

Does Public Opinion Matter?

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1 Overview

Does public opinion matter? At its core, democracy is often defined as government by the people. Through centuries of philosophical writing, the democratic idea has been defended as the best form of government relative to all alternatives due, in part, to its equal incorporation of individuals' views. The aggregation of the public's preferences through polling, elections, and other forms of political participation is seen as normatively superior to oligarchy, anarchy, or absolutist forms of government. Yet, most citizens are not directly part of the public policy process and considerable skepticism exists regarding the capacity of citizens to form and act on their political opinions. How, then, do citizens' views get represented? Should they be represented? Are democratic institutions able to reflect public views effectively and translate those views into policy? And are the public's preferences — individually or in aggregate — sufficiently informed, meaningful, coherent, stable, and/or responsive to external events to merit being the basis for the democratic form of government? The course is structured as a dialog between normative perspectives and empirical research on public opinion formation, representation, and political influence, as well as a debate between views about the importance, value, and relevance of public opinion and skeptical positions about the incoherence or irrelevance of public opinion in contemporary democratic politics.

Public opinions determine which parties, candidates, and referenda win, but government activity itself is rarely shaped by the public's views. Public opinions are deeply constrained by stable individual-differences, such as biology, ideology, and values, but at the same time show instability over-time and reflect often incoherent belief systems. The majority public's views on different issues are often responsive to changing political events, but this direction of causality runs opposite of the opinion-policy linkage demanded by most theories of representation. While opinions motivate citizens' engagement with politics, they also bias the form of that engagement and many people remain disinterested in fulfilling the demands of citizenship. Government policies that run contrary to public views violate democratic ideals of government by the people, but citizens often hold views that are ignorant, racist, xenophobic, or otherwise harmful. If public opinion is the centerpiece of democratic government, why is it such a problematic concept in contemporary politics?

The purpose of this course is to explore issues related to public opinion — what opinions are and how they are formed, how opinions shape citizens' political behavior, and how legislatures and other governmental institutions respond (or do not respond) to

citizens' preferences. Students will leave the course with a thorough theoretical understanding of political opinions, their origins, and their possible effects through exposure to philosophical perspectives, contemporary case studies, and a broad set of empirical research. The course will challenge assumptions about what democracy is and how it works, but will also provide students with insight into how government — in legislative, judicial, and bureaucratic capacities — should work and what role public servants have in influencing and responding to the public's views.

2 Expectations and Assignments

The expectations for this course are that students (1) participate actively, regularly, and positively in classroom discussions (which will constitute the bulk of the course's content), (2) lead discussion on at least one day of class, and (3) complete a written exam answering questions raised by the course using relevant theoretical and empirical literature. Toward the first expectation, students should read the assigned reading ahead of the day on which they are assigned and have at least two questions in mind that were provoked by those readings that might be answered in class or serve as a topic for discussion. Toward the second end, students will sign up for one or more weeks to lead discussion (on the first day of class), which will also involve writing a short (one-page) response essay to structure that discussion. On their assigned week, students can structure class discussion however they so choose, but should use submitted discussion questions where useful. Toward the final end, students will be assessed by their responses to a seven-day, written take-home examination.