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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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:


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


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


9/8  How Shall We Study Public Opinion?


[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?**


9/22 **Alternative Roles of Public Opinion in Governance**


9/29 **Surveyed Opinion as Public Opinion**


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


10/13 **Assessing the Impact of Public Opinion on Policy**


10/20 **Channels of Influence**

*Stimson, Tides of Consent (all)*


10/27  On the Need for an Informed Citizenry


11/3  Political Information and the Rationality of Collective 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]


11/17  Political Interests


11/24  **NO CLASS: THANKSGIVING BREAK**

12/1  **Public Opinion and Deliberative Democracy**


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


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