

Syllabus: Public Opinion

Political Science AS.190.345
Johns Hopkins University
Fall 2025

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Class Time: M, W, 3:00pm-4:15pm
Classroom: LaTrobe 107

What is this course about?

This course provides an overview of public opinion in the United States. We will explore what affects people's political opinions, how opinions change, and how opinions affect (and are affected by) politics. Some of the questions we will discuss are: What is public opinion? How much do Americans know about politics? How do the issue positions of leading politicians affect public opinion? How do race relations affect public opinion? What role does partisanship play in all this? When and how do people change their minds about politics?

The class will read papers that include quantitative/statistical work; a prior knowledge of statistical methods would be helpful but it is not required for success in the course. The final paper will be based on an original research project, the successful completion of which does not require any statistical training.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this course, you will:

- Have experience reading a range of academic and journalistic sources, and understanding their key points
- Be able to evaluate the reliability and neutrality of a public opinion poll
- Know the basics of how public opinion in the United States is structured
- Be able to analyze people's opinions using the tools of political science

Reading materials

All readings for the course are listed in the course schedule (below) and will be made available on Canvas.

Assignments

In-class test 1: a test taken during class hours on October 22nd. It is worth 25% of your final grade and covers material from the first half of class.

In-class test 2: a test taken during class hours on December 3rd. It is worth 25% of your final grade and primarily covers material from the second half of class.

Final project: a podcast, video essay, or paper that uses concepts learned in class to analyze the public opinion of 2-4 people whom you interview yourself. Due on December 11th at 5pm and worth 25% of your final grade. See separate instructions for more detail. This project also has the following cumulative assignments:

Interview plan: a plan for conducting interviews for your final project, due on October 8th. It is worth 3% of your final grade and is graded Pass/Fail. See separate instructions for more detail.

If applicable: revised interview plan. If you are asked to revise your interview plan (this is common), the revision will be due on October 29th.

Raw interview materials: You need to complete your interviews and upload the raw video or audio material to Canvas by December 3rd. This will be a pass/fail assignment worth 2% of your final grade.

NB: you should not contact any interviewees for your final project before you have received a “pass” grade on your interview plan.

NB 2: The cumulative assignments must be completed in order, and successfully completing each one is required for permission to submit the next. For example, an approved interview plan is required before you can submit raw interview materials, and raw interview materials must be submitted before you can submit final projects.

Late submission policy

Late submissions have a penalty of one third of a letter grade (e.g. from B+ to B) per 24 hr period. No late submissions are accepted more than a week after the deadline, unless special arrangements have been made (due to health conditions and other emergencies).

PLEASE NOTE that if you anticipate difficulties submitting either an interview plan, a revised interview plan, or raw interview materials on time, then you need to reach out to me before the deadline to discuss the situation and get advance approval for an alternative deadline. Failing one of these part-way assignments (by not submitting within a week of the deadline and not having an alternative arrangement in place) has the repercussion of not being able to submit a final project. This, in turn, is extremely likely to cause a failing grade in the class. The intermediate project deadlines are there to keep you on track with the project, so if you foresee a risk of not meeting one of them, reach out early.

Cold call policy

This class relies on every student doing the reading for each class. The lectures will discuss the readings, but in a way that assumes everyone has read them before class. This means you get the most out of class if you read all required readings beforehand.

We will not have pop-quizzes or pre-class reading quizzes. Instead, in each class I will cold-call on students to start our discussion of the reading. This means I will call names at random and ask a question about the reading.

You can prepare for cold calls by keeping notes of your answers to the following questions:

- 1) What is the main argument in this source?
- 2) What evidence do the author(s) use to make their point?
- 3) How does this reading relate to the topic of class today?
- 4) The “superlative” question: What about this reading was most X?

X here can be any adjective of your choice, positive or negative. For example: “The most surprising thing about this reading was the graph showing Republican and Democratic perceptions of how the economy is doing, because I did not expect...” Other adjectives you could use include fascinating, boring, gobsmacking, confusing, surprising, difficult, fun, etc.

Note that if you do not know the answer to a cold call question but describe what it was in the reading that stumped you, that is OK. If you found the reading difficult, others in the class did too! Just say so, and we will figure it out together.

