

New York University
Wilf Family Department of Politics
Fall 2009

**American Public Opinion
(V53.0342)**
Professor Patrick Egan

What this course is about

What do Americans think about politics and public affairs? Why do they hold these beliefs? And does it matter? This course grapples with these three questions, which lie at the core of our understanding of the health of American democratic society. In doing so, the class will give you the tools you need to critically assess the construction, conduct, and reporting of public opinion surveys. In addition, you will learn how to apply important concepts from social science that will enhance the analytical skills you will need for careers such as law, business, and public affairs.

Logistics

class meetings:	Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11:00 a.m. – 12:15 p.m. 194 Mercer Street, Room 306
contact info:	email (best way to reach me): patrick.egan@nyu.edu phone: (212) 992-8078
office hours:	Thursdays, 2 to 4 pm (and by appointment, if necessary) 19 W. 4 th Street, Room 327
graders:	Tania Barnes tsb210@nyu.edu Ryan Miller rmm358@nyu.edu Alex Stepanek als544@nyu.edu

Course requirements and grading

Five separate components of this course contribute to your grade:

- Two short essays (each worth 20 percent of your grade). These papers, between 4 to 6 pages in length, will require you to briefly analyze a question regarding public opinion. Assignments with details about these papers will be handed out in class. These papers are due at the beginning of class on October 13 and December 3.
- A midterm examination (20 percent). This in-class written exam will cover all material presented in class through October 10. It will include questions in short-answer and brief-essay format. This exam will be held on October 27.
- A final examination (30 percent). This two-hour written exam will cover material from the entire semester, with a focus on material presented after the midterm exam. According to the Registrar's office, this exam is currently scheduled to be held in our classroom on Tuesday, December 22 at 10 a.m.
- Class attendance and participation (10 percent):

Attending class is good for you. The lectures will present material not covered in the readings, synthesize ideas and concepts, and—I promise—be interesting. To stress the importance of attendance, I will call roll for a randomly selected group of students at the beginning of every class session. You are permitted two (2) unexcused absences (out of a total of 26 class sessions) for the semester, no questions asked. Any more than two absences will result in a reduction of your class participation grade, with additional reductions taken for additional absences. If you seek to be excused from attendance, please let me know via email beforehand. Do not assume you have been excused until you hear a response from me.

To the extent possible in a large class, we will periodically discuss the material we are studying. Please participate in these discussions to the best extent that you can. It will make discussion more interesting and engaging for you and for the rest of the class. I understand that some students find it difficult to present their ideas to a group and contribute to discussion. However, speaking in public is a critical life skill which your college education should help you acquire. I will therefore occasionally call on students who are not voluntarily participating to contribute to class discussion. If you are someone who has particular trouble participating in class, please see me during office hours so I get a sense of what you're thinking and how you're handling the material.

The fine print

Here are a few policies that I sincerely hope won't be necessary or relevant to our work together this semester:

Missing exams. Students missing an exam will receive a grade of zero. If a true emergency situation arises, contact me before the scheduled test time. If I determine that the excuse is justified (such as in cases of illness or family/personal emergencies), we will schedule a make-up. Travel plans (e.g., a plane ticket purchased for departure before the day of the exam) are not an acceptable excuse.

Late papers. Papers must be turned in on time by the beginning of class on the day they are due. You will be penalized 1/3 of a grade (e.g. from an A- to a B+) per day late.

Academic dishonesty. The work you do in this course must be your own work. Academic dishonesty is not only against the rules; it is also slothful, cowardly, unfair to your classmates, and a waste of the tuition money you and your family have worked hard to earn. I simply won't tolerate it. The University's penalties for academic dishonesty are severe, and can include receipt of a failing grade in the course for which plagiarized work was submitted; probation, suspension, or expulsion; and the entry of a letter describing the incident in a file kept permanently by the Office of the Dean.

