

Public Opinion and Democratic Theory

This course considers various questions at the center of democratic theory using the tools of political theory and the study of public opinion. The course is divided into four major sections. The first, “Public Opinion and Legitimacy,” explores the question of why government policy should take into account what the people think in the first place. We will consider only a small selection of attempts to answer this question, with particular emphasis on the influential view of Rousseau. We will also consider attempts to measure legitimacy, including the theoretical concerns these attempts prompt. The second section, “Tyranny of the Majority,” focuses on the effects of majority tyranny on the formation of public opinion and how it might distort it, rather than on the traditional concern for its effects on liberty. We will look at mechanisms by which democratic norms of equality work to distort individuals’ formation and expression of their views as well as ways to combat these tendencies. In the third section, “The Quality of Public Opinion,” we ask: how informed is public opinion? Does it matter? Are decisions made according to public opinion good ones? We will consider major arguments both in favor and against the quality of public opinion, as well as attempts to improve public opinion. The fourth and final section, “Representatives and Elites,” will consider how representatives and elites can improve public opinion, how they contribute to its formation in the first place, and how these considerations push us toward a revision of traditional conceptions of representation.

Because of the nature of the subject and the variety of approaches taken by scholars studying it, the readings for the class involve multiple methodological approaches. They range from pure normative analysis to social choice theory to behavioral and statistical analysis. No familiarity with these methods is required. The course will not examine or require statistical survey methodology, though we will analyze some non-mathematical methodological issues. We focus instead on what the conclusions of these studies mean for our understanding of democratic government. Though we consult classic texts—often at length—at key points in the course, the focus will be on relating them to contemporary debates in political science and theory.

Learning Objectives:

- Students will be able to understand and assess conflicting theories of public opinion’s proper role in a democracy.
- Students will understand the fundamentals of how pollsters measure public opinion.
- Students should understand and be able to assess the effects of democratic norms on the formation of public opinion and the search for truth.

- Students will reflect on the public's competence to direct and assess public policy.
- Students will be able to evaluate political science theories about how public opinion is formed, including the influence of elites, importance of information, and group norms.
- Students should be able to understand and assess alternative formulations of the relationship between representation and public opinion.

Course Expectations and Grading:

Attendance is mandatory. Class may not be missed except in case of emergency or illness with a doctor's note. The format of the course will involve both lectures and class discussions. The discussion portion of the course is meant to be a collaborative discourse, involving the close reading of texts and addressing each others' thoughts and questions. For this reason, you must be prepared to participate every day. This means you must bring your texts to class every day, having read, annotated and thought about them. Naturally, this applies to online texts as well. Your participation grade will be based on your contributions to discussions.

20% Participation

Participation is based on attendance, preparedness and contribution to the class.

20% Forum (blog)

Forum assessment is based on the completion of two required and randomly assigned postings to the forum and responses to others' postings.

30% Short paper

The short paper is in response to a provided question and the length is 3-4 good pages.

30% Final exam

Exam consists of three parts: identifications and two essay questions. There will be choice in IDs and one of the essay questions.

Required texts:

Rousseau, Basic Political Writings, Hackett edition.

John Stuart Mill, On Liberty, ed. Stefan Collini, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought edition.

Page, Benjamin I. and Robert Y. Shapiro. The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences. University of Chicago Press, 1992.

All other readings will be made available through Courseworks.

Schedule of Sessions

7/ 9 Introduction: The meaning of public opinion and how we measure it

Glynn, Carrol J. et al. Public Opinion: 2nd edition. Pp. 16-32. (16 pages)

7/11 Public Opinion and Legitimacy I: Why care about public opinion in the first place? Truth? Justice?

Plato, Republic. 514-17 (Cave Allegory). (≈ 6 pages).

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. Social Contract.

Book I: (Intro, Chs. I, III, V-VIII)

Book II: (Chs. I, III, IV, VI, VII)

Book III: (Ch. XV)

Book IV: (Chs. I, II) (≈ 25 pages)

7/16 Public Opinion and Legitimacy II: Sources and Measures of Legitimacy

Hume, David. On the Original Contract. (<http://www.constitution.org/dh/origcont.htm>) (≈ 15 pages)

Easton, David. A Systems Analysis of Political Life. Ch. 18. (278-88) (10 pages)

Yglesias, Matthew. Holding Politicians Accountable. (<http://goo.gl/2reM5>) (≈ 3 pages)

Read all of the day's forum postings

7/18 Tyranny of the Majority I: How does the tyranny of the majority affect public opinion?

de Tocqueville, Alexis. Democracy in America. Vol. I, Pt. I, Ch. 4: "The Principle of the Sovereignty of the People in America;" Pt. II, Ch. 7 (or 15, depending on your edition): "The Omnipotence of the Majority in the United States and Its Effects." (≈ 18 pages.)

