

Government 099:
First-Year Seminar: Public Opinion and American Democracy
Fall Semester 2009
Clark University

Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 11-11:50
Jonas Clark 206
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Description

Public opinion polls have become ubiquitous in American politics. During the final week of the 2008 presidential election campaign, nineteen different national polls were taken by reputable polling firms, and the responses to these polls were analyzed extensively in the national media. During the first month of Barack Obama's presidency, ten different firms conducted regular polls regarding the public's level of support for Obama. What are citizens to make of this wealth of information? How are we to distinguish between the results of these polls, or understand what they are actually saying about us?

What, for that matter, are politicians expected to do with this information? At times, we criticize politicians for paying too much attention to the fickle whims of the public, while at other times we criticize politicians for ignoring public sentiment. Is there a middle ground? Can politicians use information about public opinion without seeking to manipulate the public, or without straying from their political instincts and core beliefs?

In this course we will discuss the determinants of the public's opinions about politicians and political issues, the methods researchers use to measure public opinion, and the role public opinion plays in politicians' choices. We will discuss different ways of measuring public opinion – not only through polls, but through focus groups and through less scientific methods – and how well these methods represent public opinion. We will pay particular attention to differences in opinion among different groups in the population and to how American public opinion has changed over the past fifty years.

The goal of this course is to help you become an educated consumer of public opinion information – to help you understand what it is that pollsters do, to help you distinguish between good and bad public opinion polls, to help you think critically about some of the problems in measuring public opinion, and to help you understand the context behind the public's opinions. In addition, by the end of this course you will get the chance to articulate your views on how important public opinion should be in democratic politics.

Readings

Moore, David W. 2007. *The Opinion Makers: An Insider Exposes the Truth Behind the Polls*. New York: Beacon Press.

Erikson, Robert S., and Kent L. Tedin. 2005. *American Public Opinion: Its Origins, Content, and Impact*, 7th ed. New York: Pearson Longman.

Asher, Herbert. 2007. *Polling and the Public: What Every Citizen Should Know*, 7th ed. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press.

Norrander, Barbara, and Clyde Wilcox, eds. 2009. *Understanding Public Opinion*, 3rd ed. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press.

Stonecash, Jeffrey. 2003. *Political Polling: Strategic Information in Campaigns*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Other readings will be provided to you as handouts (but probably will not be on reserve at the library, so be sure to get them from me!).

Web Resources

1. Some regular public opinion surveys:
 - American National Election Studies (ANES), <http://www.electionstudies.org/>: Conducted every election year by the University of Michigan. This is the standard ongoing poll used by political scientists studying electoral behavior. The ANES asks roughly the same questions every year, making measurement of change in the electorate possible. The website includes tables and graphs of question responses, as well as the survey questionnaires and datasets.
 - General Social Survey (GSS), : <http://www.norc.uchicago.edu/GSS+Website/>: Conducted every other year by the University of Chicago. This is the other big ongoing political science survey of Americans, focusing a bit more on attitudes and a bit less on electoral behavior than the ANES. The website contains datasets, questionnaires, analysis, and links to other surveys.
 - World Values Survey (WVS), <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>: One of the better international surveys, conducted since 1981 and now covering 54 countries. A good means of doing cross-national comparisons. Lots of documentation on the website.
 - Bay State Poll, <http://kahuna.merrimack.edu/polling//data.html>: Conducted quarterly by Merrimack College. Pretty much every American state has at least one statewide survey, and this is the one for Massachusetts. There's a little bit less info on the website than for the above surveys, but it is a good survey and easy to use. Last I checked the website has surveys through 2006.
 - Canadian Election Study (CES) <http://ces-ec.mcgill.ca/ces.html>: Like the ANES, but for Canada.

