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, everyone 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 by Friday, December 18, by 5:00 p.m.

TOPICS AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

(Required readings are preceded by an asterisk)

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Basic Definitions and Historical Views of Public Opinion


B. Public Opinion and the American Political System


C. Basic Concepts: Attitudes, Beliefs, and Information Processing


II. POLITICAL CULTURE


A. Core Values and Adherence to Fundamental Principles


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.


E. Is There a ‘Culture War’?


F. Patriotism, Nationalism, and Related Topics


### III. THE SOURCES OF ISSUE ATTITUDES WITHIN THE MASS PUBLIC

**A. Self-Interest and Symbolic Politics in Citizen Attitudes toward Policy Issues**


B. Personal Concerns and Politics


C. Genetics and Political Orientations


D. Values, Ambivalence, and Issue Attitudes


E. Beliefs About the Economy


F. Public Attitudes Toward Welfare


G. Foreign Policy Attitudes: A Special Case?


IV. IDEOLOGY, BELIEF SYSTEMS, AND POLITICAL SOPHISTICATION

A. Basic Concepts and Issues


B. The Classic Works


C. Political Sophistication


D. Attitudinal Constraint


### E. Dimensions of Political Judgment


### F. The Levels of Conceptualization


**G. The Liberal-Conservative Continuum and Public Opinion**


**H. Psychological Perspectives on Ideology**


I. Political Knowledge


V. 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


VI. PUBLIC VALUES IN THE MASS PUBLIC

A. Tolerance


B. Citizen Feelings about Government and the Political System


C. Political Trust


VII. SOCIAL GROUP INFLUENCES AND PATTERNS

A. Basic Concepts


B. Social Status and Social Class


**C. Neighborhood, Community, and Interpersonal Influences**


**D. Deliberation and Social Interaction Effects**


**VIII. RACE AND AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION**

**A. Basic Concepts**


**B. Are Americans Racists?**


**C. Public Opinion Within Minority Communities**


D. Racial Context and Environmental Effects


IX. 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**


**X. 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**


**XI. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**


