

Introduction to American Politics

Week 7: Public Opinion & the Media

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Attendance



Outline

- Kernell et al. (Ch. 10)
- Asher, Fiorina, Abramowitz (Kernell & Smith)
- Additional readings (if time)
- Wrap-up

Section 1

Discussion

Public opinion (PO)

- V. O. Key Jr. defines PO as *“those opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed”*
- How do we measure it today? How did we used to measure it?
- Why does PO matter for politics?
- What are some of the challenges with measuring PO?
- How has modern PO research changed American politics?

Where does PO come from?

- Attitudes → organized/consistent way of thinking about *something* (combines feelings, beliefs, thoughts, and predispositions to reach certain reactions)
- Ideologies → organized sets of political attitudes
- Partisanship → disposition towards the political parties
- Acquiring opinions → real-world experiences and socialization
- Information → valuable but costly
- Framing → attitudes are generally unstable, and can be affected by context

What does PO *mean* for politics?

- While individual-level opinions are generally unstable and indeterminate, *aggregate* PO is generally stable and consistent
- Individual-level errors (of measurement or response) usually cancel out
- Attitudes with strong partisan cues are more likely to be stable → good or bad?
- Opinion leaders → the minority of the public that is both attentive *and* informed, and can help guide mass opinion

Content of PO

- Views on:
 - Democratic institutions → right to vote, freedoms and liberties, due process, equal treatment under law
 - Government → trust in government, support for political officials
 - Issues and policies
- What influences individuals' opinions? → **their background**

Asher: “Analyzing and Interpreting Polls”

- What are some of the problems with polls?
- How can we fix (or at least get around) these issues?
- What is an “omnibus” survey?
- Why do some polls that appear to be measuring the same thing sometimes have completely different answers?

Fiorina: From *Culture War*?

- What's the main point Fiorina is arguing?
- The country appears to be *closely* divided, but not *deeply* divided → what does this mean?
- (Think about the *issue* polarization discussed by Fiorina, and contrast that with the *affective* polarization we've discussed in previous weeks)

Abramowitz: “The Polarized Electorate”

- What's the main point Abramowitz is arguing? Who's his primary “interlocutor?”
- What evidence does he present to support his claims?
- What does he have to say about state and local political environments?
- When Abramowitz uses the term “consistency,” what is he referring to?
- Raises important points about the “divides” in American politics → what are they?
- (Affective polarization is looming here, too)

Additional Materials

- Lovenheim → political betting markets used to gauge PO
- Gabriel → Trump voter profiles
- Roose → important points about *where* we assess PO in the digital age
- Enten → debunking the “shy Trump voter” hypothesis

Section 2

Outro

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- **No quiz on this week's material (Week 7 on the syllabus)**
- **The Midterm Exam is next Thursday, March 9th!** (Week 8 on the syllabus, and we won't have sections that week)
 - I'll hold my normal office hours today (12:30-1:30pm in Monroe 450), and also offer more times in the lead-up to the Midterm
 - Be on the lookout for information about the Midterm review session(s)

Attendance

