

POLS 1140

Public Opinion and American Democracy

Paul Testa
Assistant Professor
paul_testa@brown.edu

Cory Manento
Teaching Assistant
cory_manento@brown.edu

This Draft: January 23, 2020

GENERAL INFORMATION

Canvas <https://canvas.brown.edu/courses/1080965>

Where/When We meet Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2:30–3:50 pm, in **CIT Center 165**.

Office Hours **Paul's Office Hours** Wednesday, 12–2 pm in 111 Thayer St Room 339 or other times by appointment. When possible please email me to reserve a 20-minute slot.

Cory's Office Hours TBD

Sections Four Wednesday evenings over the semester at either 5–6 pm or 7–8 pm in **Barus & Holley 163**. We'll assign sections the third week of class.

Overview This is a course on public opinion and American politics. We begin with the basics. What is public opinion and why do we care about it? More specifically, we ask whether our best understanding of how citizens think and act lives up to what a functioning democracy requires. Do citizens hold coherent and consistent beliefs? Do they know basic facts about government and politics? Can they use these beliefs to make informed decisions in a democracy?

As we will see, the field of public opinion offers more causes for concern than celebration in answer to these questions. If most people, most of the time, rarely form opinions and make decisions in the way democratic theory presumes, how exactly do they think about politics? The second portion of this course considers this question by examining the ways social and group identities structure political attitudes, with a specific focus on partisanship, race, gender, and sexuality.

Finally, we'll conclude our journey with an exploration of some sources of stability, change, and difference in public opinion. How much of our beliefs about the world are relatively fixed or dispositional? How much do our environments, such as our

families, friends, or media habits, shape our political beliefs?

GOALS, EXPECTATIONS & POLICIES

Course Goals

Students taking POLS 1140 will:

- Develop their understanding of processes, theories, empirical regularities of public opinion in American politics.
- Learn how to read academic articles to identify and critique a study's research question, theory, design, results, and conclusions (and not just skip over the tables, figures and footnotes).
- Build effective written communication skills, especially the ability to convey complex concepts and information in a clear and concise manner.
- Conduct their own surveys on issue of public opinion of interest to them and their peers. In the process they will learn basic principles of survey design and research methodology, and gain experience analyzing and presenting survey data.
- Deepen their understanding and appreciation of their own political beliefs, the beliefs of their peers, and the broader public.

Course Expectations

This is a lecture course with periodic, project-based sections. I will do my best to break up long periods of me talking, with opportunities for small, individual reflection, small-group discussion, and larger debates. Questions are welcome throughout. I expect that you will have done the readings and submitted your assignments on time (more on that below). In terms of participation, I expect that you will come to class eager to learn and engage with that week's topics and with each other's ideas in a critical and respectful manner. Finally, I expect that you will treat the assignments in this class not as a chore or a necessary evil but as an opportunity for discovery and development. The writing assignments and group projects are a chance for you to clarify your understanding of a topic, form your own ideas on a topic and engage in ongoing scholarly and political debates. I look forward to seeing what you have to say and helping you say it in a way that clearly conveys your meaning and intent.

Community Standards

Political discussions can sometimes grow contentious. All students and the instructor must be respectful of others in the classroom. If you ever feel that the classroom environment is discouraging your participation or problematic in any way, please contact me.

Computers in Class

With the exception of some activities, I ask that you not use your computers (or phones) in class. Print the readings. Take what notes by hand. I'll post slides and notes after class. The temptation to check your email or send a quick text is just too strong and I really want you to be engaging with each other and the material.

Accessibility

Brown University is committed to full inclusion of all students. Please inform me if you have a disability or other condition that might require accommodations or modification of any of these course procedures. You may speak with me after class or during office hours. For more information contact Student and Employee Accessibility Services at 401-863-9588 or SEAS@brown.edu.

