

Public Opinion & Political Behavior
Fall 2008
POL 40116-001 (call # 12534)
Bowman 203, Tues. & Thur.: 2:15-3:30 p.m.

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Office Hours: Tues. & Thur.: 12:30-2:00 & 3:30-4:30, and by appointment

Purpose

But in my two decades of experience as a professional pollster, I have found that those who complain the loudest about polls are the ones who can quote all the latest numbers most readily.

John Zogby

Stories of presidents carrying the most recent public opinion polls in their pocket lend credence to the notion that the court of public opinion decides, or at least influences, all things political—from who seeks reelection (e.g. not Johnson in 1968) to public policy. Naturally, the electoral connection remains the most direct link between public sentiment and democratic responsiveness; but in an era of continuous polling, elected officials can gauge public sentiment in advance of elections and on an issue by issue basis. On the one hand, the poll appears to be bringing the ideal of direct democracy to fruition, and it achieves the goal efficiently, bothering only about 1,000 citizens at a time (rather than requiring all 300,000,000 to weigh-in on every matter). On the other hand, with so many groups and businesses scrambling to learn about public preferences on everything from favorite soft-drink to presidential approval, some wonder whether the tail is wagging the dog. Do polls influence elected officials or do elected officials use polls to influence the public? We will undertake an in-depth study of polling, public opinion, and the democratic implications of polling and public opinion. In addition to a nuts-and-bolts primer, we will read about an academic debate over whether the mass public are polarized and polarizing, learn to analyze raw polls, prepare a paper outlining original research, and present findings to the class.

Requirements

Attendance: Attendance is required and roll will be taken during each meeting.

Readings: Do the assigned readings before coming to the class for which they are assigned. Experience shows that there is a strong relationship between preparedness and grades. The lectures are designed to help internalize some of the concepts covered in the readings. Students who have not done the readings will get less from the lectures. Moreover, you will be responsible for all assigned materials, including topics not covered in lectures.

Homework: There are several homework assignments relating to data analysis and a journaling assignment. Homework is due as marked on the syllabus and cannot be turned in late.

Consultant Paper: This assignment places each of you in the role of academic consultant on public opinion about an important issue. We will be covering how to analyze public opinion in lectures, readings, and especially in assignments from *Adventures in Social Research*. This text provides you with data from several large-scale public opinion surveys, a copy of SPSS (a statistical analysis program), and a primer on how to use SPSS to conduct some basic statistical analyses. In addition, I will conduct in-class SPSS training sessions and, to help with research projects, several class sessions will be conducted in individualized (or small group) tutorials. These meetings are designed to ensure that you each have some time with me to help with your research project prior to your in-class presentation. The paper will be 3-4 pages (double spaced, plus tables, figures, bibliography, etc.) and should be divided into an introductory section (describing the current state of knowledge regarding the issue analyzed), a data and methods section, a results section, and a conclusion. In addition to conducting your own analysis of public opinion on the issue you select, your paper should review at least three accounts of public opinion on the issue in the popular press and at least three peer-reviewed academic articles [from JSTOR] on the issue.

Presentations: Each student will make a brief (5-8 minutes) presentation of their paper in class. Presentations will be structured in an academic conference format with discussion following each. Students will prepare overhead slides of tables and figures in order to share their findings.

Midterm: In class.

Final: In class.

Incompletes will not be granted except in the case of extreme, documented, non-academic, emergencies.

Grades

Participation:	5%
Consultant Papers:	20%
Presentations:	5%
Homework	10%
Midterm:	25%
Final:	35%

Books

Babbi, Earl, Rob Babbie, Earl Robert, Frederick S. Halley, and Jeanne S. Zaino. *Adventures in Social Research with SPSS Student Version: Data Analysis Using SPSS 14.0 and 15.0 for Windows*. 6th Ed. Pine Forge Press. ISBN: 9781412940825.

