

COMM 4820

Public Opinion and Communication

Jacob Long

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Summer 2016. University Hall 090.

Class: Tues. and Thurs. 9:00am–12:10pm.

Office Hours: Tues. and Thurs. 1:00pm–3:00pm.

“To speak with precision of public opinion is a task not unlike coming to grips with the Holy Ghost.” (V. O. Key, 1961, *Public Opinion and American Democracy*, p. 8)

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES

This course surveys theory, research, and practice in the domain of public opinion with an emphasis on the role of communication. Other disciplines drawn from include political science, sociology, and social psychology. We begin by grappling with current and historical takes on the meaning of the concept before covering the techniques with which public opinion is measured. As the course progresses, our focus turns to covering major theories related to public opinion and its relationship with both mass and interpersonal communication. Throughout the course, the texts and subject matter covered will be a mixture of historically important work and some of the latest scholarly contributions. Further, we will keep an eye on the current political environment and assess whether it meets the expectations set by the material covered in class.

With that in mind, there are several explicit objectives for this course. By the end of the term, students should:

- Gain an understanding both of what public opinion is commonly understood to mean and the limitations of that definition.

- Know the predominant methods by which public opinion is measured as well as the pitfalls thereof.
- Understand the psychological processes involved in the formation and maintenance of opinions.
- Have a working knowledge of major theories relating communication and public opinion.
- Be able to see connections between individual opinions, group dynamics, and larger institutions such as the government and mass media.
- Be savvy consumers of present-day reporting of information that purports to be about public opinion.

REQUIRED MATERIALS

There is no required textbook for this course. We will be using *The Oxford Handbook of American Public Opinion and the Media* on a fairly regular basis, but this can be accessed in its entirety online. I will distribute PDFs of the assigned chapters, but you can see the complete text at <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199545636.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199545636> when connected to campus WiFi or <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199545636.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199545636> otherwise. Readings will draw from many other sources as well, but PDF copies will always be provided via Carmen.

With that in mind, consistent access to the internet will be necessary in order to access readings, turn in assignments, and keep up with any updates to the class. Carmen will be the preferred method of communication to the class and the place where written assignments are generally turned in. Any changes to class policies or scheduling will be reflected in updates to this syllabus, which will be uploaded to Carmen.

EVALUATION

This class will use the standard OSU grading scheme:

A	93-100%	A-	90-92.99%	B+	87-89.99%
B	83-86.99%	B-	80-82.99%	C+	77-79.99%
C	73-76.99%	C-	70-72.99%	D+	67-69.99%
D	60-66.99%	E	0-59.99%		

The final grade in the class will consist of the following:

Participation	20%
Discussion questions	10%
Methods critique	15%
Article presentation	10%
Topic report	30%
Final presentation	15%

Discussion questions These will be required to be posted to Carmen by 11:59pm on the day before each class meeting. These should be questions that you would like to raise in class and that would add to a larger discussion. While your question may build on or be inspired by another student's question, it should not be a duplicate of a question already posted. You are expected to contribute one question for each assigned reading, except when the reading schedule says otherwise. On the day you are doing your article presentation, you do not need to submit discussion questions.

Methods critique This is a written assignment in which students will locate and analyze a recently published report—either from a mass media source, research firm, or academic journal—that describes the results of a public opinion poll. The analysis will focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the methods used to collect the data and the conclusions the source drew from that information. Students are expected to draw upon the readings and discussion on survey methodology in order to make their arguments. It will not be a research paper per se, but will require references to sources from assigned readings or elsewhere to justify arguments.

Article presentation Students will present the argument of their written methods critique to the class on several dates throughout the semester. The presentation should last 8–15 minutes after which the class may discuss the issues raised further. An opportunity to choose a date will be provided early in the term.

Topic report Due on the final day of class, this assignment requires you to use what you have learned to independent research a public opinion topic of interest and present a detailed report of your findings. Drawing upon existing data from academic and other sources, describe the state of knowledge about the chosen topic. The guidelines for choosing a topic are deliberately broad to allow for you to be creative and pursue your own interests. Acceptable ideas can be how different social groups differ in their opinions, an in-depth analysis of opinions on a particular issue, or the way a particular media source covers public opinion on an issue.

Final presentation The last day of class will be dedicated to 10–15 minute presentations of the findings of the topic report. These presentations, which should include some sort of visual aids—such as PowerPoint slides—should summarize what was written in the topic report.

Participation is discussed in more detail in the course policies section.

COURSE POLICIES

Attendance

Attendance in this course is mandatory and, considering this is a 6-week term with only 11 total class meetings, critically important. Students will be granted 1 unexcused absence over the course of the term, for which no notice or reason is needed. Any graded activities (e.g., presentations) that occur on a day of an unexcused absence will be given a 0. Each unexcused absence beyond the 1 allotted will result in a penalty of a full letter grade on your final grade in the course (e.g., a B+ becomes a C+).