- Eurobarometer, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/standard_en.htm: The standard European public opinion survey, covering primarily Western Europe and the EU, with links to a separate survey covering Eastern Europe.
 - Maxwell Poll on Citizenship and Inequality, <http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/campbell/programs/maxwellpoll.htm>: One of the more intriguing newer polls, conducted since 2004 by Syracuse University, and focusing, as the name suggests, on public engagement and inequality. Website contains reports, questionnaires, and data.
2. Blogs and other websites about polling, and poll archives:
- Real Clear Politics, <http://www.realclearpolitics.com/>: Mostly a collection of current news articles and editorials on politics, but if you click the “polls” button you can look at graphs and summaries of a variety of recent media and professional (e.g. nonacademic) polls on elections, presidential support, and so on. There are nice trendlines here for election polls, and everything from the 2008 election is still here. A slight Republican slant in some of the analysis.
 - www.pollster.com: Probably the best blog on public opinion polling.
 - www.fivethirtyeight.com: Another good blog, covering a variety of political issues, but focusing on polling. Most postings lean left, but the survey analysis is pretty objective.
 - Gallup Poll, www.gallup.com: The actual polls are not here, but there’s plenty of analysis of Gallup Polls. Gallup is probably the foremost professional polling firm.
 - Roper Center, <http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/>: You have to be a subscriber to access the actual polling data here, but there’s plenty of analysis of all manner of media, professional, and academic polls, plus plenty of resources for understanding how polling is done.
 - Pew Center for the People and the Press, <http://people-press.org/>: Very up-to-date commentary on a variety of polls, including political information but also other sorts of public sentiment – for instance, when I checked this while putting together the syllabus, there was an entertaining analysis of racial differences in how much attention people were paying to Michael Jackson’s death. But there’s much more serious stuff here too, especially on religion and the media.

There’s a lot more out there, as well – let me know if you find anything you think would be of interest to the class.

Other Technological Stuff for the Class:

- During several of the class sessions, you will use handheld remote devices (“clickers”) to anonymously respond to questions I ask, and your responses will be instantly tabulated and displayed on screen. Several courses at Clark have been using these devices, and the Turning Point, or interactive Power Point, software that goes with them, for the past couple years. This is my fourth go-around with them. I have found this software useful in this class for two reasons. First, we will at times be covering topics that some of you may be reluctant to voice an opinion on – questions that range from “did you do today’s reading?” to “Do you support same-sex

marriage?” The software gives us the ability to get accurate measurements on questions that people may feel tentative about answering in front of their classmates. And second, the software gives us the opportunity to link question responses together. That is, while you will remain anonymous when you answer questions, each clicker is assigned a unique ID, so it will be possible to measure, for instance, how people who answered “yes” to one question responded to subsequent questions. In a nutshell, we can use them to introduce the type of research that political scientists do on public opinion. I encourage you to give me your feedback on how we can best use them in the course.

- I hate PowerPoint, but I will use it anyway from time to time, especially to show graphs, tables, and so on. I’m happy to give you copies of the graphs and tables I show. I dislike using PowerPoint to do bullet points for lectures, though – it is up to you to decide what’s important to you in my lectures, and PowerPoint presentations make people lazy – they stand there and read from the screen instead of interacting with their audience. So please don’t ask for Power Point slides of my lectures!
- There is a Cicada site for the class; I will post things on there from time to time, and will let you know when I do. The syllabus and paper assignments will be on there. Your thoughts on what else to put there are welcome.

Requirements and Grading

Attendance and Participation. The most important requirement for this class is your attendance and participation. In order to succeed in this course, you must attend class and you must come prepared to discuss the readings. Attendance will be taken, and attendance and participation will comprise ten percent of your grade. This is particularly important because this is a small class – your presence and engagement in the class is necessary for everyone to learn, and your views are important.

Two 3-5 page reaction papers: Early in the course, while we’re all still getting comfortable with the material, you will write two short papers (questions are listed below) to serve as starting points for class discussion. I will use these papers to gauge your understanding of the reading and your ability to formulate your own views on the material. You will not need to do any reading beyond the assigned texts for these papers, but you must cite the readings and cite them properly. Be prepared to discuss these in class the day they are due; I may ask some of you to email me drafts the evening before class so I know where discussion is likely to go. These are each worth fifteen percent of your grade.