Noelle-Neumann, Elisabeth. "Spiral of Silence: A Theory of Public Opinion." *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (June 1974); pp. 43-51. (8 pages)

Breed, Warren and Thomas Ktsanes. "Pluralistic Ignorance in the Process of Opinion Formation." *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Autumn 1961); pp. 382-392. (10 pages)

Read all of the day's forum postings

7/23 Tyranny of the Majority II: Majority tyranny and the quality of public opinion

Mill, John Stuart. On Liberty, Chs. 1-2, pp. 5-55. (50 pages)

Read all of the day's forum postings

7/25 Quality of Public Opinion I: Does social choice theory prove the low quality of public opinion?

Anderson, Elizabeth. "The Epistemology of Democracy." *Episteme*, Vol. 3, No. 1-2 (2006); pp. 8-22. (14 pages)

Riker, William. "Social Choice Theory and Constitutional Democracy." In Christiano (ed), Philosophy and Democracy: An Anthology. Pp. 161-194. (30 pages)

Read all of the day's forum postings

7/30 Quality of Public Opinion II: Improving public opinion

Mill, John Stuart. Considerations on Representative Government. Ch. 3: "That the Ideally Best Form of Government is Representative Government;" pp. 55-80. (25 pages)

Fishkin, James S. "The Televised Deliberative Poll: An Experiment in Democracy." *Annals of the Amer. Academy of Pol. and Social Science*, Vol. 546, (Jul. 1996), pp. 132-140. (9 pages)

Read all of the day's forum postings

In-class film: Deliberative Polling: By the People

8/1 Quality of Public Opinion III: Is public opinion meaningful?

Converse, Philip E. "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics." *Critical Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1-3 (2006). Intro, Sections I-III, VII, pp. 1-18, 44-52. (26 pages)

Page, Benjamin I. and Robert Y. Shapiro. The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences. Chs. 1-2. Pp. 1-36, 37-66. (66 pages)

Read all of the day's forum postings

(Short paper assignment handed out)

8/6 Quality of Public Opinion IV: Are citizens too poorly informed for public opinion to be good?

Delli Carpini, Michael X. and Scott Keeter. What Americans Know About Politics And Why It Matters. Ch. 2: "What Americans Know about Politics." Pp. 62-104. (42 pages)

Lupia, Arthur. "Shortcuts versus Encyclopedias: Information and Voting Behavior in California Insurance Reform Elections." *American Political Science Review (APSR)*, Vol. 88, No. 1 (Mar., 1994), pp. 63-76. (14 pages)

Lau and Redlawsk, "Advantages and Disadvantages of Cognitive Heuristics in Political Decision Making." *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (Oct. 2001), pp. 951-971. (17 pages)

Read all of the day's forum postings

8/8 Representatives and Elites I: How does representation affect public opinion?

Burke, Edmund. "Speech to the Electors of Bristol." (<http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch13s7.html>) (≈ 2 pages)

Hamilton, Alexander . Federalist 10, 71 (≈ 8+5 pages)

Zaller, John R. The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion, Ch. 2: "Information, predispositions, and opinion." Pp. 6-38. (32 pages).

Nelson, Thomas E. "Issue Framing." in Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro (eds), Oxford Handbook of American Public Opinion and the Media; pp. 189-203. (11 pages)

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(Short paper assignment DUE)

8/13 Representatives and Elites II: Revising the meaning of representation

Jacobs, Lawrence R. and Robert Y. Shapiro. Politicians Don't Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness. Part of Ch. 2: "Crafted Talk and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness." Pp. 44-71. (27 pages)

Page, Benjamin I. and Robert Y. Shapiro. "Effects of Public Opinion on Policy." *APSR*, Vol. 77, No. 1 (Mar. 1983); pp. 175-190. (14 pages)

Disch, Lisa. "Toward a Mobilization Conception of Democratic Representation." *APSR*, Vol. 105, No. 1 (Feb. 2011); pp. 100-114. (13 pages)

Read all of the day's forum postings

8/15 Final Exam