

Syllabus

Public Opinion in America

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What is the *real* American opinion and ideology? Is it the fake populism of Donald J. Trump, the plurality preference for the symbol “conservative,” or the leftist sentiment expressed in most policy preferences? The answer will come from a dispassionate examination of public opinion with a strong emphasis on opinion movements over time. We shall see that the data will support a case for any of the alternative interpretations and then the challenge becomes going beyond partial views and beyond advocacy to locate the complex reality which is that Americans in the aggregate are somewhat confused and have difficulty reconciling opinion and ideology.

A second conflict will structure much of the course. That is that Americans, considered as individuals, neither know nor care much about politics. Ignorance of matters political is the norm and beliefs are often collections of relatively random scraps instead of meaningful structures. But considered as an aggregate unit, the American electorate becomes purposive and responsive—in striking contrast to the individual view. Instead of resolving this conflict, we will see that both of the conflicting views are correct, but in differing contexts and for different questions.

Reading: James A. Stimson. *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics* Revised Second Edition. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Material listed as “references” in the topic outline is usually original sources, both my own work and that of others. These are not required reading.

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Exam: One hour essay exam in the final course meeting.

Structure of Lectures

1. Early Micro Views of Opinion and Ideology

Early studies of the democratic citizen Converse and non-attitudes. Reference: (Campbell et al. 1960, Converse 1964)

2. The Aggregate View

Aggregation gain, Condorcet, and Zaller. Reference: (Zaller 1992)

3. Ideology as Symbols

Ideological self-identification as measure of ideology.

4. Ideology as Preferences

Survey measures of preference and party identification. Reference: (Ellis & Stimson 2012, Chapter 2)

5. Ideology as Preferences II: Mood

Mood and elections. Mood and policy-making. (Stimson, MacKuen & Erikson 1995) Mood in France. Reference: (Stimson, Tiberj & Thiébaud 2010)

6. The Parallel Publics Thesis

References: (Page & Shapiro 1992, Enns & Kellstedt 2008)

7. Symbols and Preferences Reconciled

Aggregate conflict between ideology as symbols and ideology as preferences. Conflicted Conservatives. Campaign strategy Reference: (Ellis & Stimson 2012)

8. Exam

References

Campbell, Angus, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller & Donald E. Stokes. 1960. The American Voter. New York: Wiley.

Converse, Philip E. 1964. The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics. In Ideology and Discontent, ed. David E. Apter. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Ellis, Christopher & James. A. Stimson. 2012. Ideology in America. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Enns, Peter K. & Paul M. Kellstedt. 2008. “Policy Mood and Political Sophistication: Why Everybody Moves Mood.” British Journal of Political Science 38:433–454.

Page, Benjamin I. & Robert Y. Shapiro. 1992. The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans’ Policy Preferences. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Stimson, James A., Michael B. MacKuen & Robert S. Erikson. 1995. “Dynamic Representation.” American Political Science Review 89:543–565.

Stimson, James A., Vincent Tiberj & Cyrille Thiébaud. 2010. “Le mood, un nouvel instrument au service de l’analyse dynamique des opinions. Application aux évolutions de la xénophobie en France (1990-2009).” La Revue Française de Science Politique .

Zaller, John R. 1992. The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinions. New York: Cambridge University Press.