

## PLSC 3220: Public Opinion and Political Psychology, Spring 2005

Monday and Wednesday 1:00–2:15 p.m. in Sullivan-Harrell Room 268

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Office: Sullivan-Harrell Room 169.

Hours: MW 11:00 a.m.–12:30 p.m. or by appointment.

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Course Web Page: <http://home.millsaps.edu/~lawrecn/s05/plsc3220/>

At the heart of a representative democracy lies the transmission of the will of the citizenry to the government. In order to have a full understanding of the shape of government and the choices made by the citizens, we must first comprehend what the “public will” is and how it is formed. The truth about public opinion is that it is often fractious and malleable. What does this mean for our democracy? How do people form opinions? How do citizens process information to create our political evaluations? How is public opinion measured? What is the role of the media with respect to our opinions? These are just a few of the questions we will address in our quest to better understand public opinion in the United States and other democratic societies.

**Texts:** Readings will be taken from the following books:

- Alvarez, R. Michael and John Brehm. 2002. *Hard Choices, Easy Answers*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. ISBN 0-691-09635-X.
- Erikson, Robert S. and Kent L. Tedin. 2005. *American Public Opinion*, Seventh Edition. New York: Longman. ISBN 0-321-10753-5.
- Fiorina, Morris P. 2005. *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*. New York: Longman. ISBN 0-321-27640-X.
- Glynn, Carroll J., Susan Herbst, Garrett J. O’Keefe, and Robert Y. Shapiro. 1997. *Public Opinion*. Boulder, Co.: Westview. ISBN 0-8133-2917-5.

Additional readings, as noted on the syllabus, will be made available either on reserve at the library, online, or as handouts.

**Assignments and Grading:** Your grade in this course will be based on the following elements:

Exams (3)	50%
Critical Analysis Paper	20%
Research Paper	20%
Participation	10%

**Examinations:** There will be three in-class examinations, on the dates indicated on the syllabus; these examinations will consist of short answer and essay questions. Your best examination grade will count 20% toward your final grade, and your other two exam grades will each count 15% toward your final grade.<sup>1</sup>

**Critical Analysis Paper:** After we cover the section titled “Is the American Public Stupid? Understanding Uncertainty and Inconsistency in Public Opinion” in class, you will be randomly assigned one chapter from chapters 5–9 in the Alvarez and Brehm book. You will write a critical analysis of that chapter including a description of the research contained therein and how the assertions of that chapter fit into the theoretical framework presented in chapters 1–4 of the Alvarez and Brehm book.

**Research Paper:** In consultation with the professor, you will select an important issue in contemporary American or comparative politics and examine public opinion regarding that issue, based on data from a recent survey of the appropriate population (such as the National Election Studies series, the General Social Survey, the Eurobarometer,

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<sup>1</sup>Seniors exempt from the final exam will have their better exam grade count 30% toward their final grade and their lower exam count 20% toward their final grade.

or the World Values Survey). Your paper should also discuss previous findings of other researchers studying the issue.

Both papers must be approximately eight pages in length. The papers must be typed (or word-processed), double-spaced, have one-inch margins, and utilize a *proportional* font (*not* Courier or a “typewriter” font) approximately the size of the one used for this syllabus. Papers should include a title page and a list of works cited, and use an appropriate method (such as APA, APSSA, or MLA style) of citing and quoting any references. Cited materials should generally be textbooks, scholarly journals, and conference and working papers, although citations of newspapers and periodicals may be appropriate as well. Papers will be due on the dates indicated on the syllabus; substantial grade reductions will be applied to late papers.

**Honor Code:** Millsaps College is an academic community dedicated to the pursuit of scholarly inquiry and intellectual growth. The foundation of this community is a spirit of personal honesty and mutual trust. Through their Honor Code, the students of Millsaps College affirm their adherence to these basic ethical principles.

An Honor Code is not simply a set of rules and procedures governing students’ academic conduct. It is an opportunity to put personal responsibility and integrity into action. When students agree to abide by an Honor Code, they liberate themselves to pursue their academic goals in an atmosphere of mutual confidence and respect.

The success of the Code depends on the support of each member of the community. Students and faculty alike commit themselves in their work to the principles of academic honesty. When they become aware of infractions, both students and faculty are obligated to report them to the Honor Council, which is responsible for enforcement.

The pledge signed by all students upon entering the College is as follows:

As a Millsaps College student, I hereby affirm that I understand the Honor Code and am aware of its implications and of my responsibility to the Code. In the interests of expanding the atmosphere of respect and trust in the College, I promise to uphold the Honor Code and I will not tolerate dishonest behavior in myself or in others.