Academic Integrity

Neither the University nor I tolerate cheating or plagiarism. The Brown Writing Center defines plagiarism as “appropriating another person’s ideas or words (spoken or written) without attributing those word or ideas to their true source.” The consequences for plagiarism are often severe, and can include suspension or expulsion. This course will follow the guidelines in the Academic Code for determining what is and isn’t plagiarism:

In preparing assignments a student often needs or is required to employ outside sources of information or opinion. All such sources should be listed in the bibliography. Citations and footnote references are required for all specific facts that are not common knowledge and about which there is not general agreement. New discoveries or debatable opinions must be credited to the source, with specific references to edition and page even when the student restates the matter in his or her own words. Word-for-word inclusion of any part of someone else’s written or oral sentence, even if only a phrase or sentence, requires citation in quotation marks and use of the appropriate conventions for attribution. Citations should normally include author, title, edition, and page. (Quotations longer than one sentence are generally indented from the text of the essay, without quotation marks, and identified by author, title, edition, and page.) Paraphrasing or summarizing the contents of another’s work is not dishonest if the source or sources are clearly identified (author, title, edition, and page), but such paraphrasing does not constitute independent work and may be rejected by the instructor. Students who have questions about accurate and proper citation methods are expected to consult reference guides as well as course instructors.

We will discuss specific information about your written work in class in more detail, but if you are unsure of how to properly cite material, please ask for clarification. If

you are having difficulty with writing or would like more information or assistance, consult the Writing Center, the Brown library and/or the [Academic Code](#) for more information.

COURSE STRUCTURE AND POLICIES

Grading

Attendance and Participation	20%
Three Reading Reflections	30%
Two Term Papers	30%
Group Project	20%

Your final grade is a weighted average of your performance on these components and is converted to a letter grade using the following cutoffs:

- A: 90–100%
- B: 80–89.49%
- C: 70–79.49%
- NC: 69.49 and below.

Attendance: Somewhere between 80 and 99 percent of life or success is just showing up depending on how much weight you give to Google’s search algorithm. In this class, 75 percent (15 percent of your overall grade) of your participation and attendance grade will come from attendance. Attendance will be taken via survey – approximately one one-question survey a week on either Tuesday or Thursday. After the first week, there are thirteen weeks of classes. I will calculate your attendance grade from ten of the thirteen surveys. So you can miss three classes before it affects your grade. After those three classes, I will need a Dean’s note for any additional excused absences. Before those three, I don’t need to know – so no need to email me.

Participation Learning is not a passive activity. Your active participation is a crucial part of this seminar and your grade (5 percent of your final grade). This includes both regular attendance in class, contribution to class discussion, and active engagement in your group projects. You should complete all readings and submit all assignments before attending class so that you can engage critically with that material.

Reading Reflections: Over the course of this semester, you will complete three reading reflection papers designed to help you get the most out of the courses readings. You will be given a template designed to help you summarize and read academic articles in an efficient and informative manner. You will succinctly state the paper’s main research question, discuss the theoretical issues it addresses, comment on the papers research design, and summarize the main findings and potential critiques of the studies’ findings.

Some readings are less amenable to this approach, for example, the selections from the Theiss-Morse et al. (2018) textbook, as well as other “review” type articles.

Your reflections should be no longer than two-pages, single spaced. The default

grade for these reflections is a B (85 percent). To receive an A (100 percent), you must identify a second article related to the reading from the syllabus and complete similar summary and offer a paragraph or two discussing how these two articles relate to one another. Does your second reading refute the findings of the first, or offer some nuanced elaboration? Let us know. Th

You must complete at least one reflection paper by the end of February and two reflection papers by the end of Spring Break (March 29). You may complete reflection papers in advance, but must submit a reflection paper before the class in which that reading is assigned.

Term Papers You will write two “term” papers for this course. Both should be approximately 5 pages double-spaced, not including references and any figures or tables which should be provided in the appendix.

