

POLS 4510: Public Opinion and American Democracy

Fall 2025

Tuesday and Thursday, 12:45 PM – 2:00 PM
Baldwin Hall, Room 307

Instructor: Karlee L. Kimbrell

Office: 109B

Office Hours: 11:30 AM -12:30 PM T/TH, and by appointment

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Course Description

This course provides a comprehensive introduction to the study of public opinion in American democracy. Students will examine fundamental questions about the nature, measurement, and political influence of public opinion. The course explores how public attitudes are formed and measured, who participates in shaping collective opinion, and the complex relationship between elite leadership and mass preferences. We will investigate the competence of the American electorate, the evolution of public opinion over time, and its impact on democratic governance. Through empirical analysis and theoretical frameworks, students will develop critical and analytical skills in evaluating polling data, understanding opinion formation processes, and assessing the health of democratic representation in contemporary America.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. **Define** public opinion and **critically evaluate** methods for measuring it, including the strengths and limitations of polling techniques
2. **Analyze** the relationship between elites and mass opinion, assessing whether leaders shape or follow public preferences
3. **Examine** patterns and changes in American public opinion over time, identifying who participates in opinion formation and whose voices are heard
4. **Evaluate** the role of public opinion in democratic governance, including debates about electoral competence and its implications for democratic quality

Course Materials

All course material will be provided on eLC. However, to be successful in this class, you should have access to internet, your GSuite (UGA login), and OneDrive (UGA login).

Office Hours and Help

I will hold office hours every Tuesday and Thursday, immediately before and by appointment. I will be available to meet in my office or via zoom. It is important to me that this course is comprehensible for all, and I will strive to make sure that you do not feel lost or overwhelmed. Office hours can be used to talk about lectures, assignments, grades, etc. If you feel like a question could be resolved via email, please allow me 24 hours to respond and until the next business day if over the weekend, though I will often be able to respond before then. If I happen to not respond within 24 hours, please email me again. All grade disputes should be emailed to me after 24 hours of the grade posting and before 1 week passes (after the initial 24 hour wait).

Grading

In this course, you will be graded on:

- ⇒ Midterm and Final Exam (25% of final grade, 10% and 15% respectively)
- ⇒ Public Opinion Archeology Group Project (“Dig Report”) (25% final grade)
- ⇒ Written Assignments (x2) (20% of final grade, 10 % each)

- ⇒ Participation (20% of final grade)
- ⇒ Attendance (10% of final grade)

Midterm and Final Exam

Both the midterm and final exams will be administered in person during scheduled class periods. Exams consist of multiple-choice questions and short answer responses designed to assess your understanding of key concepts, theories, and empirical findings in public opinion research. Students may prepare one index card (3in by 5 in) for assistance during the exam. The index card must be handwritten and will be reviewed by me before the exam. Students must provide their own scantrons and blue books for these examinations. The midterm covers material from the first half of the semester, while the final exam is cumulative with most questions focusing on content covered after the midterm. Study guides will be provided at least one week prior to each exam.

Dig Report

Working in groups of 4-5, students will select a political issue and trace how public opinion on it has evolved over time using historical polling data, newspaper archives, social media trends, etc. Groups will create a multimedia timeline showing key events that shifted opinion and present an analytical "dig report" examining the patterns, causes, and demographic dimensions of opinion change on their chosen issue. In addition to the report, the project culminates in a 15–20-minute class presentation where groups share their findings and lead discussion about the broader implications for understanding opinion formation and democratic representation. For further details, please refer to rubric and instructions on eLC.

Written Assignments

Over the course of the semester, student will have to submit two (2) 4-page writing assignments of their choice. Below are the types of papers you may select from. Types of paper selections should be different for each writing assignment. For further details, please refer to rubric and instruction on eLC.

- **Polling Critique:** Students analyze real polls from news coverage, identifying methodological strengths/weaknesses and evaluating media interpretation. Could focus on different types: election polling, issue polling, approval ratings.
- **Elite vs. Mass Opinion Case Study:** Students analyze a specific instance where elite and public opinion diverged (or converged), using course frameworks to explain the dynamics and outcomes.
- **Reading Response Papers:** Students connect course readings to current events and personal observations about public opinion in action.