Excused absences for university-approved or medical purposes must be *convincingly* documented and done within one week of the absence. It is at the instructor's discretion to determine what consists of sufficient reason for an excused absence; when in doubt, check in advance.

Punctuality Tardiness is discouraged, but no specific penalties will be given so long as you enter within a reasonable time and the lateness is not a pattern. Special arrangements may be considered if there are acceptable reasons for being slightly late to class. When you are late, it is your responsibility to ensure that you were counted for attendance. While the instructor will make every effort to notice late entries and add them to the attendance log, you must approach the instructor after class or during break *on the day of the class* to verify you were counted.

Participation

Beyond mere attendance, involvement in class discussion is an important part of the learning environment. This is not only for the benefit of the student, but for all students who will learn and generate ideas from one another. It is expected that students will participate in discussion in all or nearly all class periods. This requires having completed assigned readings and any other required activities *prior* to the beginning of class. This *does not* require that you completely understand all assigned readings; to the contrary, questions arising from a sincere attempt to understand the material are among the most helpful contributions to the class. In any case, there is a necessary balance of quality and

quantity. Relatively infrequent comments and questions that are intellectually rigorous are welcome, just as frequent innocuous or unhelpful comments are discouraged.

Participation entails both contribution and engagement. Otherwise positive contributions can be undermined if you are spending the rest of your time distracted. Making for a positive discussion requires both input and engaged, respectful listening.

Technology Use

You may feel free to use laptops or tablets to take notes and/or access course documents during class. However, it is unacceptable to use these devices for non-class activities. I cannot and will not police their use throughout class time, but it is not hard to tell who is using their devices productively and who is distracted. If you are frequently focused on your computer screens rather than what is going on in the classroom, I may lower your participation grade. I may not always disrupt the class when I see someone using technology inappropriately, so do not assume that just because I haven't said anything that you are unnoticed. If it becomes too large of a problem, I may change this policy accordingly.

Written Assignments

In-class assignments may be handwritten, but all other work must be typed and must conform to APA formatting, citing, and referencing guidelines (see <http://www.apastyle.org/> and <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/>). Unless otherwise noted, assignments must be uploaded to the dropbox no later than 11:59 p.m. on the assigned due date.

Classroom Civility

Given the content of this course, we will frequently be talking about political issues over which reasonable people may disagree. This is not a class designed to hash out our political disagreements, however, and disagreements of this nature should not be dwelled upon in class. Further, statements of your own political beliefs in general are discouraged unless they clearly advance the class's discussion of a scholarly topic. It is especially important that we avoid racist, sexist, homophobic, or other negative language that may unnecessarily exclude members of our campus and classroom. This is not an exhaustive list of behaviors; rather, they represent the minimal standards that help make the classroom a productive learning environment for all concerned.

Consultation

I'm happy to talk about any questions or concerns you may have about class. The best way to do this is by visiting me during my office hours, which are posted at the top of this syllabus. You do not need to warn me that you'll be dropping by; you should assume that I will be there unless I have given advance notice otherwise. If office hours won't work for you, chat with me after class to schedule another time we can meet.

Email

I prefer to meet in person to discuss any questions or concerns. Email should generally be reserved for issues that absolutely cannot wait until the next class or office hours. Email is an acceptable way to arrange a face-to-face meeting as well. You may email to give advance notice about university-approved absences or to explain medical/emergency absences that will be documented later per course policy. Please treat email correspondence as formal communication and be professional when you use it. Email is absolutely not the medium for negotiating special requests, addressing grade concerns, or discussing ideas for assignments; those issues must be handled in person.

Challenging a Grade

I am always willing to discuss your grades with you, but I will not do so during class time. If you are only looking for more details or feedback, there is no formal process required. However, do not use the need for more feedback as a subtle way of asking for a grade change.

To challenge a grade, you must meet me during office hours or make an appointment within one week of the assignment being returned to you. When we meet, you must present your concerns in writing and attach the graded speech, paper, or exam. Please note that a challenge may result in grades being raised or lowered.

Academic Misconduct

Cheating and plagiarism in any form will not be tolerated. The Ohio State University's Code of Student Conduct (Section 3325-23-04) defines academic misconduct as "any activity that tends to compromise the academic integrity of the University, or subvert the educational process" (p. 2). Examples of academic misconduct include, but are not limited to, plagiarism, collusion (unauthorized collaboration), copying the work of another student, and possession of unauthorized materials during an examination.