The first term paper is be due on Canvas before the start of class **Tuesday, March 10**. Approximately one (or perhaps two) weeks before March 10 I will provide you with a selection of prompts addressing concepts and debates from the first half of the course. You will choose one to respond to integrating concepts and evidence from the work you have read so far.

The second term paper is due on Canvas on April 30. You will be asked to summarize a debate or question raised in the second half the course and discuss why this debate exists and offer some general discussion of what evidence might provide further insights into this question.

You may take one 1-week extension for either paper, no questions asked. Just email the TA and cc Me. If you need a second extension, you will need to provide a Dean’s note.

Group Projects You will be assigned to groups of five. We will hold four sections run by your TA on Wednesday evenings over the course of the semester where you will

- **February 12** Define a research question
- **February 26** Design a survey instrument to address that question
- **March 11** Plan how you will analyze your data
- **April 9** Interpret your results and prepare your presentations

We will design surveys using Brown’s account with [Qualtrics](#) and field these surveys using a convenience sample from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk, an online labor market. Finally, you will present your results in class April 21, and 23.

Course Time Allotment

After the first class, this course will meet twice a week for 13 weeks. Over those 13 weeks, you should expect to spend 3 hours per week in class (39 hours total); approximately 7 hours per week reading and reviewing required readings (91 hours total); approximately 3 hours writing each of your three reflection papers (9 hours total); approximately 10 hours writing and revising your two term papers (20 hours total); approximately 15 hours researching and designing your group project and at least .5 hours meeting with me in person to discuss the course.

Readings

The primary text for this course is:

Achen, C. H. and Bartels, L. M. (2017). *Democracy for realists: Why elections do not produce responsive government*. Princeton University Press

We will also use

Theiss-Morse, E. A., Wagner, M. W., Flanigan, W. H., and Zingale, N. H. (2018). *Political Behavior of the American Electorate*. CQ Press

as a supplementary textbook

Both should be available through the book store and Amazon. Achen and Bartels (2017) is available online through the [library](#) should cost between \$15-20 (used is fine) and Theiss-Morse et al. (2018) \$42-56 (used or digital is fine but please get the 2018 edition)

Copies of additional chapters and articles assigned for each week will be posted to the course website. Most weeks, you will read 3-4 articles or chapter from a book. Reading academic articles is a skill which requires practice. When I started graduate school, I had this idea that I would read every article on the syllabus twice. It was horrible.

As I progressed through my academic career, I learned how to read articles quickly and efficiently. Some things I skim. Others I read with rapt attention. My goal in designing this course around many current articles in political science is to give you the opportunity to practice this skill and develop strategies that will help you in this class and beyond. It takes time and effort. You should read articles closely, highlighting key points and questions and making some effort to understand what a table or figure is trying to convey. Oh, and please do read the footnotes.¹

If something is unclear in a text, don't worry, it's generally not your fault. Academic writing is often quite bad. It's filled with jargon, run-on sentences, and lot of tables and figures without much context or guidance on how to interpret them. Bad writing can be a sign of a conceptual confusion in the author's arguments or the field in general. Sometimes, though it's unavoidable. To read a lot of academic work in public opinion, you need to be able to process things like a regression table or an experimental design. These things sound harder than they actually are. We'll take extra care to ensure that you develop this foundation. If you don't understand something on the first read through, make a note, bring it up in class or send me or your TA and email.

¹For example, in many major texts within our field you will find important clarifying points and details. In this particular footnote, dear reader, you'll find that by sending me a picture of a cute animal before the third week of class, I will add one point of extra credit to your participation grade. Now I'm going to write some extra gobbledygook to discourage the skimmers from reading to closely.

SCHEDULE

The general outline of topics for the course is as follows. You should come to class having read the articles and chapters listed below that day. This schedule is preliminary and the readings and topics for some weeks may change.

Week 1 — Introduction and Course Overview

Thursday January 23, 2019— What am I getting myself into?

