

Political Science 211/211W
Spring 2008

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PUBLIC OPINION, VOTING, AND ELECTIONS

COURSE OUTLINE AND READINGS:

The class will include considerable class discussion as well as lectures. There will be frequent short assignments, a midterm, and a comprehensive final exam. Class attendance is expected, and grades will reflect attendance and participation.

OFFICE HOURS: Tue. 11:15-12:00 & Fri. 11:00-12:00 and most other times 8am-5pm.

TEXTS:

Herbert Asher, *Polling and the Public*, 7th ed., CQ Press, 2007.

Robert Erikson and Kent Tedin, *American Public Opinion*, 7th ed., updated, Longman, 2007.

Martin Wattenberg, *Is Voting for Young People?* Pearson Longman, 2008.

Gary Jacobson, *A Divider, Not a Uniter*, Pearson Longman, 2008.

Russell Dalton, *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation is Reshaping American Politics*, CQ Press, 2008.

Additional readings are available on electronic reserve.

ASSIGNMENTS:

All assignments should be typed, double-spaced, and 3-4 pages long (12 pt font). Because there is flexibility built into the system by virtue of group assignments, late work will be accepted only under rare circumstances. Note that it is possible that changes will occur in the schedule. If you miss a class, it is your responsibility to find out what the assignment is for the next class period.

Students will be divided into pairs—according to their own preferences insofar as possible. Most—perhaps all—assignments will be done by pairs rather than individually.

Failure to hand in multiple assignments or to take any of the exams on time (without prior arrangements) may be interpreted as your not having completed the course.

GRADING:

Assignments	90 points (10 points each)
Class discussion	30 points
Exams	200 points (100 points each)
Total	320 points

SCHEDULE OF CLASSES:

Jan. 17-31 Public Opinion Polling

- 17 Getting organized; nonrandom sampling
- 22 Random sampling
Reading: Asher, ch. 3-5
- 24 Internet surveys; practical matters in sample design/execution
Reading: Asher, ch. 7-8
- 29 Designing questions for surveys; interviewing effects; your questions on polling.
Assignment:
Hand in one or more questions about polling. This assignment will not be graded, but it will count against your “discussion” grade if you fail to hand in a question.
- 31 Public opinion and policy
Assignment:
Read a handout on gun control. Groups report in class on their interpretation of public opinion on gun control and how legislators should respond to it (in addition to the written report).

Feb. 5-7 People's Knowledge of Politics

- 5 Public knowledge
Reading: Erikson & Tedin, ch. 3
- 7 More on knowledge levels, measuring knowledge
Reading: Niemi & Weisberg, *Controversies in Voting Behavior*, pp. 100-13
Assignment:
Evaluate NAEP public items and survey test items (to be handed out). Do they constitute adequate tests? Assuming you were to add something, what would it be? Think broadly about the topics covered and about the response formats that are used. However, you may also suggest specific questions that you think should be added.

Feb. 12 Minority Attitudes (Guest lecturer)

- Reading: “Deep Divisions, Shared Destiny – A Poll of Black, Hispanic, and Asian Americans on Race Relations,” online at http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=28501933d0e5c5344b21f9640dc13754. Open and read the slides in the power point presentation.

Feb. 14-28 Issues and Issue Voting

- 14 Meaningfulness of public opinion
Reading: Erikson & Tedin, ch. 7
Dalton, pp. 20-39 & ch. 6
- 19 More on meaningfulness
Reading: Dalton, ch. 7
Assignment:
Ever since scientific polls became widespread, political scientists have emphasized citizens' lack of knowledge, the extent to which their attitudes are nonexistent, inconsistent,

and highly changeable, and their lack of knowledge about candidates and their issue stances. As a consequence, citizens use short-cuts (party identification, individual and group endorsements, personal characteristics, etc.) to make decisions about candidates. However, primary elections are something of a problem—as party is the same for all candidates. In the 2007-8 presidential primaries, what short-cuts do you think voters used? Did these short-cuts provide good information about the candidates (meaning useful in distinguishing between candidates and reasonably correct guides to candidates' issue positions)? Were there any short-cuts that you think were poor (misleading or not useful)?

- 21 Does lack of issue knowledge matter?

Reading: Erikson & Tedin, ch. 4

Niemi & Weisberg, *Controversies in Voting Behavior*, pp. 180-96

- 26 Elites and issue positions

Reading: "The Content of U.S. House Member Web Sites"

Assignment:

Examine state legislators' web sites (each group takes one or more different states).

Evaluate the sites, where the basic question is whether (and how easily and thoroughly) voters might find enough information about legislators' issue positions to help them decide how to cast their ballots.

- 28 Attitudes over time; review for midterm

Assignment:

Is the gender gap in voting (candidate preference) alive and well? How long has it existed? How large is it in the most recent data you can find? Identify one or more issue bases for this difference. Are there any issues on which you expected a difference but found none? Use the NES data or any other data you can find.