Participation

Active participation is essential for your learning and contributes to the quality of our classroom discussions about complex political topics. Participation in this course takes multiple forms throughout the semester, including contributing to class discussions, engaging thoughtfully with polling data and current events, participating in small group activities, and completing in-class exercises such as survey design workshops and opinion analysis tasks. These varied opportunities ensure that students with different communication styles can demonstrate their engagement with the material. If you miss a class session, you can earn back a portion of your participation points by completing discussion questions posted at the end of that day's lecture slides, which will be available on our learning management system (this is not allowed for large participation days which are bolded on the course outline—most of these involve no preparation outside of class). These make-up questions are designed to help you engage with the missed content while maintaining accountability for class attendance. To receive partial credit for participation, please submit your responses before the next class. If repeated signs of lack of engagement with course material arises, I reserve the right to supplement quizzes for participation supplementation.

Attendance

A key part of your success is just showing up (it makes the getting-things-done part easier). Showing up for this class means that you have done your part to prepare for class and you're actively preparing for class, drawing connections between the material, and ready to participate in conversation. This said, sometimes life happens, and you can't show up. Absences will be excused in cases of documented illness, official university related representation or events (with documentation from university/program official), death of a close loved one, religious holidays, and other circumstances beyond your control. I'm here to talk about situations that may arise. You are asked given two (2) unexcused absences and I will not ask any questions (I may if its two in a row). After the 2 unexcused absences, six (6) points will be deducted

from your attendance grade. Starting at five (5) absences, 10 points will be deducted from your attendance grade. Most lecture slides will be posted on eLC for your reference. It is your responsibility to get notes from your peers from in class discussions and activities or come to office hours.

Late Work, Make-up Work, and Make-up Exams

Late work policy is in accordance with the University's policy on excused absences. Please inform me as soon as possible and I will work on deadlines with you. For assignments, I understand issues arise that may interfere with your work. If this occurs, please contact me at least 48 hours in advance (or what is reasonably possible), and I will try to work with you to turn in your late assignment. For late assignments without prior extension agreement, expect to have 10% of the submission grade deducted per day that it is late starting immediately after the deadline. Make-up work and exams/quizzes will only be given with proper documentation. There is no suitable substitution for large participation days and therefore will not have make-up opportunities.

GRADE	PERCENT
A	94-100
A-	90-93
B+	87-89
B	84-86
B-	80-83
C+	77-79
C	74-76
C-	70-73
D+	67-69
D	64-66
D-	60-63
F	<60

Extra Credit

As of now, there is no extra credit built into the course. However, I reserve the right to offer extra credit throughout the semester. All potential extra credit will be presented in class and via email. I will not offer individual extra credit.

Academic Honesty & Artificial Intelligence

The University of Georgia has an academic honesty policy. Academic integrity is required for a positive learning environment. All students enrolled in university courses are expected to complete coursework responsibilities with fairness and honesty. Failure to do so by seeking unfair advantage over others or misrepresenting someone else's work as your own, can result in disciplinary action. Students caught cheating or plagiarizing will receive a failing grade in the course. Additionally, I will forward your name to the University. You can read the policies in their entirety here: <https://honesty.uga.edu/Academic-Honesty-Policy/>

I feel that it's important to teach and model ethical usage of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) tool. These tools can help you brainstorm ideas, polish your writing, and much more. However, as professionals in training, it's important to critically evaluate when and how you use these tools responsibly. There are several GAI tools on the market that have conflated successful learning and efficiency. Learning takes work! It can be slow and frustrating. While you can use GAI for brainstorming, ideation, etc., don't let GAI replace your thinking and critical reflection. **However, GAI is NOT permitted in any part of this course without direct approval and permission from me. Any violation of this policy will result in a zero (0) for the assignment, any additional violations will result in being referred to the university for academic integrity issues.** Furthermore, I believe it is important to talk about the environmental impact that GAI tools have. GAI requires massive energy consumption, and this leads to an increase in carbon emission and water usage. Additionally, to continue to produce GAI hardware and machinery, there is an increase in mining of limited earth minerals—which can cause pollution and habitat destruction. If you are unsure if your use of GAI is appropriate for this course, I am happy to chat with you about academically ethical methods.

Accessibility, Accommodations, & Preferences

The purpose of disability accommodation is to provide equal access to the academic material and equal access to demonstrate mastery of the material. Disability accommodations work best starting at the beginning of the semester but can be approved and started at any point in the semester. Accommodations start at the time the accommodation letter is presented to faculty within reasonable timelines; accommodations are not given retroactively. If you plan to request accommodations for a disability, please register with the Accessibility and Testing Center. If you need accommodations but are unable to register formally with the ATC, please reach out to me and we will discuss reasonable accommodations that you may need.