Two Group Projects:

For your first project, you and three of your classmates will carefully read the questionnaires from one of the public opinion surveys listed above and develop a research program for using these questions to address some broader issues in public opinion. We will discuss this more in class. Your task will be to figure out how to bring some of the questions in the survey together – I do not expect you to answer the larger questions you raise, but you will develop a clear strategy for doing so. You will be responsible for explaining why your larger question is important, using our readings to guess what sort of answers you might expect, and to

explain why your question is important. I have hired a graduate student to do the actual analysis you suggest; your paper will serve as a set of instructions to him about what he should do.

For your second project, you, and three of your classmates will develop a questionnaire on an issue of concern to Clark students. You will write the questions, and you will explain the reasoning behind these questions, your expectations about what you might find, and the consequences of these answers. I will then test out your questions on a sample of Clark students, and together we will study the results. Your group will be responsible for interpreting what the results mean, and you should also be prepared to comment on any problems in your survey – questions that didn't elicit the answers you were expecting, problems in the wording, bias in the respondents, and so forth. Think of it as the first-ever Clark public opinion survey.

I haven't decided yet whether you will receive a collective grade or an individual grade on these; I'm leaning towards doing a collective grade but retain the right to change my mind about that. Each of these projects will be worth twenty percent of your grade.

Final Paper: At the end of the course, you will write a 5-7 page paper on the role public opinion plays in American politics. Is there too much polling? Should our politicians pay more attention to public opinion surveys? Less? How much is public opinion shaped by politicians? Do surveys really represent what we want? Are there better ways of measuring what we want? As with the shorter papers, I will use your paper to gauge your understanding of the course material and your ability to construct your own argument. Again, proper citations are necessary. This paper will be worth twenty percent of your grade, and we will discuss it on the final day of class.

Summary: Class Requirements and Percent Contribution to Final Grade:

Requirement	Contribution to Grade	Objective
Class attendance and participation	10%	Involvement in class
Reaction Papers	30% (15% each)	Understanding of material
Group Projects	40% (20% each)	Ability to analyze and apply concepts
Final Paper	20%	Ability to think critically about course material

Some other Things to Know:

This is a pretty substantial course for a first-year seminar, but I am taking advantage of your enthusiasm (the fact that you are all undecided about your majors, and want to be here!) to help push all of you to think about politics, about your own opinions, and about those of your classmates. The most important requirement for the course is for you to be honest – honest about what you think, honest about what you do and don't understand – and to be respectful of your classmates. Part of that respect entails being serious about your work:

Your Papers: Attached to this syllabus is a style sheet for your essays, which includes both requirements and suggestions. Following the guidelines here will result in a better grade for the course. Also, keep the following in mind when writing your research questions and your short research essay:

- All papers are due in class on the due date.
- You may turn in a paper late for one grade fraction per day (not including weekends) reduction. That is, an A drops to an A- when it is one day late, then to a B+ on the second day, and so on. *However*, failure to submit your papers in class will also factor into your participation grade – if you didn't submit your paper in class, I will assume you were not there.
- Papers with inadequate citation of the readings will be returned to you and will be subject to a one grade fraction per day reduction until I receive them back with proper citation.
- Unless you have authorization from me to do so, you may not email your papers to me. Emailed papers will be returned to you and will be subject to the one grade fraction per day reduction until I receive the printed copy from you.
- There is a lot of good political information available on the web. I will call your attention to some of this material from time to time. You should feel free to consult web-based resources as you wish. There is also, as you should know, a lot of bad material out there – factually incorrect material, or material that is infused with overly partisan or ideological views. Thus, if you wish to explore other sources, be an educated consumer. You are free to check with me on the value of any outside material.
- You do not, however, *need* to consult outside material for this course (except perhaps for your final essay). In no case will outside material serve as a substitute for the assigned readings.

