

Pol377: Public Opinion and Democracy, Fall 2006

Paul Gronke
Phone: 517-7393
Office Hours: Mon, 1–3 pm and by appt

424 Eliot Hall
email: gronke@reed.edu

Course URL: <http://www.reed.edu/~gronkep/pol370-s06>

Course Description: Coming to grips with public opinion is, in the words of one analyst, akin to coming to grip with the Holy Ghost. In this course, we attempt to survey the sprawling literature dealing with American public opinion. We begin with the question I always ask: “So what?” There are two parts to this question. First, what are our theoretical notions of citizenship in a democracy, and in society generally. What *should* citizens know? Second, what is the role of public opinion in a representative democracy, and how does that differ from other governmental systems? Next, we turn to the empirical evidence, hopefully always keeping in mind our main questions. What *do* people think and know? Can public opinion play the role we expect of it? If not, what function does it seem to have in American democracy?

The potential topics for this course are vast. This is one of my areas of research interest. Thus, the readings for this course are heavy and often quite complicated, the writing assignments are frequent, and my expectations are high. You should know ahead of time that much of the reading is heavily quantitative (as is much of the public opinion literature).

There are two innovations this semester. Most importantly, for the first time, we will also attempt to actually conduct a public opinion poll. I am not sure how well that will work, but we are going to give it a try. Second, in line with what I am doing in my other classes, you will have a *data confrontation* memorandum due regularly during the term. This is designed to make you an actual *analyst* of public opinion, not just a consumer.

I hope you will leave the course with a better understanding of the role of public opinion in democracy, what the public feels on a variety of topics, and an appreciation for the complexities inherent in measuring public opinion.

Your performance in this class will be determined by three components. First, you need to turn in weekly one page think pieces that summarize one or more important points in the readings. These are due by **Wednesday at noon** the day of class. Second, you will have a set of short (3-5 page) memoranda. Third, there will be an examination at the end of the semester. Fourth, we will work as a team on a survey project.

Although not explicitly evaluated, this is a conference class, and I place a very high value on regular, productive class participation. I expect everyone to come to class prepared to discuss the readings.

Assessments:

- Think pieces: 25%
- Memoranda: 25%
- Final exam: 25%
- Team project 25%

Readings: The following books can be purchased at the Reed College Bookstore. The books are also at the reserve desk.

- Gilens, Martin. *Why Americans Hate Welfare*
- Glynn, Herbst, O’Keefe, and Shapiro. *Public Opinion*
- Mendelberg, Tali. *The Race Card*
- Mutz, Diana. *Hearing the Other Side*.

- Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, and Krysan. *Racial Attitudes in America*
- Stimson, James. *Tides of Consent*.

Many readings are available at the Reed library reserve room. These may be books or articles held on reserve. We have lengthy readings from the following books, and the library owns multiple copies: Key, V.O. *Public Opinion and American Democracy*, Apter, David *Ideology and Discontent* (the Converse reading is in this book). Since we are a small class, I will attempt to have an “honors” copy of other readings.

Many readings are from the JSTOR system (<http://www.jstor.org>). This is an online repository of scholarly work. All Reed students *must* be acquainted with this system.

Sources of Public Opinion Data: You may find the following sources useful for public opinion data.

- The Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) and the National Election Study (NES) are the most commonly used source among academics. They have recently added an online survey data analysis system that allows you to answer many research questions online, without the need to learn a statistical program. Most of you will conduct your research here. You are **strongly** urged to look at this website <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu>.
- An alternative is maintained by Berkeley’s Survey Research Center: <http://sda.berkeley.edu>, click on “archives” to see what they have online; click on “other archives” to see other places that use the SDA analysis system.
- A general, up to date repository of results is available at <http://www.pollingreport.com>.
- The library subscribes to “Policy Central”, essentially a front end to the *National Journal* website. This has a very useful section on polling. You can get to this from on-campus locations: <http://nationaljournal.com/about/policycentral/>
- If you use Lexis-Nexis at the library, select “reference” then “polls and surveys” and you can search for public opinion data from a huge variety of sources.
- This site, at the School of Mass Communications and Journalism at UNC-Chapel Hill, has a nice set of polling sites: <http://parklibrary.jomc.unc.edu/researchers.html>

Two useful blogs: I have also found these two blogs to be a very good source of information and commentary on public opinion:

- <http://www.mysterypollster.com> contains some of the best commentary on public opinion polls from a Washington pollster.
- <http://www.politicalarithmetik.com>: a blog mainly on presidential approval, but also increasingly on other polls, by an old friend and colleague of mine at the University of Wisconsin.

