

# 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 Practical Matters

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.

## 3 Objectives and Evaluation

After this course, students should be able to:

1. Explain what opinions are, how they are formed, and how they behave.
2. Apply knowledge of opinions and opinion measurement to the evaluation of survey public opinion research.
3. Explain different conceptualizations of political representation and their empirical implications.
4. Apply theories of representation to the evaluation of public processes and institutions.
5. Evaluate arguments about the proper role of public opinion in democracy and government.

## 4 Course Outline

The general schedule for the course is as follows. Details on the readings for each week are provided on the following pages.

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- 4.1 Introduction and Course Overview (4 Sep)
  - 4.2 Theory – What is public opinion? (11 Sep)
  - 4.3 Psychology I – How do people form opinions? (18 Sep)
  - 4.4 Psychology II – Are opinions constrained? (25 Sep)
  - 4.5 Methods – How to measure opinion? (2 Oct)
  - 4.6 Influences I – What shapes public opinion(s)? (9 Oct)
  - 4.7 *No class meeting* (16 Oct)
  - 4.8 Influences II – Are opinions responsive? (23 Oct)
  - 4.9 Participation I – Do people act on their opinions? (30 Oct)
  - 4.10 Participation II – Do campaigns help citizens? (6 Nov)
  - 4.11 Aggregation – From Micro to Macro? (13 Nov)
  - 4.12 Representation I – Public opinion matters? (20 Nov)
  - 4.13 Representation II – Groups matter? (27 Nov)
  - 4.14 Opinion and Representation – Theory and practice? (4 Dec)
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## 4.1 Introduction and Course Overview (4 Sep)

No assigned reading

## 4.2 Theory – What is public opinion? (11 Sep)

- Chapters 7–9 from Robert A. Dahl. *Democracy and Its Critics*. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1989.
- Chapters 2–3 from Susan Herbst. *Numbered Voices: How Opinion Polling Has Shaped American Politics*. University Of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Chapters 1–3 from Anthony Downs. *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. Harper & Row, New York, 1957.
- Jane Mansbridge. Rethinking Representation. *American Political Science Review*, 97(04):515–528, December 2003.

## 4.3 Psychology I – How do people form opinions? (18 Sep)

- James N. Druckman and Arthur Lupia. Preference Formation. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 3:1–24, 2000.
- Alice H. Eagly and Shelly Chaiken. Attitude Structure and Function. In D.T. Gilbert, Susan T. Fiske, and G. Lindzey, editors, *Handbook of Social Psychology*, chapter 7, pages 269–322. McGraw-Hill, New York, 1998.
- Chapter 3 from John Zaller. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Cambridge University Press, New York, 1992.
- Richard R. Lau and David P. Redlawsk. Advantages and Disadvantages of Cognitive Heuristics in Political Decision Making. *American Journal of Political Science*, 45(4):951–971, 2001.

## 4.4 Psychology II – Are opinions constrained? (25 Sep)

- John T. Jost, Christopher M. Federico, and Jaime L Napier. Political Ideology: Its Structure, Functions, and Elective Affinities. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 60:307–37, January 2009.
- Stanley Feldman. Structure and Consistency in Public Opinion: The Role of Core Beliefs and Values. *American Journal of Political Science*, 32(2):416, May 1988.
- Kevin Smith, John R. Alford, Peter K. Hatemi, Lindon J. Eaves, Carolyn L. Funk, and John R. Hibbing. Biology, Ideology, and Epistemology: How Do We Know Political Attitudes Are Inherited and Why Should We Care? *American Journal of Political Science*, 56(1):17–33, November 2012.

## 4.5 Methods – How to measure opinion? (2 Oct)

- Roger Tourangeau and Kenneth A. Rasinski. Cognitive Processes Underlying Context Effects in Attitude Measurement. *Psychological Bulletin*, 103(3):299–314, 1988.

- George F. Bishop, Alfred Tuchfarber, and R.W. Oldendick. Opinions on Fictitious Issues: The Pressure to Answer Survey Questions. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 50(2):240, 1986.
- Jonathan P. Schuldt, Sara H. Konrath, and Norbert Schwarz. ‘Global Warming’ or ‘Climate Change’?: Whether the Planet is Warming Depends on Question Wording. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 75(1):115–124, February 2011.

*Optional reading:*

- David Scott Yeager, Samuel B. Larson, Jon A. Krosnick, and Trevor Thompson. Measuring Americans’ Issue Priorities: A New Version of the Most Important Problem Question Reveals More Concern About Global Warming and the Environment. 2010.
- Jon A. Krosnick, Allyson L. Holbrook, Matthew K. Berent, Richard T. Carson, W. Michael Hanemann, Raymond J. Kopp, Robert Cameron Mitchell, Stanley Presser, Paul A. Ruud, V. Kerry Smith, Wendy R. Moody, Melanie C. Green, and Michael Conaway. The Impact of ‘No Opinion’ Response Options on Data Quality. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 66:371–403, 2002.

## **4.6 Influences I – What shapes public opinion(s)? (9 Oct)**

- Michael Bang Petersen, Rune Slothuus, Rune Stubager, and Lise Togeby. Deservingness versus Values in Public Opinion on Welfare: The Automaticity of the Deservingness Heuristic. *European Journal of Political Research*, 50(1):24–52, January 2011.
- Alan S. Gerber, James G. Gimpel, Donald P. Green, and Daron R. Shaw. How Large and Long-Lasting Are the Persuasive Effects of Televised Campaign Ads? Results from a Large Scale Randomized Experiment. *American Political Science Review*, 105(1):135–150, March 2011.
- Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman. Framing Public Opinion in Competitive Democracies. *American Political Science Review*, 101(4):637–655, November 2007.

