

American Public Opinion

Prof. Zachary Jablow

Email: zjablow@brynmawr.edu

Class Meetings:

Office Hours:

Course Description

We will be studying public opinion and mass political behavior in the American context. This course explores the role of public opinion in the political process, enduring tensions in the idea of public opinion itself, and the power struggles that shape how people think and act and how we interpret different forms of mass political expression. During the semester, we will home in on different arenas, from the nature of party competition and partisanship to war and foreign policy to economic inequality and the welfare state. To that end, throughout the semester students will also develop their own analysis of public opinion research on a political topic of interest or conduct preliminary research.

Class Structure

Class sessions will be a combination of lectures and group discussions. Every group of students is unique, so the exact structure will be flexible depending on what students want to get out of this experience. I expect the class to be driven by students' interests, questions, and their engagement with the readings rather than a rigid delivery of information. *Please note that this syllabus may be subject to change during the semester as I see fit.*

I also encourage everyone to make use of my office hours! This is time I have allocated specifically to talking with students one-on-one about the course, resources for learning more about politics or political science, your education in general and future plans, or whatever else suits you.

Expectations and Class Policies

Discussions: Participation is expected and will be evaluated as part of the final grade. Further, I expect that students will be following contemporary politics in some form (the medium is of course up to you) for the duration of this class and come ready to discuss connections between what you see in the media and what you've read for the class. We will discuss contentious political issues in class; these discussions must be civil and respectful. You are welcome to disagree with a point made by myself or a fellow student, and all are encouraged to thoughtfully critique and debate the arguments presented in class. But you must do so without condescension or personal attacks toward your classmates.

Readings: I expect all students to have done the readings before each class session and come ready to ask questions and discuss the material.

Attendance policy: Attendance in class is expected and will count toward the final grade. Of course, I understood that extenuating circumstances come up. You may miss one class session without needing to notify me in advance. After that, please be in touch so that your grade is not affected.

Late assignments: If you are unable to submit an assignment by the deadline, you should email me before the deadline with an explanation. I will consider granting extensions on a case-by-case basis. Otherwise, there will be a late penalty of one letter grade per calendar day.

Course Materials and Resources

With one exception, readings will be made available as PDFs. We will read the following short book in full during the first week:

E.E. Schattschneider. 1960. *The Semi-Sovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America*

In addition, I strongly encourage all students to take advantage of the resources provided at this institution. I believe that undertaking this course of study will be most fruitful when done in conjunction with attention to contemporary political discourse and news. The libraries offer an excellent collection of both hard-copy and digital editions of newsmagazines and daily newspapers, including the most prestigious establishment press as well as some high-quality alternative publications. I will also provide a more detailed guide to different news media on the course website to help facilitate your exploration.

Assignments and Grading

Attendance and participation (20%)

I will evaluate your overall contribution and effort in class discussions, not the quantity or duration of your participation.

Public opinion project (50%)

The goal of this project is to have students engaged more deeply in a specific political topic of interest. In the first few weeks of the semester, you will choose a topic and propose a project. You may choose from two tracks; in either case, you will be drawing on the course readings as a foundation and then exploring deeper into your topic of interest.

- (1) A critical review essay on how public opinion on your topic has been studied, what we can learn from that literature and what if anything is left out or understudied, needs further research.
- (2) A research project on public opinion, outlining a question you are interested in, a plan for studying it based on the research covered in class, and some preliminary empirical work. The course readings include a variety of methods for studying public opinion, from original surveys to secondary analysis to interviews to ethnography. Feel free to consult with me early on to determine what you are interested in and how to model your own project after examples covered in class.

Students will complete this project in stages throughout the course of the semester:

Proposal (10%) — Writeup outlining the project you'll undertake, the political topic and/or question you're interested in, and how you will go about studying it. I may ask for revisions depending on the feasibility/appropriateness of the initial proposal.

Mid-semester presentation (10%) — We will take one class session to share progress made on the project and any difficulties that have been encountered. This will be an opportunity to solicit feedback from peers and myself on the direction of the project. Along with the informal presentation, you will submit a progress report describing what you have done so far, what you have learned, and your plan for completing the project.

Paper (30%) — Final report/essay covering both the relevant material from class for your topic as well as the further research you've done.

Final paper (30%)

This will be due during the final examination period and will ask you to demonstrate your understanding of the totality of class materials through open-ended prompts. The paper will give you the opportunity to synthesize and critique the material we've discussed during the semester.

Calculation of final grades:

A+ ≥97%	A 93-96%	A- 90-92%
B+ 87-89%	B 83-86%	B- 80-82%
C+ 77-79%	C 73-76%	C- 70-72%
D+ 67-69%	D 63-66%	D- 60-62%
F ≤60%		

Accommodations for Disabilities

“Students needing academic accommodations for a disability must first register with Access Services. Students can email accessservices@brynmawr.edu to make an appointment with the Access Services office to begin this confidential process. Once registered, students should schedule an appointment with me, the instructor, as early in the semester as possible to share the verification form and make appropriate arrangements. Please note that accommodations for disabilities are not retroactive and require advance notice to implement. Any student who has a disability-related need to tape record this class must first speak with the Access Services office and to me, the instructor. More information can be obtained at the Access Services website.”

Honor Code

“Plagiarism consists of work taken partially or entirely from an uncited source (online or AI content, a peer, a published article, etc.) and assumed as your own. If I have reasons to suspect plagiarizing, I

will ask that you report yourself to the Bryn Mawr Honor Board. See the Bryn Mawr Honor Code and Honor Board Hearing Process in the Student Handbook for more information.”