Week 2 — What is Public Opinion and How Do we Study it

Tuesday January 28, 2019— What is public opinion?

Achen, C. H. and Bartels, L. M. (2017). *Democracy for realists: Why elections do not produce responsive government*. Princeton University Press Chapter 1-2

Thursday January 30, 2019—How do we study public opinion

Theiss-Morse, E. A., Wagner, M. W., Flanigan, W. H., and Zingale, N. H. (2018). *Political Behavior of the American Electorate*. CQ Press Chapter 6 (skim), Appendix: p. 294-304

Berinsky, A. J. (2017). Measuring Public Opinion with Surveys. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 20(1):309–329

Week 3 — Ideology and Issues

Tuesday February 4, 2019—Do people hold coherent world views?

Converse, P. E. (1964). The nature of belief systems in mass publics. In Apter, D., editor, *Ideology and discontent*. Free Press

Thursday February 6, 2019—Do people hold meaningful policy attitudes?

Ansolabehere, S., Rodden, J., and Snyder, J. M. (2008). The strength of issues: Using multiple measures to gauge preference stability, ideological constraint, and issue voting. *American Political Science Review*, 102(02):215–232

Freder, S., Lenz, G. S., and Turney, S. (2019). The Importance of Knowing “What Goes with What”: Reinterpreting the Evidence on Policy Attitude Stability. *The Journal of Politics*, 81(1):274–290

Week 4 — Political Knowledge and Information

Tuesday February 11, 2019—Do people know basic political facts

Jerit, J., Barabas, J., and Bolsen, T. (2006). Citizens, knowledge, and the information environment. *American Journal of Political Science*, 50(2):266–282

Weaver, V., Prowse, G., and Piston, S. (2019). Too much knowledge, too little power: An assessment of political knowledge in highly policed communities. *Journal of Politics*, 81(3):1153–1166

Wednesday February 12, 2019—Section: Research Design

Thursday February 13, 2019—Why do people believe factually incorrect information

Thorson, E. (2015). Identifying and Correcting Policy Misperceptions. Technical report, Washington, D.C

Week 5 — Models of Political Cognition

Tuesday February 18, 2019—Long Weekend No Class

Thursday February 20, 2019— How do people think about politics and form opinions?

Zaller, J. and Feldman, S. (1992). A simple theory of the survey response: Answering questions versus revealing preferences. *American journal of political science*, pages 579–616

Lodge, M. and Taber, C. S. (2013). *The rationalizing voter*. Cambridge University Press Chapter 1 (skim)

Walsh, K. C. (2004). *Talking about politics: Informal groups and social identity in American life*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago Chapter 2

Week 6 — Models of Democratic Choice

Tuesday February 25, 2019— Retrospective Voting

Achen, C. H. and Bartels, L. M. (2017). *Democracy for realists: Why elections do not produce responsive government*. Princeton University Press Chapter 4, 5

Wednesday February 26, 2019—Section: Survey Design

Thursday February 27, 2019—Voting

Achen, C. H. and Bartels, L. M. (2017). *Democracy for realists: Why elections do not produce responsive government*. Princeton University Press Chapter 6

Theiss-Morse, E. A., Wagner, M. W., Flanigan, W. H., and Zingale, N. H. (2018). *Political Behavior of the American Electorate*. CQ Press Chapter 8

Week 7 — Social Groups and Identities

Tuesday March 3, 2019— Group and Social Identities

Walsh, K. C. (2004). *Talking about politics: Informal groups and social identity in American life*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago Chapter 4

Achen, C. H. and Bartels, L. M. (2017). *Democracy for realists: Why elections do not produce responsive government*. Princeton University Press Chapter 8,9

Thursday March 5, 2019—A Group Theory of politics

Achen, C. H. and Bartels, L. M. (2017). *Democracy for realists: Why elections do not produce responsive government*. Princeton University Press Chapter 10