Readings (with syllabus abbreviations)

Books for purchase at the NYU Main Bookstore:

- (APO) Erikson, Robert S. and Kent L. Tedin. 2007. *American Public Opinion: Its Origins, Content and Impact*. New York: Pearson Longman. Updated 7th edition.
**Make sure you read this (7th) edition, which is updated with the latest polling and election results.
- (EPA) Pollock III, Philip H. 2005. *The Essentials of Political Analysis*. Washington: CQ Press. 3rd edition. You may also buy the 2nd edition; if so, let me know and I'll tell you the corresponding page numbers.
- (TOC) Stimson, James A. 2004. *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- (TRP) Page, Benjamin I. and Robert Y. Shapiro. 1992. *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- (WAK) Delli Carpini, Michael X. and Scott Keeter. 1996. *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Additional readings will be made available on Blackboard—they are marked with a (B) on this syllabus—or in a reader (R) that may be purchased at New University Copy, 11 Waverly Place.

Schedule of Topics and Readings

How to think about the readings: Be sure to read the readings *before* class on the day they are assigned; you will often be asked to discuss them in class. The readings for this class average about 70 pages per class session, and very few of them are technical. Depending on how fast a reader you are, consider budgeting between two to three hours per class session to keep on top of the readings. When several readings are assigned for one class session, you will find it helpful to read the assigned selection from the textbook (APO) first.

PART I. Public Opinion and Polling

Tues. Sept. 8 Overview: what is public opinion, and does it matter?

Thurs. Sept. 10 The APO poll. Polling and democracy.

- Herbert Blumer (1948), "Public Opinion and Public Opinion Polling" *American Sociological Review* 13: 542-549. (B)
- Benjamin Ginsberg (1986), *The Captive Public*. Ch. 3. (B)
- Sidney Verba (1996) "The Citizen as Respondent: Sample Surveys and American Democracy." *American Political Science Review* 90: 1-7. (B)

Tues. Sept. 15 Theories of public opinion. The history of polling.

- APO, Ch. 1.
- Susan Herbst (1993), *Numbered Voices: How Opinion Polling Has Shaped American Politics*. Ch. 3. (B)

Thurs. Sept. 17 How polling is done today. The use (and misuse) of polls.

- APO, Sections 2.1, 2.2 and 2.4.
- Ann E. Marimow, "Last Minute Push Polls Send Some Voters Over the Edge." *Washington Post*, November 3, 2006. (B)
- Jon Cohen. "When a Poll Is Not Really A Poll." *Washington Post*, August 8, 2007. (B)

Plus, skim/surf:

- "Recent SFGate Polls." online at <http://www.sfgate.com/polls>
- American National Election Studies (2004). Pre-election questionnaire and Pre-Election Respondent Booklet. (B)
- Polimetrix, Inc. Polls at <http://pollingpoint.com>

Tues. Sept. 22 **Class cancelled today.**

Thurs. Sept. 24 Key concepts and terms for understanding polling.

- EPA, Chapter 2.

Tues. Sept. 29 Polling pitfalls.

- APO, Section 2.3.
- Patrick J. Egan, Nathaniel Persily and Kevin Wallsten (2008). "Gay Rights." in *Public Opinion and Constitutional Controversy*. pp. 234-245. (B)
- Roger Tourangeau and Tom W. Smith. (1996). "Asking Sensitive Questions: The Impact of Data Collection Mode, Question Format, and Question Context." *Public Opinion Quarterly*. 60:275-304. (B)
- Brad Lockerbie and Stephen A. Borrelli (1990). "Question Wording and Public Support for Contra Aid, 1983-1986." *Public Opinion Quarterly*. 54: 195-208. (B)

PART II. What People Know and Think About Politics

Thurs. Oct. 1 Political information (and lack thereof).

- WAK, Introduction and Ch. 2.

Tues. Oct. 6 Response instability and a theory of survey response.

- APO, Ch. 3.
- John Zaller and Stanley Feldman (1992). "A Simple Theory of Survey Response: Answering Questions Versus Revealing Preferences." *American Journal of Political Science* 36: 579-616. (B)

Thurs. Oct. 8 The consequences of political knowledge.

- WAK, Ch. 6 and 7.
- Arthur Lupia. (1994) "Shortcuts Versus Encyclopedias: Information and Voting Behavior in California's Insurance Reform Elections." *American Political Science Review* 88:63-76. (B)

Tues. Oct. 13 Analyzing survey data: basic tools.
First short essay due at beginning of class.

- EPA, pp. 54-67; 78-90; 94-110.

Thurs. Oct. 15 The role of self-interest.

