Richard R., and David P. Redlawsk. 1997. "Voting correctly." *American Political Science Review* 91 (3):585-598.

*Althaus, Scott. *Collective Preferences in Democratic Politics*. Chapter 7.

11/24 NO CLASS: THANKSGIVING BREAK

12/1 Public Opinion and Deliberative Democracy

Barber, Benjamin. 1984. "Citizenship and participation: Politics as epistemology." In *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Bessette, Joseph. 1980. "Deliberative democracy: The majority principle in republican government." In *How Democratic is the Constitution?*, edited by R. A. Goldwin and W. A. Schambra. Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute.

Bryan, Frank M. 1999. "Direct democracy and civic competence: The case of the town meeting." In *Citizen competence and democratic institutions*, edited by S. Elkin and K. Soltan. University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Thompson, Dennis F. 2008. "Deliberative democratic theory and empirical political science." *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (1):497-520.

Mutz, Diana C. 2008. "Is deliberative democracy a falsifiable theory?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (1):521-538.

12/8 Public Opinion in the Public Sphere: Looking to the Future

Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Henry Brady, and Norman Nie. 1993. "Citizen activity: Who participates? What do they say?" *American Political Science Review* 87 (2):303-318.

Teorell, Jan. 2006. "Political participation and three theories of democracy: A research inventory and agenda." *European Journal of Political Research* 45:787-810.

Verba, Sidney. 1996. "The citizen as respondent: Sample surveys and American democracy." *American Political Science Review* 90 (1):1-7.

*Althaus, Scott. *Collective Preferences in Democratic Politics*. Chapter 8.

12/16 Papers due uploaded to Moodle by 10:00pm