OR

Take an issue (e.g., capital punishment, abortion, race, international involvement). Find public opinion data showing trends over time and analyze them. Has opinion changed? Does it appear to have changed in some sensible fashion, or randomly? Can you identify any events/actions/movements that appear to have led to changes?

In class: I will hand out a figure showing the relationship in 1952 between media usage and attitude stability along with a political scientist's highly creative and provocative interpretation of what that relationship tells us about politics in the 19th century. We will talk about whether history bears out that interpretation.

Mar. 4 Midterm exam

Mar. 6 Follow-up to midterm exam; public opinion on international relations

Mar. 18 Political Rights/Tolerance

Reading: Erikson & Tedin, pp. 162-80

"The Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other," online at <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?PageID=833>, pp. 1-26.

Mar. 20-25 Mass Media

20 Character of the media, past and present
Reading: Erikson & Tedin, ch. 8

25 Media influence

Reading: Wayne, "News Media: Watchdog or Pit Bull?"

Assignment:

Analyze three or more of: cbsnews.com; nbcnews.com; abcnews.com; foxnews.com; cnn.com. First, evaluate the layout and overall content of the web sites—i.e., their user-friendliness, their coverage of various aspects of the news (e.g., U.S. and foreign), and so on. Second, take three (or more) stories that are covered by all sources; compare coverage of these stories across each of the web sites. (Choose political stories, broadly conceived; no murders.) Look at the headlines as well as the stories themselves. Is coverage better on a certain site or sites? Consistently? Is there any detectable bias in the reporting? What direction is the bias? Is the bias consistent across stories? Print out the stories that you compare and hand them in along with your report.

Mar 27-Apr. 1 Parties and Partisanship

27 Partisanship, past and present
Reading: Jacobson, chs. 1-2

1 Party system changes

Reading: Jacobson, chs 6, 8, 10

Apr. 3-15 Political Participation; Social Capital

3 Voter turnout

Reading: Wattenberg, pp. 9-126, 161-66

Assignment:

Use IDEA project data: <http://www.idea.int/vt/index.cfm>. Compare three (or more) specific countries. How do they differ in their turnout statistics? Is the difference consistent over time? What does that suggest to you? Why do the countries differ in their turnout levels? Is turnout declining in these countries more or less than elsewhere?

8 Other forms of participation; stratification of participation

Reading: Wattenberg, pp. 175-95

Brady et al. "Who Bowls?" in Norrander & Wilcox, *Understanding Public Opinion*

10 Social capital

Reading: Hibbing, "The People's Craving for Unselfish Government," in Norrander & Wilcox, *Understanding Public Opinion*

15 Origins and development of opinions; generations

Reading: Erikson & Tedin, ch. 5

Dalton, ch. 1, pp. 39-52, ch. 4

Assignment: Wattenberg and Putnam, on the one hand, and Dalton, on the other, have very

different ideas about political participation and how it has changed over the past generation. Summarize their arguments very briefly. Then evaluate them, framing your evaluation in terms of the following questions: Are people in the past decade or two less participatory? Are young people, in particular, not participating? Cite evidence from the readings (or elsewhere) as appropriate. Are the changes you note detrimental to American democracy? Why or why not?

Apr. 17 Responding to the New Reality: More, Better Civic Education? Institutional Reforms?

Reading: Levine, *The Future of Democracy*, ch. 7

Assignment:

Analyze one of the election reforms noted below. Description of the reform itself should be brief. The main part of the report should be a critique of it. What are its good points? Its drawbacks? You must include your own view on the matter. Should a change be made? Why or why not? Also, indicate to what degree this reform will have an effect on public opinion about elected officials and the political system.

Instant run-off (<http://www.fairvote.org/>)

Electoral College—congressional district method or proportional allocation method only (Donovan & Bowler, *Reforming the Republic*, ch. 5, on reserve)

Initiatives, recall (Donovan & Bowler, *Reforming the Republic*, ch. 7);
<http://www.iandrinstitute.org/>)

Deliberative polls (<http://bostonreview.net/BR31.2/fishkin.html>)

The citations above provide minimal sources. There are numerous web sites that deal with these issues.

22 Class discussion of a current issue—probably illegal immigration.

What should we do about it? What position do/should the political parties take? Use results from public opinion polls to support your conclusions.

24 Session with a real, live pollster (tentative)

Hand in at least two questions about polling. These can be about polling procedures, the outcomes and interpretation of recent polls, the use of and influence of polls, etc.

This assignment will not be graded, but it will count against your “discussion” grade if you fail to hand in a question.