Erikson, Robert S., and Kent L. Tedin. 2007. *American Public Opinion: Its Origin, Contents, and Impact*. Updated 7th edition. New York: Longman. ISBN-10: 0321430190 | ISBN-13: 9780321430199.

Asher, Herbert. 2007. *Polling and the Public: What Every Citizen Should Know*. 7th ed. 2004. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press. ISBN: 978-0-87289-340-5.

Finally, read the newspaper! As members of the college educated intelligentsia you will be expected to hold up your end of dinner conversations on current events, and as students you will find the news an important resource for developing topical interests, to say nothing of staying abreast of American politics.

Accessibility Policy

University policy 3342-3-18 requires that students with disabilities be provided reasonable accommodations to ensure their equal access to course content. If you have a documented disability and require accommodations, please contact the instructor at the beginning of the semester to make arrangements for necessary classroom adjustments. Please note, you must first verify your eligibility for these through Student Accessibility Services (contact 330-672-3391 or visit www.kent.edu/sas for more information on registration procedures).

Class Schedule

August 26—Welcome and overview

August 28—Class Cancelled. I am presenting a paper at the American Political Science Association annual meeting in Boston.

September 2—Why study Public Opinion

➤ Erikson and Tedin, Chapter 1

- Asher, Chapter 1
- September 4—Continued
- Asher, Chapter 2
- September 9—Nuts and Bolts of Polling
- Erikson and Tedin, Chapter 2
- Asher, Chapter 3-5
- September 11—Continued
- September 16—Individuals and Their Opinions
- Erikson and Tedin, Chapter 3
- September 18—Introduction to Data Analysis
- Babbie et al., Chapters 1-3
- Handout Homework 1
- September 23—Collective Opinion
- Erikson and Tedin, Chapter 4
- Homework 1 due
- September 25—Socialization and Learning
- Erikson and Tedin, Chapter 5
- September 30—Group Differences in Public Opinion
- Erikson and Tedin, Chapter 7
- October 2—Analyzing Political Orientations and Abortion Attitudes
- Babie et al., Chapters 4-8
- Handout Homework 2
- October 7—Elections
- Erikson and Tedin, Chapter 9
- Asher, Chapter 7
- Homework 2 due
- October 9—Continued
- Review for Midterm
- October 14—Midterm
- October 16—Video
- October 21—Basic Research Questions
- Asher, Chapter 8
- Babbie et al. Chap. 10, Chap. 13 (p. 250-59) & Chap. 14 (p. 269-70)

October 23—Advanced Research Questions

- Babbie et al. Chapter 16-18
- Handout Homework 3
- Sign-up for a 20 minute tutorial to discuss your Consultant Paper
- Sign-up for your in-class presentation

October 28— No class Meeting (tutorials instead)

October 30— No class Meeting (tutorials instead)

November 4—Election 2008

- Read the *New York Times* everyday for the week prior to the election.
- Journal, writing a one paragraph reaction (about 200 words) to one election-related article each day (e.g. a total of 7). Journal is due in class.
- Vote early, vote often!

November 6—Election 2008: Postmortem

November 11— Holiday

November 13—Student Presentations

- Consultant Paper Due (your paper is due on the day you present)
- Presentations will be graded as Homework 4

November 18— Student Presentations

November 20— Student Presentations

November 25—The Culture Wars Debate

- Article 1. “Culture War in America: Myth or Reality.” *The Forum*. Issue 2: Volume 3. (Will be emailed.)
- Article 2. “Culture War in America: Myth or Reality.” *The Forum*. Issue 2: Volume 3. (Will be emailed.)
- Article 3. “Culture War in America: Myth or Reality.” *The Forum*. Issue 2: Volume 3. (Will be emailed.)

November 27— No Class. Happy Thanksgiving.

December 2—Media and Polls

- Erikson and Tedin, Chapter 8
- Asher, Chapter 7

December 4—Wrap-up

- Erikson and Tedin, Chapter 10
- Asher, Chapter 9

December 11, 12:45-3:00, Thursday—Final Exam