Academic Honesty: Finally, as you should be aware by now, the work you do in this course must be entirely your own. To be sure we all have the same understanding of academic integrity as it pertains to this course, here is what the Academic Advising *Blue Book* (p. 22) has to say on the subject:

Academic integrity is highly valued at Clark. Research, scholarship and teaching are possible only in an environment characterized by honesty and mutual trust. Academic integrity requires that your work be your own. Because of the damage that violations of academic integrity do to the intellectual climate of the University, they must be treated with the utmost seriousness and appropriate sanctions must be imposed. The maintenance of high standards of academic integrity is the concern of every member of the University community.

Plagiarism refers to the presentation of someone else's work as one's own, without proper citation of references and sources, whether or not the work has been previously published. Submitting work obtained from a professional term paper writer or company is plagiarism. Claims of ignorance about the rules of attribution, or of unintentional error are not a defense against a finding of plagiarism.

Suspected plagiarism cases will be referred to the Dean's office. Every year I have the misfortune of having to do this at least once, and it is one of the worst things about teaching. If you are in doubt about whether you have provided adequate citation or used others' work properly, please talk with me before handing your paper in! If you are up against a paper due date and are tempted to just pluck something from the web and hand it in, *don't do it!* I will catch you, and it won't be worth it. In a case like this, it's better to talk with me or turn the paper in late.

Schedule

Week 1: Introduction to the Course

Monday, August 31: What is Public Opinion?

Wednesday, September 2 and Friday, September 4:

Moore, *The Opinion Makers*

Week 2: History and Theory in Public Opinion Measurement

Wednesday, September 9:

Susan Herbst, *Numbered Voices* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993),
ch. 3 [Handout]

Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Captive Public* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), ch. 2
[Handout]

Friday, September 11: The September 11 attacks and the American public

Norrander and Wilcox, ch. 5, 11

Week 3: A Quick Primer on How Public Opinion is Measured Today

September 14 and 16:

Erikson, ch. 1-2

- Reaction paper #1, due Friday September 18: What does “public opinion” mean to you?
Can we actually know what the public wants?

I. What Public Opinion Tells Us about Ourselves

Week 4: Micro- and Macro-Level Opinion

Erikson, ch. 3-4

Week 5: Values and Attitudes

Monday, September 28: No Class

Wednesday, September 30:

Erikson, ch. 5-6

Handout: Dalton or Nevitte on WVS

- Reaction paper #2, due Friday, Friday, October 2: Consider a current political issue.
How do we disentangle people’s values from their attitudes towards that issue?

Week 6: Group Differences

Erikson, ch. 7

Norrander and Wilcox, ch. 1-3, 6

Week 7: Changing Public Opinion

Monday, October 12: No Class

Wednesday, October 14:

Norrander and Wilcox, ch. 4, 7

Clyde Wilcox, Paul R. Brewer, Shauna Shames, and Celinda Lake, "If I Bend this far I will Break? Public Opinion About Same-Sex Marriage." In *The Politics of Same-Sex Marriage*, ed. Craig Rimmerman and Clyde Wilcox (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). [Handout]

■ Friday, October 16: Quiz #1?

(Whether we have this will depend on my assessment of how well you're comprehending the material – I'll let you know the week before if we'll be doing this.)

Week 8:

Monday, October 19, Wednesday, October 21, Friday, October 23

■ Group Project #1 (Use of established survey) due

II. Polling and Public Opinion

Weeks 9 and 10: Polling Techniques

Monday, October 26, Wednesday, October 28, Friday, October 30

Asher, *Polling and the Public*

Monday, November 2, Wednesday, November 4, Friday, November 6

Asher, *Polling and the Public*

Case Studies: 2009 Election Results

Weeks 11 and 12: Campaign Polling

Monday, November 9, Wednesday, November 11, Friday, November 13

Stonecash, *Political Polling*

Monday, November 16:

Candice Nelson, "Polling: Trends in the Early Twenty-First Century." In *Campaigns on the Cutting Edge*, ed. Richard J. Semiatin (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2008). [Handout]

Wednesday, November 18 and Friday, November 20: No Class

Monday, November 23:

Applied Readings TBA

Week 13:

Monday, November 30, Wednesday, December 2, Friday, December 4:

■ Group Project #2: Development of Survey to address issue at Clark

Week 14: The Purpose of Public Opinion Research

Monday, December 7, Wednesday, December 9, Friday, December 11:

Erikson, ch. 10-11

Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro, *Politicians Don't Pander* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), ch. 1 [Handout]

John Geer, *From Tea Leaves to Opinion Polls* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), ch. 1 [Handout]

Monday, December 14:

- Final Essay due: What should the role of public opinion be in politicians' decisionmaking?

A Few Tips on Writing
Professor Boatright
Government 099

1. Spelling counts. Punctuation counts. Grammar counts. I don't want to spend time in this course on the mechanics of writing, in part because I assume that all of you are good writers. Most of the errors that I notice in students' papers are not made because students do not know how to write well. They are made because students did not proofread their papers carefully. If you take a few minutes to review your paper before turning it in, you will not only catch grammatical errors, but you will also have an opportunity to reconsider the clarity of your argument and the merit of your ideas. Plan your work so that you have time to complete your paper long enough before it is due that you can print it out and set it aside for a few hours, before giving it a final review.
2. The most important part of your paper is the thesis statement. Your thesis statement should appear in the first paragraph or two of your paper. It should succinctly present your original argument and let the reader know what the main point of your paper will be. A thesis statement is not, however, merely an explanation of how the paper is organized.
3. When discussing points in the readings, be sure to cite the book and the page number to which you are referring. For most of the papers in this class, I do not expect you to draw upon material other than the books assigned, so you do not need to supply full bibliographic information. Putting the author and page number in parentheses after the sentence in which you discuss their work is sufficient. For example, you might write
 Smith argued that the division of labor encouraged workers to attempt to perform their jobs as quickly and efficiently as possible (Smith, p. 11).
Be sure not to confuse your own ideas with those in the texts; only cite the text where you are referring to a specific point made by the author.
4. *Do not use lengthy quotes.* The papers we will write in this class are too short for you to take up space reciting passages from the books we are reading. Quotes may be appropriate in instances where the author has used a particularly noteworthy or original term. If you were discussing Marx's views on the relations of the Communist Party to the working class, for example, you might write
 Marx claimed that the Communists must be aligned with the proletariat because they "have no interests separate and apart from the proletariat as a whole" (Marx, p. 483).
5. Be careful about referring to yourself in your papers. It is sometimes appropriate to write in the first person, but doing so is often a way of being tentative in your writing. You should not qualify your arguments by saying "I think that ..." It should be obvious what you think; the task of an expository essay is to convince the reader that you are right.
6. As you will certainly notice in the coming weeks, there is a distinctive "jargon" in political science. This is not a good thing. I am hopeful that none of you will feel compelled to adopt this jargon as your own. You should be careful, though, when using words that have a very precise meaning in the works we have read and another, less precise meaning outside the discipline. Always be sure that it is clear to the reader whether you are using these words in the discipline-specific context or not. And make sure you know what all the words you use mean!
7. *Do not be afraid to ask for help with your papers.* I have assumed in writing these comments that all of you are familiar with the basic principles of writing style. If you are not satisfied with your writing, ask a friend to look your papers over, ask a college writing tutor for help, or talk to me during office hours or by email. I also highly recommend purchasing the following books on writing style and mechanics:

Strunk, William, and E. B. White. 1979. *The Elements of Style*. Third Edition. New York: Macmillan.
Williams, Joseph. 1989. *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. New York: HarperCollins.
Weston, Anthony. 1987. *A Rulebook for Arguments*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.