Each examination, quiz, or other assignment that is to be graded will carry the written pledge: “I hereby certify that I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment. (Signature)” The abbreviation “Pledged” followed by the student’s signature has the same meaning and may be acceptable on assignments other than final examinations.

It is the responsibility of students and faculty to report offenses to the Honor Code Council in the form of a written report. This account must be signed, the accusation explained in as much detail as possible, and submitted to the Dean of the College. Further details on the Honor Code, including the current members of the Honor Council, are online at [http://millsaps.edu/academics/honor\\_code.shtml](http://millsaps.edu/academics/honor_code.shtml).

**Policies:** Attendance at class is required, and is a component of your “participation” grade. Please discuss any planned absences with me at least two weeks in advance. Regular attendance is essential for understanding the material; if you don’t come to class, you will probably be hurting your grade. Per college policy, excessive absences will be reported to the director of Academic Support Services.

Students with disabilities are encouraged to contact me to discuss their individual needs for accommodations.

The professor reserves the right to add assignments, such as quizzes, at his own discretion, and this syllabus is subject to revision by the professor.

**Course Roadmap:** An approximate outline of the content of the course is as follows. Revisions to this roadmap may be made, and additional readings may be assigned, throughout the semester as circumstances warrant.

January 10: Introduction to the course.

January 12: Introduction to Public Opinion: Erikson and Tedin, ch. 1; Glynn et al., ch. 1–2; Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, ch. 2.

January 17: **Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday (No Class).**

January 19: Introduction to Public Opinion (continued; same readings as above).

January 24, 26: Measuring Public Opinion: Erikson and Tedin, ch. 2; Glynn et al., ch. 3; Zaller, ch. 5.

January 31, February 2: Is the American Public Stupid? Understanding Uncertainty and Inconsistency in Public Opinion: Alvarez and Brehm, ch. 1–4; Lawrence, “The Concept of Political Sophistication” (ch. 2 of *The Impact of Political Sophistication on the Decision-Making Processes of Voters*, doctoral diss.); Glynn et al., ch. 8.

February 9, 14: Psychological Perspectives on Opinion Formation: Erikson and Tedin, ch. 3; Glynn et al., ch. 4.

February 16: Sociological Perspectives on Opinion Formation: Glynn et al., ch. 5; **Exam 1 Assigned.**

February 21: Perception and Opinion Formation: Glynn et al., ch. 6.

February 23: Basic Beliefs and Public Opinion: Erikson and Tedin, ch. 6; Glynn et al., ch. 7.

February 28: Socialization Effects on Opinion Formation: Erikson and Tedin, ch. 5; Sears and Levy, “Childhood and adult political development,” from *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*.

March 2, 7: Contemporary Perspectives on Opinion Formation: Lau, “Models of Decision Making,” from *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*; Rahn, Aldrich, Borgida, and Sullivan, “A Social-Cognitive Model of Candidate Appraisal,” from *Information and Democratic Processes*; Rahn, Aldrich, and Borgida, “Individual and Contextual Variations in Political Candidate Appraisal” (from March 1994 *APSR*); Huffmon, “Revisiting the Role of Information Format in Candidate Evaluation: An ‘Update Model of Evaluation’” (from *The Journal of Political Science*); Masters and Sullivan, “Nonverbal behavior and leadership: Emotion and cognition in political information processing,” ch. 6 of *Explorations in Political Psychology*; Gilens, “Political ignorance and collective policy preferences” (from June 2001 *APSR*).

March 4: **Critical analysis paper due.**

March 9, 14: Trends in Public Opinion: Erikson and Tedin, ch. 4; Page and Shapiro, “Opinions about social issues,” ch. 3 of *The Rational Public*; Fiorina, ch. 1–5; Glynn et al., ch. 10.

March 16: **Exam 2.**

March 28, 30: The Media and Public Opinion: Erikson and Tedin, ch. 8; Zaller, “The myth of massive media impact revived: New support for a discredited idea,” (ch. 2 of *Political Persuasion and Attitude Change*); Miller and Krosnick, “News media impact on the ingredients of presidential evaluations: A program of research on the priming hypothesis,” (ch. 3 of *Political Persuasion and Attitude Change*); Glynn et al., ch. 11.

April 4, 6: The Electoral Connection: Erikson and Tedin, ch. 9; Fiorina, ch. 6–8; Glynn et al., ch. 12.

April 11, 13: The Opinion Connection: The Public and its Leaders: Erikson and Tedin, ch. 10; Kuklinski and Hurley, “It’s a matter of interpretation,” (ch. 5 from *Political Persuasion and Attitude Change*); Glynn et al., ch. 9.

April 15: **Research paper due.**

April 18, 20: Public Opinion in Comparative Perspective: Dalton, *Citizen Politics*, ch. 5, 6, and 10.

April 25: **Exam 3 (9 a.m.).**