Overview

This course will examine research on the character of public opinion in contemporary America. The questions to be addressed include: What is public opinion? How well do surveys measure it? Where do attitudes and opinions come from? What shapes opinion? Does the nature of public opinion meet the requirements of democratic theory?

We will consider the answers that have been proposed to the questions and examine how the questions have been studied. Our assumption is that what we know about public opinion is linked to how we know it.

Classes will be structured by formal student presentations. Each student will prepare a ONE-PAGE memo based on one of the readings for the week. Memos will have three parts: a very brief summary of one key claim in the reading; a short overview of the evidence supporting the claim; and a critical evaluation of the evidence and/or of the connection of the evidence to the claim. Make sure the third part addresses the question “So what?” The memos are to be e-mailed to each of the instructors by Wednesday at 5:00 PM.

Students will also prepare a secondary analysis to replicate a published public opinion study in order to examine how, if at all, key analysis decisions influenced the results. Although the course will focus on American public opinion, this analysis may use non-American data. (A good working knowledge of data analysis and statistical software is important.)

Students will present ideas for their secondary analyses in class on October 20, and formally defend their proposals on November 10. Results are to be presented during the December 1 and December 8 classes, with final papers due by December 15.

The memos, contribution to class discussion, and the secondary analysis each counts for one-third of the final grade. The grade of A is only awarded for excellent work; B is assigned to good work, and C to satisfactory work.
Fall 2005 Schedule and Reading List

Introduction   (9/1)


A Case Study: Support for War   (9/8)


Non Attitudes   (9/15)


Response to Converse I   (9/22)


R. Erikson, "The SRC Panel Data and Mass Political Attitudes," British Journal of Political Science v. 9: 89-114


Response to Converse II   (9/29)

Response to Converse III (10/6)


Racial Attitudes and Stereotypes (10/13)


Class Presentations (10/20)

The Role of Information (10/27)


The Link between Attitudes and Behaviors (11/3)


Class Presentations (11/10)
Measuring Attitudes in Surveys (11/17)


Class Presentations (12/1)

Class Presentations (12/8)