Attendance

Given the centrality of weekly preparation and participation in this class, attendance is both important and expected. Sometimes life happens and it is necessary to miss class. I understand

this; you do not need to ask for advance permission to miss class. You can send me a courtesy note to let me know why you are missing a class, but this is not required.

At the same time, missed classes mean that you have less exposure to class materials and cannot participate in discussion. For these reasons, please know that if you miss more than two classes, your participation grade will be affected. This means that you can miss up to two classes with no impact on your grade, and no explanation required (except for the days when we have in-class tests).

If you experience a serious life event that will affect more than one week of attendance, means you will not be able to take an in-class test on the designated day, or may cause you to miss a final project-related deadline (including and especially part-way deadlines), please let me know that something has happened; we will then discuss how to best manage the situation.

“Don’t cold call me today” policy

Sometimes, you may not be able to be 100% prepared for class even when you are able to attend. For this reason, you get two “don’t cold call me today” cards for the term. To use your card, send me an e-mail **by noon on the day of class**, telling me you would prefer to not get called on that day. I will not call on you, and I will not share with the class who has asked to not be called on. This policy is in addition to the two classes you can miss without penalty, described above.

Office hours and communication

I hold office hours on Tuesdays, 2:30pm-4:30pm in Mergenthaler 359 or on zoom. Please use the sign-up sheet here: <https://calendly.com/kstrump/office-hours>. Other times available by appointment; email me to set something up.

You can also reach out to me with a question over e-mail. Please note, I do not use e-mail as an instant messaging system. I aim to respond within 24 hours during the workweek, and messages sent over the weekend will need to wait until Monday.

Grading

Your course grade will be determined as follows:

Attendance and participation: 20%

Written interview plan: 3% (graded P/F)

Submission of raw interview materials: 2% (graded P/F)

In-class test 1: 25%

In-class test 2: 25%

Final project: 25%

Letter grades will be assigned based on the following scale (%):

100-97: A+

96-93: A

92-90: A-

89-87: B+

86-83: B

82-80: B-

79-77: C+

76-73: C

72-70: C-

69-67: D+

66-63: D

62-60: D-

59-0: F

Classroom expectations

You are expected to arrive to class on time and prepared. Cell phones must be on completely silent mode, put away, and not used at all during class. Personal laptops are permitted for only two purposes: taking notes of the lecture and referring to your own reading notes. Other activities, such as opening any e-mail or chat applications, are not permitted. If I notice that student attention to laptop screens appears to reduce attention to the lecture, I reserve the right to ban laptops from the classroom for the rest of the class session or the remainder of the semester. Food and drink are only allowed if they do not distract other students, i.e. if they do not smell or make sound.

Course schedule:

Aug 25 – Introduction

An introduction to the class: topics we will cover, important dates, classroom policies, readings, assignments, and exams.

Readings: The course syllabus.

Aug 27 – What Is Public Opinion?

What is public opinion? What is polling? How do I know whether to trust a poll? What is a margin of error?

Pew Research Center, “Public Opinion Polling Basics” (all six lessons)

<https://www.pewresearch.org/course/public-opinion-polling-basics/>

Harel, Ofer, “What is a Margin of Error?” *The Conversation*, 2021.01.06.

<https://theconversation.com/what-is-a-margin-of-error-this-statistical-tool-can-help-you-understand-vaccine-trials-and-political-polling-151833>

Sept 1 – Labor Day, no class

Sept 3 – How Much Do People Know about Politics?

What does the average citizen know about politics? How many people consider ideology when evaluating politicians? Why is there a political science meme named “Conversed!”?

Kinder, Donald R. and Nathan P. Kalmoe. 2017. *Neither Liberal Nor Conservative: Ideological Innocence in the American Public*. Chicago: Chicago University Press. Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2.

Sept 8 – But wait, it gets worse! Elite cues

We learn about “elite cues”, whereby people change their mind on policy issues to match their preferred party’s position, what limits these cues have, and encounter the key concept of “competing considerations”.

Cohen, Geoffrey L. “Party over Policy: The Dominating Impact of Group Influence on Political Beliefs.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 85, no. 5 (November 2003): 808–22. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.85.5.808>. Read pp. 808-813 only (up to Study 3).