I believe that the use of AI, in this course at least, is detrimental to your educational development, and I advise against using such tools. Any contributions from AI sources would need to be properly quoted and cited every time they are used, just like any other source. Failure to properly quote, cite, and document your use of sources including AI would constitute an academic integrity violation, in accordance with the College’s Honor Code.

Course Schedule:

Date	Topic	Readings
Week 1	Introductions	<p><u>Day 1</u></p> <p>This syllabus</p> <p><u>Day 2</u></p> <p>Moustafa: “Political Science as a Dependent Variable”</p>
Week 2	Foundations of democratic politics	<p><u>Day 1</u></p> <p>Schattschneider: <i>The Semi-Sovereign People</i> (chapters 1-5)</p> <p><u>Day 2</u></p> <p>Bachrach and Baratz: “Two Faces of Power”</p> <p>Schattschneider: <i>The Semi-Sovereign People</i> (chapter 5-end)</p>
Week 3	What is “public opinion” supposed to mean?	<p><u>Day 1</u></p> <p>Herbst: “The History and Meaning of Public Opinion”</p> <p>Blumer: “Public Opinion and Public Opinion Polling”</p> <p><u>Day 2</u></p> <p>Converse: “Changing Conceptions of Public Opinion in the Political Process”</p> <p>Bourdieu: “Public Opinion Does Not Exist”</p>

Week 4	Ideology and hegemony	<p><u>Day 1</u> Zaller: “The Question of Elite Domination of Mass Opinion” from <i>The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion</i></p> <p>Herbst: “Critical Perspectives on Public Opinion”</p> <p><u>Day 2</u> Lukes: <i>Power: A Radical View</i> (excerpts)</p>
Week 5	Social cohesion, collective action, and the opinion poll	<p><u>Day 1</u> Putnam: <i>Bowling Alone</i> (excerpts)</p> <p><u>Day 2</u> Tilly: “Speaking Your Mind without Elections, Surveys, or Social Movements”</p> <p>Ginsberg: “The Domestication of Mass Belief” from <i>The Captive Public</i></p>
Week 6	Is surveyed opinion “ideological”? Is it “rational”?	<p><u>Day 1</u> Converse: “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics”</p> <p>Lane: <i>Political Ideology</i> (excerpts)</p> <p><u>Day 2</u> Page and Shapiro: <i>The Rational Public</i> (excerpts)</p>
Week 7	Parties, partisanship, polarization	<p><u>Day 1</u> Lippmann: “Yes or No” from <i>Public Opinion</i></p> <p>Bawn et al.: “A Theory of Political Parties”</p> <p>Ferguson: <i>Golden Rule: The Investment Theory of Party Competition</i> (excerpts)</p>

		<p><u>Day 2</u> Mason: “I Disrespectfully Agree: The Differential Effects of Partisan Sorting on Social and Issue Polarization”</p> <p>Fiorina: <i>Culture War: The Myth of a Polarized America</i> (excerpts)</p>
Week 8	The American right: Tea Party and MAGA	<p><u>Day 1</u> Skocpol and Williamson: <i>The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism</i></p> <p><u>Day 2</u> Walsh: “Putting Inequality in Its Place: Rural Consciousness and the Power of Perspective”</p> <p>Koenig and Mendelberg: “The Symbolic Politics of Status in the MAGA Movement”</p>
Week 9	The American left	<p><u>Day 1</u> Gregory: “Remapping the American Left”</p> <p><u>Day 2</u> Piven and Cloward: <i>Poor People’s Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail</i> (excerpts)</p>
Week 10	Mass media and propaganda	<p><u>Day 1</u> Bennett: “Engineering Consent: The Persistence of a Problematic Communication Regime”</p> <p>Carey: “The Origins of American Propaganda” and “The First Americanization Movement” from <i>Taking the Risk out of Democracy</i></p> <p><u>Day 2</u></p>

Edelman: “Contestable Categories and Public Opinion”

Iyengar: “A Typology of Media Effects”

Week 11	The relationship between public opinion and public policy	<p><u>Day 1</u> Gilens: “Inequality and Democratic Responsiveness”</p> <p>Gilens and Page: “Testing Theories of American Politics”</p> <p><u>Day 2</u> Mettler and Soss: “The Consequences of Public Policy for Democratic Citizenship”</p> <p>Soss: “Lessons of Welfare: Policy Design, Political Learning, and Political Action”</p>
Week 12	Public opinion on domestic policy and inequality	<p><u>Day 1</u> Hacker and Pierson: “Abandoning the Middle: The Bush Tax Cuts and the Limits of Democratic Control”</p> <p>Weaver: “Too Much Knowledge, Too Little Power”</p> <p><u>Day 2</u> Guardino: <i>Framing Inequality</i> (excerpts)</p>
Week 13	Public opinion on foreign policy, war and peace	<p><u>Day 1</u> Morgan: “America’s Post-Vietnam Stress Disorder”</p> <p>Entman: “Representing the Public’s Opinions in Foreign Policy” from <i>Projections of Power</i></p> <p><u>Day 2</u> Lockerbie and Borelli: “Question Wording and Public</p>

Support for Contra Aid, 1983-1986”

Krebs and Lobasz: “Fixing the Meaning of 9/11”

Week 14

Conspiracy belief and “the paranoid style”

Day 1

Hofstadter: “The Paranoid Style in American Politics”

Douglas et al.: “Understanding Conspiracy Theories”

Day 2

Last day of class! No readings.

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