PUBLIC OPINION AND THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

This course will cover the research literature on American public opinion. We will address the dominant themes in the field, as well as several ideas that should probably receive more attention from scholars. We will read most of the major empirical works on the various topics described in this syllabus; our approach will be rigorous and, in general, highly critical. We will scrutinize the methodological aspects of public opinion research, as well as the degree to which previous analyses have contributed to the development of substantive theories. Over the past fifty years, social scientists have come a long way in discerning the ways that ordinary citizens think about and react to the political world. Similarly, there has been quite a bit of recent research that seeks to explicate the various linkages between public opinion, the actions of political elites, and public policies. Nevertheless, there remains an enormous amount of work to be done. Hopefully, this seminar will point out some promising avenues for future explorations of American public opinion.

Students are expected to be active participants in this seminar. Therefore, people should (minimally) complete the required readings on each topic before the relevant class meeting. If at all possible, it would also be helpful to examine some of the other works listed on the syllabus. Most of the required articles are widely available in professional journals; additional copies can be xeroxed and circulated, if desired.

The course grades will be based on: Class participation (thirty percent); a written assignment (forty percent); and the final examination (thirty percent). The nature of the written assignment will be discussed in more detail, in class. Ideally, it will be an empirical analysis related to some topic covered in the course. Other possibilities include literature reviews and/or a research design. In any event, the written assignment will be due on Monday, December 13, by 5:00 p.m.

TOPICS AND READING ASSIGNMENTS
(Required readings are preceded by an asterisk)

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Overview: The Public Mood and Basic Definitions of Public Opinion


Lippmann, Walter. (1922) Public Opinion

B. Basic Concepts: Attitudes, Schemata, and Information Processing


II. POLITICAL CULTURE

A. Core Values and Adherence to Fundamental Principles


Devine, Donald. (1972) *The Political Culture of the United States.*


B. Delimiters to Political Orientations


C. Social Capital


D. Materialist and Postmaterialist Values in Western Societies


Clarke, Harold D.; Nitish Dutt; Jonathan Rapkin. (1997) “Conversations in Context: The (Mis)Measurement of Value Change in Advanced Industrial Societies.” *Political Behavior* 19: 19-40. Also, the exchange with Abramson, Ellis, and Inglehart that follows this article.


III. THE SOURCES OF ISSUE ATTITUDES WITHIN THE MASS PUBLIC

A. Personal Concerns and Politics


B. Self-Interest and Symbolic Politics in Domestic Issues


C. Values, Ambivalence, and Issue Attitudes


D. Beliefs About the Economy


E. Public Attitudes Toward Welfare


F. Foreign Policy Attitudes: A Special Case?


IV. THE DYNAMICS OF PUBLIC OPINION ON POLITICAL ISSUES

A. Temporal Stability and Change in Issue Attitudes


### B. The Dynamics of Mass Opinion


C. The Dynamics of Political Issues


D. Public Opinion and the (First) Gulf War


* Chapters by Iyengar and Simon, Zaller, and Brody in W. Lance Bennett and David W. Paletz (Editors) *Taken by Storm: The Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy in the Gulf War*.


V. IDEOLOGY, BELIEF SYSTEMS, AND POLITICAL SOPHISTICATION


A. The Classic Works


* Campbell, Angus; Philip E. Converse; Warren E. Miller; Donald E. Stokes. (1960) *The American Voter*. Chapters 9 and 10.

**B. Political Sophistication**


**C. Attitudinal Constraint**


**D. Dimensions of Political Judgment**


   * Journal of Politics 45: 840-865.
   * Political Science: The State of the Discipline.

E. The Levels of Conceptualization

   * Journal of Politics 53: 198-211.
   * Political Behavior 10: 316-332.
   * American Political Science Review 74: 685-696.

F. The Liberal-Conservative Continuum and Public Opinion

   * Public Opinion Quarterly 56: 419-441.


**G. Political Knowledge**


VI. THE MASS MEDIA AND PUBLIC OPINION

A. Do the Media Help People Learn About Politics and Society?


B. Media Effects on Political Orientations


C. Agenda-Setting and Related Phenomena


D. Issue Framing and Related Phenomena


VII. PUBLIC VALUES IN THE MASS PUBLIC

A. Tolerance


B. Citizen Feelings about Government and the Political System


C. Political Alienation, Efficacy, and Trust


VIII. SOCIAL GROUP INFLUENCES AND PATTERNS

A. Social Status and Social Class


B. Neighborhood and Community Influences


C. Primary, Secondary, and Reference Groups


IX. RACE AND AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION


A. Are Americans Racists?

B. Public Opinion Within the African-American Community


* Schuman, Howard; Charlotte Steeh; Lawrence Bobo; Maria Krysan. (1997) *Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations (Revised Edition)*. Chapters 3-5.
X. OTHER GROUP-RELATED PATTERNS IN POLITICAL BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES

A. Ethnicity and Public Opinion


B. Gender and Public Opinion


C. Religion and Political Attitudes


### D. AIDS and Public Opinion


### E. Public Opinion among the Elderly


### XI. PUBLIC OPINION AND PUBLIC POLICY

#### A. Pandering Politicians and Public Opinion


#### B. National-Level Evidence


### C. State Public Opinion and Policy


D. Public Opinion and Foreign Policy


XII. Final Considerations