“Leading Questions”. Video clip from the (very old) comedy series “Yes, Prime Minister”. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0ZZJXw4MTA> (Things to know before you watch: “National Service” in the UK refers to compulsory military

service, Neville Chamberlain was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom when World War II broke out.)

Sept. 10 – No class

In lieu of class, carefully read the final project guidance document. Then identify a topic in public opinion that is interesting to you, and that you want to write your final project on. If you need inspiration, you can consult the [Pew Research](#) and [Gallup](#) websites, which regularly publish reports on recent trends in public opinion.

Sept 15 – Wait, so how does politics work?

We revisit the question of what people know – and should know – about politics. What counts as relevant information? How do people connect preferences to politics?

Weaver, Vesla, Gwen Prowse, and Spencer Piston. “Too Much Knowledge, Too Little Power: An Assessment of Political Knowledge in Highly Policed Communities.” *The Journal of Politics* 81, no. 3 (July 2019): 1153–66. <https://doi.org/10.1086/703538>.

Sept 17 – The basics of political coalitions

We explore the current coalitions in American politics.

Doherty, Carroll, Jocelyn Kiley, and Nida Asheer. “Changing Partisan Coalitions in a Politically Divided Nation,” April 9, 2024.

NB: Read “Overview” (pp.4-9) and “6. Partisanship by family income, home ownership, union membership and veteran status” (pp.41-45) only.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/04/09/changing-partisan-coalitions-in-a-politically-divided-nation/>.

Sept 22 – White Attitudes on Race: The Basics

Race is one of the most politically powerful dividers in the United States. How are race-related attitudes measured, and why do they matter?

Tesler, Michael. 2016. *Post-Racial or Most-Racial? Race and Politics in the Obama Era*. Chicago: Chicago University Press. Chapter 1.

Sept 24 – White Attitudes on Race: How it Matters

We apply our knowledge of white attitudes on race to understand the dynamics of the 2016 and 2020 elections.

Sides, John, Lynn Vavreck and Michael Tesler. *Identity Crisis*. 2018. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Chapter 5.

Sept 29 – Black Attitudes: The Basics

We turn to the political attitudes of Black Americans. Why do African Americans vote overwhelmingly for liberal candidates even if they hold socially conservative views or earn high incomes?

White, Ismail K. and Chryl Laird. 2019. *Steadfast Democrats: How Social Forces Shape Black Political Behavior*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Introduction.

Optional listening:

Dzotsi, Emmanuel. “The Real Enemy, Part 1” *Reply All Podcast*, December 12, 2019. Available at <https://gimletmedia.com/shows/reply-all/llhd33/152-the-real-enemy-part-1>

Oct 1 – Black Attitudes: Respectability Politics

Black Americans’ attitudes are significantly less uniform than their voting behavior. We learn about differences in respectability politics.

Jefferson, Hakeem. “The Politics of Respectability and Black Americans’ Punitive Attitudes.” *American Political Science Review* 117, no. 4 (November 2023): 1448–64. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422001289>.

Oct 6 – Rural resentment

What are the differences between rural and urban voters? Why is rural identity politically powerful?

Walsh, Katherine Cramer. “Putting Inequality in Its Place: Rural Consciousness and the Power of Perspective.” *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 3 (August 2012): 517–32. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055412000305>.

Oct 8 – No class

In lieu of lecture, use this time to finalize your interview plan. Pay attention to choosing well defined research questions, crafting questions that match your research questions, and making a plan for strategically recruiting an interesting subject pool that matches your research question.

Interview plans due

Oct 13 – Changing coalitions in post-industrial America

We revisit the question of political coalitions, now armed with more information about how group politics works. We explore newly important political divides by age, gender, and education.

Jain, Lakshya. "Is It Normal For Young Voters To Be This Democratic?" Split Ticket, August 1, 2022. <https://split-ticket.org/2022/08/01/is-it-normal-for-young-voters-to-be-this-democratic/>.

Oct 15 – Political Polarization and Partisanship as a Group Identity

In recent decades, partisanship itself has become a group identity. We learn about affective polarization and the emergence of partisanship as an identity group.