Course Plan

1. September 6 *A Original Practitioner’s View and Current Critiques*
 - Glynn et al., Chs. 1–2
 - George Gallup, “Testing Public Opinion”, *Public Opinion Quarterly* 2:1(Jan 1938), 8-14 (JSTOR)
 - George Gallup, “Polls and the Political Process-Past, Present, and Future”, *Public Opinion Quarterly* 29:4 (Winter 1965-5) 544-49 (JSTOR)
 - Hitchens, Christopher. ”Voting in the Passive Voice: What Polling has done to American democracy.” *Harpers* Vol 284, April 1992, p. 45-53. Available at Academic Search Premier.
 - Green, Joshua. ”The Other War Room.” *Washington Monthly*, February 4, 2001. Available here: <http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2001/0204.green.html>
2. September 13 *Introduction: What Is Public Opinion? What is its “Shape”*
 - Lippman, Walter. *Public Opinion*, Chs. 1, 13–15.

- VO Key, *Public Opinion and American Democracy*. Ch. 1–4.
 - **In class assignment:** Find examples of at least three different “shapes” of public opinion. Be ready to present and discuss these in class.
3. September 20 *An Overview of Theories of Opinion Formation*
- Glynn, Chs. 4–7
 - John Zaller. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Chs. 2–4.
4. September 27 *Measuring Public Opinion*
- Fink, Arlene. *How to Conduct Surveys*. (Entire book)
 - Glynn, Ch. 3
 - Class handouts: some sample surveys
 - Recommended: Weisberg, Krosnick, and Bowen *An Introduction to Survey Research, Polling, and Data Analysis* (esp. chapters 3–7)
 - Recommended: Fink, Arlene. *The Survey Handbook* and *How to Design Survey Studies*
 - **In class assignment** Create a survey at www.surveymonkey.com and present this in class.
5. October 4 *The Classic Statement of Mass Uninformedness*
- Philip Converse, “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics.” In David Apter, *Ideology and Discontent* (book on reserve).
 - Glynn, Ch. 8 pg. 283–307
 - Kinder, Donald. “Diversity and Complexity in American Public Opinion.” In *Political Science, The State of the Discipline (1st Ed.)*. Finifter (ed), Washington, DC: APSA Press. 1983.
6. October 11 *Revisionist Responses: Heuristics, Cues, and the “New Look”*
- Glynn, Ch. 8, pg. 307–346
 - Sniderman, Paul. “The New Look in Public Opinion Research.” In *Political Science, The State of the Discipline (2nd Ed.)*. Finifter (ed), Washington DC: APSA Press. 1993.
7. October 25 *Racial Attitudes in America*
- Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, and Krysan. complete book
 - **In class assignment:** Bring at least one racial policy item to class to discuss.
8. November 1 *Race, Media, and Willie Horton*
- Tali Mendelberg, *The Race Card*. Chs. 1, 4–7, and 10.
 - Entman, Robert and Andrew Rojecki. 2001. *The Black Image in the White Mind*. Chs. 3–5.
 - Glynn, pgs. 405–429
9. November 8 *Do Americans support welfare?*
- Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, Chs. 1–3, 5–7, 9.
 - Larry Bartels. 2005. “Homer Gets a Tax Cut: Inequality and Public Policy in the American Mind.” *Perspectives on Politics* 3(1), March, p. 15–32.
10. November 15 *Do Americans Trust Government?*
- Hibbing and Theiss-Morse. *Stealth Democracy*. Chs. 1–3, 5–6, 9.

- Newton, Kenneth and Pippa Norris. “Confidence in Public Institutions: Faith, Culture, or Performance?” Ch. 3 in *Disaffected Democracies* (Pharr and Putnam, eds.)
 - King, Anthony. “Distrust of Government: Explaining American Exceptionalism.” Ch. 4 in *Disaffected Democracies* (Pharr and Putnam, eds.)
11. November 22 *The Role of Deliberation and Discussion*
- Iris Marion Young. *Inclusion and Democracy*. Pgs. 16–26.
 - Mutz, Diana. *Hearing the Other Side*. Entire book.
 - Hibbing and Theiss-Morse. *Stealth Democracy*. Chs. 7–8.
12. November 29 *Public Opinion and Policy*
- James A. Stimson. *Tides of Consent*. Entire book.
 - Glynn Ch. 9
13. December 6 *Student presentations*
- **In class assignment:** Present analyses of our public opinion survey.