## **4.7 No class meeting (16 Oct)**

## **4.8 Influences II – Are opinions responsive? (23 Oct)**

- Charles S. Taber and Milton Lodge. Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs. *American Journal of Political Science*, 50(3):755–769, July 2006.
- Benjamin I. Page, Robert Y. Shapiro, and Glenn R. Dempsey. What Moves Public Opinion? *American Political Science Review*, 81(1):23, March 1987.
- Andrew J. Healy. Random Events, Economic Losses, and Retrospective Voting: Implications for Democratic Competence. *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, 5(2):193–208, August 2010.

## 4.9 Participation I – Do people act on their opinions? (30 Oct)

- Selections from Alice H. Eagly and Shelly Chaiken. Attitude Structure and Function. In D.T. Gilbert, Susan T. Fiske, and G. Lindzey, editors, *Handbook of Social Psychology*, chapter 7, pages 269–322. McGraw-Hill, New York, 1998.
- Russell H. Fazio and Tamara Towles-Schwen. The MODE Model of Attitude-Behavior Processes. In Shelly Chaiken and Yaacov Trope, editors, *Dual Process Theories in Social Psychology*, chapter 5, pages 97–116. Guilford Press, New York, 1999.
- William H. Riker and Peter C. Ordeshook. A Theory of the Calculus of Voting. *American Political Science Review*, 62(1):25–42, 1968.
- Chapters 1–2 from Mancur Olson. *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2nd edition, 1965.

## 4.10 Participation II – Do campaigns help citizens? (6 Nov)

- Richard R. Lau and David P. Redlawsk. Voting Correctly. *American Political Science Review*, 91(3):585–598, 1997.
- Paul M. Sniderman. Taking Sides: A Fixed Choice Theory of Political Reasoning. In Arthur Lupia, Mathew D. McCubbins, and Samuel L. Popkin, editors, *Elements of Reason: Cognition, Choice, and the Bounds of Rationality*. Cambridge University Press, New York, 2000.
- Sara Binzer Hobolt. Taking Cues on Europe? Voter Competence and Party Endorsements in Referendums on European Integration. *European Journal of Political Research*, 46(2):151–182, March 2007.

### *Optional reading:*

- Lisa Disch. Toward a Mobilization Conception of Democratic Representation. *American Political Science Review*, 105(01):100–114, February 2011.

## 4.11 Aggregation – From Micro to Macro? (13 Nov)

- James N. Druckman and Thomas J. Leeper. Is Public Opinion Stable? Resolving the Micro/Macro Disconnect in Studies of Public Opinion. *Daedalus*, 141(4):50–68, October 2012.
- Chapter 10 from Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro. *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1992.
- Michael B. Mackuen, Robert S. Erikson, and James A. Stimson. Macropartisanship. *American Political Science Review*, 83(4):1125–1142, 1989.
- Martin Gilens. Political Ignorance and Collective Policy Preferences. *American Political Science Review*, 95(2):379–396, April 2001.

#### 4.12 Representation I – Public opinion matters? (20 Nov)

- Lawrence R. Jacobs and Benjamin I. Page. Who Influences U.S. Foreign Policy? *American Political Science Review*, 99(01):107–123, April 2005.
- James A. Stimson, Michael B. Mackuen, and Robert S. Erikson. Dynamic Representation. *American Political Science Review*, 89(3):543–565, January 1995.
- Chapters 1 and 5 from William H. Riker. *Liberalism Against Populism: A Confrontation Between the Theory of Democracy and the Theory of Social Choice*. Waveland Press, 1988.

#### 4.13 Representation II – Groups matter? (27 Nov)

- Chapter 2 from David E. Truman. *The Governmental Process*, volume 535. Knopf New York, Berkeley, CA, second edition, 1971.
- Revisit Chapters 1–2 from Mancur Olson. *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2nd edition, 1965.
- Kay Lehman Schlozman. What Accent the Heavenly Chorus? Political Equality and the American Pressure System. *The Journal of Politics*, 46(4):1006–1032, 1984.
- Helene Helboe Pedersen. Is Measuring Interest Group Influence a Mission Impossible? The Case of Interest Group Influence in the Danish Parliament. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, 2(1):27–47, March 2013.

#### 4.14 Opinion and Representation – Theory and practice? (4 Dec)

- Chapter 10 from William H. Riker. *Liberalism Against Populism: A Confrontation Between the Theory of Democracy and the Theory of Social Choice*. Waveland Press, 1988.
- Chapters 7-8 from John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse. *Stealth Democracy: American's Beliefs about How Government Should Work*. Cambridge University Press, New York, 2002.
- Chapter 2 (provided digitally) from Paul M. Sniderman, Michael Bang Petersen, Rune Slothuus, and Rune Stubager. *Paradoxes of Liberal Democracy: Islam, Western Europe, and the Danish Cartoon Crisis*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2014.

*Optional additional reading:*

- Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz. Two Faces of Power. *American Political Science Review*, 56(4):947–952, 1962.
- John L. Sullivan, James E. Piereson, and George E. Marcus. An Alternative Conceptualization of Political Tolerance: Illusory Increases 1950s-1970s. *American Political Science Review*, 73(3):781, September 1979.
- Leonie Huddy, Stanley Feldman, Charles S. Taber, and Gallya Lahav. Threat, Anxiety, and Support of Antiterrorism Policies. *American Journal of Political Science*, 49(3):593–608, 2005.
- James S. Fishkin. Beyond Polling Alone: The Quest for An Informed Public. *Critical Review*, 18(1):157–165, 2006.

- Chapter 8 from E.E. Schattschneider. *The Semi-Sovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America*. Dryden Press, Hinsdale, IL, 1975.
- Nadia Urbinati and Mark E. Warren. The Concept of Representation in Contemporary Democratic Theory. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 11(1):387–412, June 2008.