- David O. Sears and Carolyn L. Funk (1990). "Self-Interest in Americans' Political Opinions." in *Beyond Self Interest*, edited by Jane J. Mansbridge. (R)
- Larry M. Bartels. (2005) "Homer Gets a Tax Cut: Inequality and Public Policy in the American Mind." *Perspectives on Politics* 3: 15-31. (B)

Tues. Oct. 20 Socialization as citizens and partisans.

- APO, Ch. 5.
- Richard G. Niemi and M. Kent Jennings (1991). "Issues and Inheritance in the Formation of Party Identification." *American Journal of Political Science* 35:970-988. (B)
- Green, Donald, Bradley Palmquist and Eric Schickler (2002). *Partisan Hearts and Minds*. pp. 75-82. (R)

Thurs. Oct. 22 Catch up, review for midterm exam.

Tues. Oct. 27 **Midterm examination.**

PART III. From Opinions to a Public

Thurs. Oct. 29 The miracle of aggregation.

- TRP, Ch. 1 – 2
- PLUS: Polling on NJ, VA governor elections and NYC's mayoral election. Check your email for late-breaking readings.

Continuously updated trends may be found here:

NJ: <http://www.pollster.com/polls/nj/09-nj-gov-ge-cvc.php>
VA: <http://www.pollster.com/polls/va/09-va-gov-ge-mvd.php>
NYC: <http://www.pollster.com/polls/ny/09-nyc-mayor-ge-tvib.php>

Tues. Nov. 3 The nation's attitudes: trends over time.
(ELECTION DAY)

- APO, Ch. 4
- TOC, Ch. 2
- Pew Research Center (2007) "Trends in Political Values and Core Attitudes: 1987-2007." Read Summary of Findings, skim full report if interested. (B)

Thurs. Nov. 5 The nation's attitudes: what's changed and why.

- TOC, Ch. 3
- TRP, Ch. 8

Tues. Nov. 10 The nation's attitudes: the role of the media.

- APO, Ch. 8
- Markus Prior (2007) *Post-Broadcast Democracy*. Ch. 4 (R)
- TRP, Ch. 9

Thurs. Nov. 12 Media effects: agenda-setting and priming.

- Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder (1987) *News that Matters: Television and American Opinion*. Chs. 2, 3 and 7. (R)

PART IV. Campaigns, Elections and Exit Polls

Tues. Nov. 17 Campaigns.

- TOC, Ch. 4
- Elisabeth Bumiller (2004). "Turnout Effort and Kerry, Too, Were G.O.P.'s Keys to Victory," *New York Times*, November 3. (B)

Thurs. Nov. 19 More tools: scatterplots, correlation and regression lines.

- Fair, Ray C. (2002) *Predicting Presidential Elections and Other Things*. Ch. 1 (R)
- EPA, pp. 170-180; 184-189.

Tues. Nov. 24 Elections: aggregate results.

- Fair, Ray C. (2002) *Predicting Presidential Elections and Other Things*. Ch. 3 (R)
- Read Ray Fair's prediction for the 2008 presidential and Congressional elections at <http://fairmodel.econ.yale.edu/vote2008/index2.htm>

Thurs. Nov. 26 **Thanksgiving Holiday: No class.**

Tues. Dec. 1 Elections: individual choices and exit polls.

- APO, Ch. 9
- Paul R. Abramson, John H. Aldrich, and David W. Rohde (2007). *Change and Continuity in the 2004 and 2006 Elections*. Ch. 8 (R)
- APO, Section 2.5
- National Election Pool Election Day Questionnaire, 2004. (B)
- 2008 National exit poll results, at <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/polls/#USP00p1>

Part V. Public Opinion and Democratic Responsiveness

Thurs. Dec. 3 Do our elected officials listen to us?
Second short essay due at beginning of class.

- APO, Ch. 10 and Section 11-1.

Tues. Dec. 8 Do we listen to our elected officials?

- George C. Edwards III (2003). *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit*. Preface and Chapters 1-3. (R)

Thurs. Dec. 10 Catching up; review for the final exam.

Tues. Dec. 15 Grand finale: Can the people govern? Do they?

- APO, Sections 11-2 and 11-3.
- TRP, Ch. 10.
- (Reread) WAK, Ch. 7.

Tues. Dec. 22 Final examination, 10 am.