29 Review for final exam

Important web sites:

<http://www.vote-smart.org>

www.ifes.org

<http://www.electionstudies.org/>

<http://www.norc.org/GSS+Website/Browse+GSS+Variables/>

<http://www.idea.int/publications/voteturnout.html>

<http://pollingreport.com/>

ADDITIONAL INSTRUCTIONS FOR RESEARCH PAPERS (for students in PSC211W)

Papers must be 3,500 words or more (10-15 pages). Please double-space and, for the final copy, print only on one side of the page. You are not only allowed to but are encouraged to talk with others about your ideas. However, papers are to be written individually; in the end, the paper must be your work, not the work of others.

Papers must be on some aspect(s) of voting system reform in the U.S.—voter registration (identification requirements, registration rights of ex-felons or of college students), when and how voting occurs (early voting, absentee voting, vote by mail), voting equipment (electronic voting systems), and so on. There is presently a great deal of writing about these topics, most of it in reaction to the 2000 election and the subsequent Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA).

The paper must draw on multiple sources; this cannot be a report of a single book or other source. The paper should be divided into sections, with relevant and meaningful headings for each section (except the first, which is an introduction). As the topic is about reform, your paper should not only summarize arguments and evidence about the topic you choose; it should also include your evaluation/opinion about what reforms, if any, federal and state governments should adopt.

Schedule (“on or before” applies to all dates):

Feb. 19 Pick a tentative topic and begin your reading by this date. Since the topics are pretty narrowly defined, you do not have to get approval from me. However, consult with me early if you are having trouble deciding on a topic. Be careful about picking too narrow a topic; for example, I think the issue of registration rights for ex-felons is largely (though not entirely) resolved. Note: There is nothing to hand in on this date, but if you don't have a topic and begin reading now, you may have trouble with the March 6 assignment.

Mar. 6 Hand in a list of sources. Note which ones you have already read. Use the bibliographic style used to list the sources at the end of this syllabus.

Mar. 27 Hand in first, partial draft. I strongly suggest handing in only a page or two. If you are making fast progress, hand in a short, first draft early. I will provide feedback on this draft that will likely apply to the rest of your paper.

Apr. 10 Hand in a second draft of the original material, plus an additional few pages. I will provide further feedback. (Please send me copies as attachments or put a hard copy in my box in Harkness 314).

May 2 Hand in final paper.

Be sure to accurately cite and document all of your work. Plagiarism is a serious offense and will be reported to the College if it is deemed intentional. The first step in avoiding plagiarism is to carefully document your sources. If you provide a statistic or analysis that is not your own,

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cite the source. This is a research paper, so it is expected that you will be citing a significant portion of the material that appears in the paper. If you have doubts about whether to cite a piece of information, ask me.

Sources (a partial list only) (books are on reserve):

- Alvarez, R. Michael, and Thad E. Hall. 2004. *Point, Click, and Vote: The Future of Internet Voting*. Washington, DC: Brookings.
- Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project. 2001. "Residual Votes Attributable to Technology: An Assessment of the Reliability of Existing Voting Equipment."
http://www.hss.caltech.edu/%7Evoting/CalTech_MIT_Report_Version2.pdf
- Donovan, Todd, and Shaun Bowler. 2004. *Reforming the Republic: Democratic Institutions for the New America*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, ch. 9.
- Hanmer, Michael J., and Michael W. Traugott. 2004. "The Impact of Vote-By-Mail on Voter Behavior." *American Politics Research* 32:375-405.
- Herrnson, Paul S., Richard G. Niemi, Michael J Hanmer, Benjamin B. Bederson, Frederick G. Conrad, and Michael W. Traugott. 2007. *Voting Technology: The Not-So-Simple Act of Casting a Ballot*. Washington, DC: Brookings.
- Karp, Jeffrey A., and Susan Banducci. 2000. "Going Postal: How All-Mail Elections Influence Turnout." *Political Behavior* 22:223-39.
- Kimball, David C., and Martha Kropf. 2005. "Ballot Design and Unrecorded Votes on Paper-Based Ballots." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 69:1-22.
- Lausen, Marcia. 2007. *Design for Democracy: Election Design*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Manza, Jeff, and Christopher Uggen. 2006. *Locked Out: Felon Disenfranchisement and American Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Palazzolo, Daniel J., and James W. Ceaser, eds. 2005. *Election Reform: Politics and Policy*. Lanham, MD: Lexington.
- Perspectives on Politics* (journal): symposium in September, 2004 issue.
- Saltman, Roy G. 2006. *The History and Politics of Voting Technology*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. 2001. *Election Reform: An Analysis of Proposals and the Commission's Recommendations for Improving America's Election Systems*.
<http://www.usccr.gov/pubs/vote2000/eleceref/main.htm>
- <http://www.electionline.org/> (Up-to-date information; on various reforms)
- <http://www.sentencingproject.org/IssueAreaHome.aspx?IssueID=4> (On felon disenfranchisement)
- <http://www.tcf.org/list.asp?type=TP&topic=6> (On various reforms)
- <http://www.vote.caltech.edu/> (On various reforms)