It is the responsibility of the Committee on Academic Misconduct to investigate or establish procedures for the investigation of all reported cases of student academic misconduct. The term "academic misconduct" includes all forms of student academic

misconduct wherever committed; illustrated by, but not limited to, cases of plagiarism and dishonest practices in connection with examinations. Instructors shall report all instances of alleged academic misconduct to the committee (Faculty Rule 3335-5-487). For additional information, see the Code of Student Conduct <http://studentlife.osu.edu/csc/>.

If I suspect that a student has committed academic misconduct in this course, I am obligated by University Rules to report my suspicions to the Committee on Academic Misconduct (COAM). If COAM determines you have violated the University's *Code of Student Conduct*, the sanctions for the misconduct could include a failing grade in this course and suspension or dismissal from the University. If you have any questions about this policy or what constitutes academic misconduct, please contact me or visit <http://oaa.osu.edu/coam/home.html>.

Reasonable Accommodation Policy

Students with disabilities that have been certified by the Office for Disability Services will be appropriately accommodated and should inform the instructor as soon as possible of their needs. The Office for Disability Services is located in 150 Pomerene Hall, 1760 Neil Avenue; telephone 292-3307, TDD 292-0901; <http://www.ods.ohio-state.edu/>.

CHANGING NATURE OF THIS SYLLABUS

The assignments, policies, and readings in this syllabus are subject to change at any time. If this occurs, the changes will be announced in class and an updated version of the syllabus will be posted to Carmen. Below is a summary of all changes:

5/12/16 – First version

5/16/16 – Made Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) optional and added Glynn et al. (2004) as required for the class meeting on knowledge and competence.

5/21/16 – Made Zaller (2012) optional for 5/31.

READING SCHEDULE

Be on the lookout each week for a “reading memo” in which I will give you more details on which parts of the assigned readings you should focus most of your energy on and if there are portions that you do not need to read.

Thursday, 05/12: Introduction

No assigned readings.

Optional:

- Druckman, J. N. (2014). Pathologies of studying public opinion, political communication, and democratic responsiveness. *Political Communication*, 31(3), 467–492. doi:10.1080/10584609.2013.852643.
- Feldman, S. (2003). Values, ideology, and the structure of political attitudes. In D. O. Sears, L. Huddy, & R. Jervis (Eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*. Oxford University Press.
- Gunther, A. C., Perloff, R. M., & Tsfati, Y. (2008). Public opinion and the third-person effect. In *The Sage handbook of public opinion research* (pp. 184–191).
- Hastorf, A. H. & Cantril, H. (1954, January). They saw a game; a case study. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 49(1), 129–134. doi:10.1037/h0057880.
- Price, V. (1992). Problems of public opinion. In *Public opinion* (pp. 4–22). Sage.

Tuesday, 05/17: Defining public opinion*Required:*

- Herbst, S. (2011). Critical perspectives on public opinion. In R. Y. Shapiro & L. R. Jacobs (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of American Public Opinion and the Media* (pp. 302–314). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kinder, D. R. (1998). Opinion and action in the realm of politics. In D. T. Gilbert, S. T. Fiske, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *Handbook of Social Psychology* (4th, pp. 778–784). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Zaller, J. (1994). Positive constructs of public opinion. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 11(3), 276–287.

Optional:

- Gunnell, J. G. (2011). Democracy and the concept of public opinion. In G. C. Edwards, L. R. Jacobs, & R. Y. Shapiro (Eds.), *The oxford handbook of american public opinion and the media* (pp. 270–283). Oxford University Press.

Thursday, 05/19: Opinion measurement*Required:*

- Berinsky, A. J. (2011). Representative sampling and survey non-response. In G. C. Edwards, L. R. Jacobs, & R. Y. Shapiro (Eds.), *The oxford handbook of american public opinion and the media* (pp. 332–345). Oxford University Press.
- Bishop, G. F. (2005b). The elusiveness of "public opinion". In *The illusion of public opinion: Fact and artifact in American public opinion polls* (pp. 1–17). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Delli Carpini, M. X. (2011). Constructing public opinion: A brief history of survey research. In G. C. Edwards, L. R. Jacobs, & R. Y. Shapiro (Eds.), *The oxford handbook of american public opinion and the media* (pp. 284–301). Oxford University Press.

Optional:

- Fricker, S., Galesic, M., Tourangeau, R., & Yan, T. (2005). An experimental comparison of web and telephone surveys. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 69(3), 370–392. Retrieved February 10, 2015, from <http://poq.oxfordjournals.org/content/69/3/370.short>.

