POLS 1140

Public Opinion and American Democracy

Paul Testa
Assistant Professor
paul_testa@brown.edu

Isaac Effner
Teaching Assistant
isaac_effner@brown.edu

This Draft: January 22, 2026

GENERAL INFORMATION

Course Website https://pols1140.paultesta.org

Canvas https://canvas.brown.edu/courses/1102121

Zoom https://brown.zoom.us/j/97740301940

Where/When We meet Tuesday and Thursday from 2:30–3:50 pm in Smith-Buonanno Hall G18.

Who **Instructor:** Paul Testa paul_testa@brown.edu

Office Hours **Paul's Office Hours** Tuesdays from **12:00 - 2:00 pm** at 111 Thayer St Room 339. If possible, please reserve a spot here

Overview This is a course on public opinion and American politics. We begin with the basics. What is public opinion and why do we care about it? More specifically, we ask whether our best understanding of how citizens think and act lives up to what a functioning democracy requires. Do citizens hold coherent and consistent beliefs? Do they know basic facts about government and politics? Can they use these beliefs to make informed decisions in a democracy?

As we will see, the field of public opinion offers more causes for concern than celebration in answer to these questions. If most people, most of the time, rarely form opinions and make decisions in the way democratic theory presumes, how exactly do they think about politics? The second portion of this course considers this question by examining the ways social and group identities structure political attitudes, with a specific focus on partisanship, race, gender, and sexuality.

Finally, we'll conclude our journey with an exploration of some sources of stability, change, and difference in public opinion. How much of our beliefs about the world are relatively fixed or dispositional? How much do our environments, such as our

1

families, friends, or media habits, shape our political beliefs?

Goals, Expectations & Policies

Course Goals

Students taking POLS 1140 will:

- Develop their understanding of processes, theories, empirical regularities of public opinion in American politics.

- Learn how to read academic articles to identify and critique a study's research question, theory, design, results, and conclusions (and not just skip over the tables, figures and footnotes).

- Build effective written communication skills, especially the ability to convey complex concepts and information in a clear and concise manner.

- Conduct their own surveys on issue of public opinion of interest to them and their peers. In the process they will learn basic principles of survey design and research methodology, and gain experience analyzing and presenting survey data.

- Deepen their understanding and appreciation of their own political beliefs, the beliefs of their peers, and the broader public.

Course Expectations

This is a lecture course with periodic, project-based sections. I will do my best to break up long periods of me talking, with opportunities for small, individual reflection, small-group discussion, and larger debates. Questions are welcome throughout. I expect that you will have done the readings and submitted your assignments on time (more on that below). In terms of participation, I expect that you will come to class eager to learn and engage with that week's topics and with each other's ideas in a critical and respectful manner. Finally, I expect that you will treat the assignments in this class not as a chore or a necessary evil but as an opportunity for discovery and development. The writing assignments and group projects are a chance for you to clarify your understanding of a topic, form your own ideas on a topic and engage in ongoing scholarly and political debates. I look forward to seeing what you have to say and helping you say it in a way that clearly conveys your meaning and intent.

Community Standards

Political discussions can sometimes grow contentious. All students and the instructor must be respectful of others in the classroom. If you ever feel that the classroom environment is discouraging your participation or problematic in any way, please contact me.

Computers in Class

With the exception of some activities, I ask that you not use your computers (or phones) in class. Print the readings. Take what notes by hand. I'll post slides and notes after class. The temptation to check your email or send a quick text is just too strong and I really want you to be engaging with each other and the material.

Accessibility

Brown University is committed to full inclusion of all students. Please inform me if you have a disability or other condition that might require accommodations or modification of any of these course procedures. You may speak with me after class or during office hours. For more information contact Student and Employee Accessibility Services at 401-863-9588 or SEAS@brown.edu.

Academic Integrity

Neither the University nor I tolerate cheating or plagiarism. The Brown Writing Center defines plagiarism as "appropriating another person's ideas or words (spoken or written) without attributing those word or ideas to their true source." The consequences for plagiarism are often severe, and can include suspension or expulsion. This course will follow the guidelines in the Academic Code for determining what is and isn't plagiarism:

> In preparing assignments a student often needs or is required to employ outside sources of information or opinion. All such sources should be listed in the bibliography. Citations and footnote references are required for all specific facts that are not common knowledge and about which there is not general agreement. New discoveries or debatable opinions must be credited to the source, with specific references to edition and page even when the student restates the matter in his or her own words. Word-for-word inclusion of any part of someone else's written or oral sentence, even if only a phrase or sentence, requires citation in quotation marks and use of the appropriate conventions for attribution. Citations should normally include author, title, edition, and page. (Quotations longer than one sentence are generally indented from the text of the essay, without quotation marks, and identified by author, title, edition, and page.) Paraphrasing or summarizing the contents of another's work is not dishonest if the source or sources are clearly identified (author, title, edition, and page), but such paraphrasing does not constitute independent work and may be rejected by the instructor. Students who have questions about accurate and proper citation methods are expected to consult reference guides as well as course instructors.

We will discuss specific information about your written work in class in more detail, but if you are unsure of how to properly cite material, please ask for clarification. If

you are having difficulty with writing or would like more information or assistance, consult the Writing Center, the Brown library and/or the Academic Code for more information.

