

Pol377: Public Opinion and Democracy

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

205A Eliot Hall
email: gronke@reed.edu

Course URL: <http://www.reed.edu/~gronkep/pol370-s04>

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).

For this semester, we will cover some portion of the public opinion literature on:

- The nature of public opinion (theory, measurement), including alternative conceptualizations of opinion
- Racial attitudes in America
- American attitudes about welfare
- Presidents and public opinion
- Public opinion and American elections in the U.S.

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, 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. This does not necessarily mean that you understand all of the day’s readings, but it does mean that you’ve made a good faith effort to read, puzzle, and comprehend. Second, you will be required to take a brief in-class midterm. Third, the major portion of your grade will be based on a major (15-20 page) research paper. This paper **must** include **multivariate analysis of survey data**. We will have special class lab sessions dedicated to teaching you how to complete this assignment. However, if this requirement will cause you a problem, you must see me immediately.

As part of your participation grade, each of you are is required to do two things. First, you must take responsibility for one or more week’s readings and send out questions (2 or 3) to the class **noon** the day before we meet. Second, you will be required to bring to class a story using public opinion data or a recent set of public opinion results. We will make these assignments during the first week of class. You should be ready to discuss the items you bring in.

Assessments:

- Paper: 50% (including in-class presentation)
- Participation (including short items and questions): 25%
- Midterm: 25%

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

- Eisinger, Robert. *The Evolution of Presidential Polling*
- Gamson, William. *Talking Politics*
- Gilens, Martin. *Why Americans Hate Welfare*
- Mendelberg, Tali. *The Race Card*
- Patterson, Thomas E. *The Vanishing Voter*
- Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo. *Racial Attitudes in America*
- Traugott, Michael and Paul Lavrakas. *Voter's Guide to Election Polls 2ed*
- RECOMMENDED ONLY Berry and Sanders. *Understanding Multivariate Research*

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, so these will not be on e-reserve: Key, V.O. *Public Opinion and American Democracy*, Apter, David *Ideology and Discontent* (the Converse reading is in this book). We read from a textbook by Glynn, *Public Opinion*, but all copies should be on reserve.

Please note that 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>
- Gallup's site used to be wonderful, but now they charge for most of their useful information: <http://www.gallup.com/>

Course Plan

1. Jan 27–Jan 29 *A Original Practitioner's View and a Current Critique*
 - 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 Elite.

- Green, Joshua. "The Other War Room." *Washington Monthly*, February 4, 2001. Available here: <http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2001/0204.green.html>
2. Feb 3 *Introduction: What Is Public Opinion?*
 - Lippman, Walter. *Public Opinion*, p. 3-20.
 - VO Key, *Public Opinion and American Democracy*. Ch. 1, p. 3-18.
 - Glynn, Chs. 1-2.
 3. Feb 5 *Alternative "Shapes" of Public Opinion*
 - Key, *Public Opinion and American Democracy*, Chs. 2-4
 - Find examples of different "shapes", display some examples using online systems
 4. Feb 10-12 *How we measure public opinion*
 - Traugott and Lavrakas, Chs. 1-3, 5-7
 - Central Limit Theorem (Gronke handouts)
 5. Feb 17 *An Overview of Theories of Opinion Formation*
 - Glynn, Chs. 4-5
 6. Feb 19-24 *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. 249-263
 7. Feb 26 *Revisionist Responses: Heuristics and Cues*
 - Glynn, Ch. 8, pg. 263-297
 - Popkin, *The Reasoning Voter*, p 1-96
 8. Mar 2-4 *An Alternative: Media, Individuals, and The Context of Political Action*
 - Gamson, *Talking Politics*, Chs. 1-6, 10, and one of 7, 8, or 9
 9. Mar 9 *Direct from the source? How Presidents Use Polling*
 - Rob Eisinger, *The Evolution of Presidential Polling*
 10. Mar 11 *In Class Midterm Examination*
 - Get up to date!
 11. Mar 16-18 *Fall Break*
 12. Mar 23 *Computer Workshop*
 - Special meeting location to be announced. Access public opinion data, learn how to recode data and produce basic univariate statistics
 13. Mar 25-30 *Racial Attitudes in America, Part I*
 - Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo, complete book
 14. April 1 *Computer Workshop: Testing Hypotheses in a Multivariate Context*
 - Special meeting location to be announced
 - Introduction to multiple regression analysis

- Berry and Sanders, *Understanding Multivariate Research* for those not familiar with regression
 - Traugott and Lavrakas, Chs. 8–9
15. April 6–April 8 *Implicit Racial Attitudes: The Case of Willie Horton*
- Tali Mendelberg, *The Race Card*. Entire book.
16. Apr 13–Apr 15..... *Race and the Media: The Case of Welfare Policy*
- Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, entire book
17. April 20–April 22 *The Public, The Media, and American Elections*
- Thomas Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter*, entire book.
18. April 27–April 29 *Student Presentations*
- Student presentation of their preliminary research results