Tuesday, 05/24: Knowledge and competence

Required:

- Bishop, G. F. (2005a). Illusory opinions on public affairs. In *The illusion of public opinion: Fact and artifact in American public opinion polls* (pp. 18–45). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Glynn, C. J., Herbst, S., O'Keefe, G. J., Shapiro, R. Y., & Lindeman, M. (2004). Public opinion and democratic competence. In *Public opinion* (2nd, pp. 283–354). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Kuklinski, J. H. & Quirk, P. J. (2000). Reconsidering the rational public: Cognition, heuristics, and mass opinion. In A. Lupia, M. D. McCubbins, & S. L. Popkin (Eds.), *Elements of reason: Cognition, choice, and the bounds of rationality* (pp. 153–82).

Optional:

- Althaus, S. L. (1998). Information effects in collective preferences. *American Political Science Review*, 92(3), 545. doi:10.2307/2585480.
- Delli Carpini, M. X. & Keeter, S. (1993). Measuring political knowledge: Putting first things first. *American Journal of Political Science*, 37(4), 1179. doi:10.2307/2111549.

- Delli Carpini, M. X. & Keeter, S. (1996). From democratic theory to democratic practice: the case for an informed citizenry. In *What Americans know about politics and why it matters* (pp. 22–61). New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Price, V. & Neijens, P. (1997). Opinion quality in public opinion research. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 9(4), 336–360. Retrieved March 30, 2016, from <http://ijpor.oxfordjournals.org/content/9/4/336.short>.

Thursday, 05/26: Misperceptions and rumoring

Required:

- Garrett, R. K. (2011). Troubling consequences of online political rumoring. *Human Communication Research*, 37(2), 255–274. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.2010.01401.x.
- Nyhan, B. (2010). Why the "death panel" myth wouldn't die: Misinformation in the health care reform debate. *The Forum*, 8(1), 1–24. doi:10.2202/1540-8884.1354.

Optional:

- Garrett, R. K., Nisbet, E. C., & Lynch, E. K. (2013). Undermining the corrective effects of media-based political fact checking? The role of contextual cues and naïve theory. *Journal of Communication*, 63(4), 617–637. doi:10.1111/jcom.12038.
- Thorson, E. (2015). Belief echoes: The persistent effects of corrected misinformation. *Political Communication*, 1–21. doi:10.1080/10584609.2015.1102187.
- Weeks, B. E. & Garrett, R. K. (2014). Electoral consequences of political rumors: Motivated reasoning, candidate rumors, and vote choice during the 2008 U.S. presidential election. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 26(4), 401–422. doi:10.1093/ijpor/edu005.

Tuesday, 05/31: Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) Model

Required:

- Zaller, J. (1992a). Chapter 2: Information, predispositions, and opinion. In *The nature and origins of mass opinion* (pp. 6–39). Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Zaller, J. (1992b). Chapter 3: How citizens acquire information and convert it into public opinion. In *The nature and origins of mass opinion* (pp. 40–52). Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Optional:

Zaller, J. (2012). What Nature and Origins leaves out. *Critical Review*, 24(4), 569–642. doi:[10.1080/08913811.2012.807648](https://doi.org/10.1080/08913811.2012.807648).

Thursday, 06/02: Selective exposure and polarization

Required:

Garrett, R. K., Carnahan, D., & Lynch, E. K. (2013). A turn toward avoidance? Selective exposure to online political information, 2004–2008. *Political Behavior*, 35(1), 113–134. doi:[10.1007/s11109-011-9185-6](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-011-9185-6).

Prior, M. (2013). Media and political polarization. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 16(1), 101–127. doi:[10.1146/annurev-polisci-100711-135242](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-100711-135242).

Tuesday, 06/07: Spiral of silence and political discussion

Required:

Scheufele, D. A. (2008). Spiral of silence theory. In *The SAGE handbook of public opinion research* (pp. 173–183).

More TBA

Thursday, 06/09: Framing

Required:

Nelson, T. E. (2011). Issue framing. In G. C. Edwards, L. R. Jacobs, & R. Y. Shapiro (Eds.), *The oxford handbook of american public opinion and the media* (pp. 189–203). Oxford University Press.

Nelson, T. E., Clawson, R. A., & Oxley, Z. M. (1997). Media framing of a civil liberties conflict and its effect on tolerance. *The American Political Science Review*, 91(3), 567. doi:[10.2307/2952075](https://doi.org/10.2307/2952075). JSTOR: [2952075?origin=crossref](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2952075?origin=crossref).

Tuesday, 06/14: Agenda setting and priming

Required:

McCombs, M. E. (2005). A look at agenda-setting: Past, present and future. *Journalism Studies*, 6(4), 543–557. doi:[10.1080/14616700500250438](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700500250438).

Scheufele, D. A. & Tewksbury, D. (2007). Framing, agenda setting, and priming: The evolution of three media effects models. *Journal of Communication*, 57(1), 9–20. doi:[10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00326.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00326.x).

Thursday, 06/16: Final class

Topic papers due, in-class presentations

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