Professional courtesy and sensitivity are especially important with respect to a collaborative and supportive learning environment. Class rosters are provided to the instructor with the student's legal name. I am eager to address you by your preferred name and/or gender pronouns. Please let me know your preferences at the beginning of the course or via email before the first day of class so that I may adjust my roster.

Class Recordings and Materials

I require that you seek my permission if you want to make audio and/or video recordings of any portion of our class (including of my lectures and discussion sections). If you do not have this permission (or an accommodation from ACT), do not take photographs, audio recordings, or video recordings of any person in this class without their express permission. Further, do not take or share audio or video recordings of course lectures or discussions. Violation of this policy will may result in you receiving 0% for class participation, and, depending on the severity of the violation, may result in you receiving a grade of “F” in the class. Lectures, course material (presentations, exams, activities, notes, etc.) are my production. You are not to reproduce or distribute this content without written and explicit permission from me.

Well-Being Resources

UGA Well-being Resources promote student success by cultivating a culture that supports more active, healthy, and engaged student community. Anyone needing assistance is encouraged to contact Student Care & Outreach (SCO) in the Division of Student Affairs at 706-542-8479 or visit sco.uga.edu. Student Care & Outreach helps students navigate difficult circumstances by connecting them with the most appropriate resources or services. They also administer the [Embark@UGA](https://embark.uga.edu) program which supports students experiencing, or who have experienced, homelessness, foster care, or housing insecurity. UGA provides both clinical and non-clinical options to support student well-being and mental health, any time, any place. Whether on campus, or studying from home or abroad, UGA Well-being Resources are here to help. Additional information, including free digital well-being resources, can be accessed through the UGA app or by visiting <https://well-being.uga.edu>.

- Well-being Resources: well-being.uga.edu
- Student Care and Outreach: sco.uga.edu
- University Health Center: healthcenter.uga.edu
- Counseling and Psychiatric Services: caps.uga.edu or CAPS 24/7 crisis support at 706-542-2273
- Health Promotion/ Fontaine Center: healthpromotion.uga.edu

Family Education Rights and Privacy Act

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is a federal law that protects the privacy of student education records. The law applies to all schools that receive funds under an applicable program of the U.S. Department of Education. FERPA affords students certain rights with respect to their education records. Specifically, it affords students the right to:

- Inspect and review their education records
- Request the amendment of inaccurate or misleading records
- Consent to disclosure of personally identifiable information contained in their education record
- File a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education concerning alleged failures of the institution to comply with this law

Course Outline and Student Input on Class Materials and Discussion

See something that you think would be great to add to the course schedule or chat about in discussion? Scan the QR code or follow the link to submit suggestions: <https://forms.office.com/r/9Lrba88G3B>. Form is through Microsoft Forms. It will require you to be logged into you Microsoft account with your UGA credentials. Below is the course outline. I reserve the right to adjust, and any adjustments will be discussed in class and sent out via email.



Course Schedule

Week	Dates	Topic	Materials
<i>Week 1</i>	August 14 th	Syllabus Day <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Course overview and expectations</i> 	14 th - No Reading
<i>Week 2</i>	August 19 th August 21 st	What is Public Opinion? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Defining public opinion: individual vs collective preferences</i> <i>Why public opinion matters in democracy</i> 	19 th - The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics (1964), Critical Review, pg. 1-37 21 st - “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics (1964), Critical Review, pg. 38-66
<i>Week 3</i>	August 26 th August 28 th	Measuring Public Opinion: Methods and Challenges <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Polling techniques</i> <i>Sampling, question wording, and timing</i> <i>Historical development of polling</i> <i>Bias identification and mitigation</i> 	26 th - “The State of Survey Research as a Research Tool in American Politics”, Oxford Handbook of American Elections and Political Behavior AND “Optimizing Survey Questionnaire Design in Political Science: Insights from Psychology”, Oxford Handbook of American Election and Political 28 th - Public Opinion Polling Basics: A Short Course Explain How Public Opinion Works (Pew Research Center) Survey Question Workshop
<i>Week 4</i>	September 2 nd September 4 th	How Do People Form Attitudes? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Psychological foundations of opinions</i> <i>Information processing and heuristics</i> <i>Social influence</i> 	9 th - “Attitude Formation and Public Opinion” 11 th - “Social Influence and the Collective Dynamics of Opinion Formation”
<i>Week 5</i>	September 9 th September 11 th	Who Participates: Voice and Representation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Demographic patterns in opinion expression</i> <i>Political participation and opinion formation</i> <i>Whose voices are heard/ missing</i> 	2 nd - “Inequalities of Political Voice” 4 th - “Voter Data, Democratic Inequality, and the Risk of Political Violence” AND Explore ANES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior
<i>Week 6</i>	September 16 th September 18 th	Media and Public Opinion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Media effects</i> <i>Agenda setting, framing, priming</i> <i>Media obligations</i> 	16 th - “The Agenda Setting Role of Mass Media Shaping Public Opinion” 18 th - “Mass Media, Propaganda and Public Opinion” Writing Assignment 1 due by 11:59 PM
<i>Week 7</i>	September 23 rd September 25 th	Electoral Competence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Voter knowledge and information</i> <i>Democratic competency debates</i> <i>Low information voting</i> 	23 rd - “The American Voter”, The Oxford Handbook of American Elections and Political Behavior (Chpt 15) AND Summaries of some foundational works: Campbell et al: American Voter Summary Key: The Responsible Electorate 25 th - Electoral Competence Townhall
<i>Week 8</i>	September 30 th October 2 nd	Electoral Competence and Midterm	30 th - “The Fact of Experience: Rethinking Political Knowledge and Civic Competence” 2 nd - Midterm