Iyengar, Shanto, and Masha Krupenkin. "The Strengthening of Partisan Affect." *Political Psychology* 39, no. S1 (2018): 201–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12487>.

Oct 20 – Political Sectarianism

What are the consequences of extreme political polarization?

Finkel, Eli J., Christopher A. Bail, Mina Cikara, Peter H. Ditto, Shanto Iyengar, Samara Klar, Lilliana Mason, et al. "Political Sectarianism in America." *Science* 370, no. 6516 (October 30, 2020): 533–36. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abe1715>.

Optional listening:

"The Roots of Radical Partisanship". *Democracy Works Podcast*, 2024.07.01. Interview with Johns Hopkins Professor Lilliana Mason: <https://www.democracyworkspodcast.com/episodes/maosn>

Oct 22 – In-class test 1

In-class test.

Oct 27 – Class cross-fertilization! We hold a joint session with the Political Psychology class held at the same time as ours in the Psychology department.

Theme: how partisan polarization manifests in everyday life

No assigned readings.

Location: TBD

Oct 29 – Independents

If applicable: revised interview plans due

Who are political independents in this polarized era? What are their opinions, and how do they relate to politics?

Klar, Samara and Yanna Krupnikov, *Independent Politics*. 2016. New York: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 1.

Nov 3 – The Role of the Media: Local, National, Partisan

Most political information is at some point filtered through the media. What does the media landscape in the US look like, and what has it looked like in the past?

“News deserts are democracy deserts, too” *Democracy Works Podcast* interview with UVA Professor Jennifer Lawless. Jul 1, 2024. Available at:
<https://www.democracyworkspodcast.com/episodes/local-news>

Nov 5 – Media Effects on Public Opinion

Can the media change public opinion? If so, when and how? About what?

Ash, Elliott, Sergio Galletta, Matteo Pinna, and Christopher S. Warshaw. “From Viewers to Voters: Tracing Fox News’ Impact on American Democracy.” *Journal of Public Economics* 240 (December 1, 2024): 105256.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2024.105256>.

Nov 10 – What is happening on social media

Is social media siloing us into echo chambers? Or is it polarizing us because we are exposed to opinions we disagree with?

Nyhan, Brendan, Jaime Settle, Emily Thorson, Magdalena Wojcieszak, Pablo Barberá, Annie Y. Chen, Hunt Allcott, et al. “Like-Minded Sources on Facebook Are Prevalent but Not Polarizing.” *Nature*, July 27, 2023, 1–8.
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-023-06297-w>.

Nov 12 - Misinformation

What is misinformation? How much misinformation is the average person exposed to? What are the consequences for public opinion and politics?

Singh, Manvir. “Don’t Believe What They’re Telling You About Misinformation.” *The New Yorker*, April 15, 2024.
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/04/22/dont-believe-what-theyre-telling-you-about-misinformation>.

Nov 17 – Changing minds: the role of facts

When do facts change people's minds? Can fact checks be effective?

Coppock, Alexander, Kimberly Gross, Ethan Porter, Emily Thorson, and Thomas J. Wood. "Conceptual Replication of Four Key Findings about Factual Corrections and Misinformation during the 2020 US Election: Evidence from Panel-Survey Experiments." *British Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 4 (October 2023): 1328–41. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123422000631>.

Nov 19 – Changing minds: campaigns, conversations, and experiences

We compare the impact that campaigns have on people's opinions to the impact of everyday conversations and experiences.

Saslow, Eli. "The White Flight of Derek Black" 2016.10.15 *The Washington Post*. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/the-white-flight-of-derek-black/2016/10/15/ed5f906a-8f3b-11e6-a6a3-d50061aa9fae_story.html

Nov 24, 26: Thanksgiving break

Dec 1 – Bringing it all together

Raw interview materials due

We bring it all together by discussing the 2024 US Presidential election.

Sides, John. "The 2024 Election Story Is More Complex than 'Racial Realignment.'" *Good Authority*. November 18, 2024. <https://goodauthority.org/news/election-2024-racial-realignment-us-politics/>.

Dec 3 – In-class Test 2

In-class test