Huddy, L. (2018). The Group Foundations of Democratic Political Behavior. *Critical Review*, 30(1-2):71–86

DUE: MARCH 10, 2019—FIRST TERM PAPER ON CANVAS BEFORE CLASS

Week 8 — Partisanship

Tuesday March 10, 2019—Partisanship

Theiss-Morse, E. A., Wagner, M. W., Flanigan, W. H., and Zingale, N. H. (2018). *Political Behavior of the American Electorate*. CQ Press Chapter 4

Wednesday March 11, 2019—Section: Planning Data Collection and Analysis

Thursday March 12, 2019— Affective Polarization

Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., and Westwood, S. J. (2019). The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22(1):129–146

Levendusky, M., Ryan, J. B., Boudreau, C., Westwood, S., Dafoe, A., Orr, L., and Prior, M. (2019). The Illusion of Affective Polarization Studies partisanship

Week 9 — Race

Tuesday March 17, 2019— Racial Identities

Junn, J., Mendelberg, T., and Czaja, E. (2012). Race and the group bases of public opinion. In *New Directions in Public Opinion*, pages 119–138. Routledge

White, I. K., Laird, C. N., and Allen, T. D. (2014). Selling out?: The politics of navigating conflicts between racial group interest and self-interest. *American Political Science Review*, 108(4):783–800

Thursday March 19, 2019— Racial Resentment

Tesler, M. (2012). The Spillover of Racialization into Health Care: How President Obama Polarized Public Opinion by Racial Attitudes and Race. *American Journal of*

Political Science, 56(3):690–704

Feldman, S. and Huddy, L. (2005). Racial Resentment and White Opposition to Race-Conscious Programs: Principles or Prejudice? *American Journal of Political Science*, 49(1):168–183

Week 10 — SPRING BREAK — NO CLASS

Tuesday March 24, 2019—Have fun

Thursday March 26, 2019—Be safe

Week 11 — Gender and Sexuality

Tuesday March 31, 2019—

Huddy, L. and Terkildsen, N. (1993). Gender Stereotypes and the Perception of Male and Female Candidates. *American Journal of Political Science*, 37(1):119

Thursday April 2, 2019—

Egan, P. J. (2012). Group cohesion without group mobilization: The case of Lesbians, Gays and Bisexuals. *British Journal of Political Science*, 42(3):597–616

Week 12 — Personality and Socialization

Tuesday April 7, 2019— Socialization

Jennings, M. K., Stoker, L., and Bowers, J. (2009). Politics across generations: Family transmission reexamined. *Journal of Politics*, 71(3):782–799

Prior, M. (2010). Youve either got it or you dont? the stability of political interest over the life cycle. *Journal of Politics*, 72(3):747–766

Wednesday April 8, 2019—Section: Interpreting your Results

Thursday April 9, 2019—Biology and Politcs

Alford, J. R., Funk, C. L., and Hibbing, J. R. (2005). Are political orientations genetically transmitted?

Week 13 — Influence and Persuasion

Tuesday April 14, 2019— Personal Influence: Political Discussion

Mutz, D. C. (2002a). Cross-Cutting Social Networks: Testing Democratic Theory in Practice. *American Political Science Review*, 96(1):111–126

Mutz, D. C. (2002b). The Consequences of Cross-Cutting Networks for Political Participation. *American Journal of Political Science*, pages 838–855

Thursday April 16, 2019— Impersonal Influence: Media and Campaigns

Theiss-Morse, E. A., Wagner, M. W., Flanigan, W. H., and Zingale, N. H. (2018). *Political Behavior of the American Electorate*. CQ Press Chapter 7

Week 14 — Class Presentations

Tuesday April 21, 2019—Class Presentations

Thursday April 23, 2019—Class Presentations

**DUE: APRIL 30, 2019—SECOND TERM PAPER
BY 11:59 PM ON CANVAS**