<i>Week 9</i>	October 7 th October 9 th	Historical Patterns: Early America-Civil Rights <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Evolution of American public opinion</i> • <i>Key turning points and critical events</i> • <i>Polling during major historical events</i> 	7 th - “Federalist Papers #10 and #51” Case Study Day: 1860 Presidential Election and Southern Succession 9 th - Case Study Day: Pearl Harbor, Brown v. Board of Education, Kennedy Assassination, Civil Rights Legislation of the 1960s Dig Reports Group Selection and Topic Submission due by 11:59 PM
<i>Week 10</i>	October 14 th October 16 th	Historical Patterns: Modern Era <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Opinion trends from 1970-present</i> • <i>Polarization and opinion sorting</i> • <i>Generational differences</i> 	14 th - <u>“America is Exceptional in the Nature of its Political Divide”, Pew Research center</u> AND <u>“Americans Feelings About Politics, Polarization, and the Tone of Political Discourse”, Pew Research Center</u> Public Opinion in the Modern Era Handout Questions due by class time (12:45 PM) 16 th - No Reading. Sorting Simulation
<i>Week 11</i>	October 21 st October 23 rd	Elite vs The Masses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Who directs public opinion?</i> • <i>Elite influence theories</i> • <i>Mass opinion constraints on elites</i> 	21 st - “How Citizens Acquire Information and Convert it to Public Opinion”, Ch. 3 of Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion 23 rd - “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interests Groups, and Average Citizens”
<i>Week 12</i>	October 28 th October 30 th	Policy and Interest Groups <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Opinion-policy linkage</i> • <i>Astroturfing vs grassroots</i> • <i>\$ Money \$</i> 	28 th - “Revolving Door Lobbyist” AND <u>“Facts About American’s Views of Money in Politics”, Pew Research Center</u> 30 th - “Digital Astroturfing in Politics: Definition, Typology, and Measures”
<i>Week 13</i>	November 4 th November 6 th	Public Opinion in Crisis <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Opinion during national emergencies</i> • <i>Rally-around-the-flag effects</i> • <i>Democratic resilience</i> 	4 th - No Reading. Review slides before class. Crisis Response Simulation 6 th - “How Democracies Prevail: Democratic Resilience as a Two-Stage Process” Writing Assignment 2 due by 11:59 PM
<i>Week 14</i>	November 11 th November 13 th	Contemporary Challenges <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Misinformation</i> • <i>Polarization and democratic governance</i> • <i>Political Violence</i> 	11 th - “The Role of Trust and Attitudes towards Democracy in the Dissemination of Disinformation: A Comparative Analysis of Six Democracies” 13 th - <u>“Polarization, Democracy, and Political Violence in the United States: What the Research Says”</u>
<i>Week 15</i>	November 18 th November 20 th	Group Dig Reports	18 th - Group Presentations 20 th - Group Presentations Group Presentation materials due by class time of respective presentation day

<i>Week 16</i>	November 25 th November 27 th	Group Dig Reports	25 th - Group Presentations Group Presentation materials due by class time Written Report and Peer Evaluations due by 11:59 PM 27 th - No Class- Thanksgiving Break.
<i>Final Exam Tuesday, December 9th 12:00- 3:00 PM</i>			