Generative AI

Students may use generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT or similar systems) for limited, supportive purposes, such as brainstorming research ideas, clarifying concepts from lecture or readings, or helping to understand statistical or methodological material. However, these tools may not be used to complete any of the written assignments in the course. All written work you submit must reflect your own thinking and language. Any written material uploaded to this course will be checked using Turnitin, and the use of generative AI beyond the permitted purposes described here will be treated as a violation of academic integrity.

Academic Accommodations

Any student with a documented disability is welcome to contact me as early in the semester as possible so that we may arrange reasonable accommodations. As part of this process, please be in touch with Student Accessibility Services by calling 401-863-9588 or online

Diversity and Inclusion

This course is designed to support an inclusive learning environment where diverse perspectives are recognized, respected and seen as a source of strength. It is my intent to provide materials and activities that are respectful of various levels of diversity: mathematical background, previous computing skills, gender, sexuality, disability, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, and culture. Toward that goal:

- If you have a name and/or set of pronouns that differ from those that appear in your official Brown records, please let me know!

- If there are things going on inside or outside of class that are affecting your performance in class, please don't hesitate to talk to me, provide anonymous feedback through our course survey, or contact one of Brown's Academic Deans.

Course Structure and Policies

Grading

Attendance and Participation	20%
Three Reading Reflections	30%
Two Term Papers	30%
Group Project	20%

Your final grade is a weighted average of your performance on these components and is converted to a letter grade using the following cutoffs:

A: 90–100%
B: 80–89.49%

C: 70–79.49%
NC: 69.49 and below.

Attendance: Somewhere between 80 and 99 percent of life or success is just showing up depending on how much weight you give to Google's search algorithm. In this class, 75 percent (15 percent of your overall grade) of your participation and attendance grade will come from attendance. Attendance will be taken via survey – approximately one, one-question survey during one of the classes. After the first week, there are thirteen weeks of classes. I will calculate your attendance grade from ten of the thirteen surveys. So you can miss three classes before it affects your grade. After those three classes, I will need a Dean's note for any additional excused absences. Before those three, I don't need to know – so no need to email me.

Participation Learning is not a passive activity. Your active participation is a crucial part of this seminar and your grade (5 percent of your final grade). This includes both regular attendance in class, contribution to class discussion, and active engagement in your group projects. You should complete all readings and submit all assignments before attending class so that you can engage critically with that material.

Reading Reflections: Over the course of this semester, you will complete three reading reflection papers designed to help you get the most out of the courses readings. You will be given a template designed to help you summarize and read academic articles in an efficient and informative manner. You will succinctly state the paper's main research question, discuss the theoretical issues it addresses, comment on the papers research design, and summarize the main findings and potential critiques of the studies' findings. Some readings are less amenable to this approach such as certain "review" type articles, which follow a slightly different format.

Your reflections should be no longer than two-pages, single spaced. The default grade for these reflections is a B (85 percent). To receive an A (100 percent), you must identify a second article related to the reading from the syllabus, complete a similar summary and offer a paragraph or two discussing how these two articles relate to one another. Does your second reading refute the findings of the first, or offer some nuanced elaboration?

You must complete at least one reflection paper by the end of February and at least two before March 19. You may complete reflection papers in advance, but must submit a reflection paper before the class in which that reading is assigned.

Term Papers You will write two "term" papers for this course. Both should be approximately 5 pages double-spaced, not including references and any figures or tables which should be provided in the appendix.

The first term paper is be due on Canvas before the start of class **Tuesday, March 10**. Approximately one (or perhaps two) weeks before March 10 I will provide you with a selection of prompts addressing concepts and debates from the first half of the course. You will choose one to respond to integrating concepts and evidence from the work you have read so far.

The second term paper is due on Canvas on May 12. You will be asked to summarize a debate or question raised in the second half the course and discuss

why this debate exists and offer some general discussion of what evidence might provide further insights into this question.

You may take one 1-week extension for either paper, no questions asked. Just email Me. If you need a second extension, you will need to provide a Dean's note.

Group Projects You will be assigned to groups of five. We will hold four sections run by Isaac and I on Wednesday during times that work for each group over the course of the semester, designed to help you make progress on your group's survey. The monday after these sections, you will complete the following:

- **February 17** Define a research question
- **March 19** Design a survey instrument to address that question
- **April 14** Upload your planned analysis
- **May 3** Upload your presentations

We will design surveys using Brown's account with Qualtrics and field these surveys using a convenience sample from Prolific, an online labor market. Finally, you will present your results in class December 4 and 6.

Course Time Allotment

After the first class, this course will meet three times a week for 13 weeks. Over those 13 weeks, you should expect to spend 3 hours per week in class (39 hours total); approximately 7 hours per week reading and reviewing required readings (91 hours total); approximately 5 hours writing each of your three reflection papers (15 hours total); approximately 15 hours writing and revising your two term papers (30 hours total); approximately 30 hours researching and designing your group project and at least .5 hours meeting with me in person to discuss the (182.5 hours total).

Readings

The primary text for this course is:

Achen, C. H. and Bartels, L. M. (2017). *Democracy for realists: Why elections do not produce responsive government*. Princeton University Press

Achen and Bartels (2017) is available online through the library should cost between $15-20 (used is fine).

Copies of additional chapters and articles assigned for each week will be posted to the course website. Most weeks, you will read 3-4 articles or chapters from a book. Reading academic articles is a skill which requires practice. When I started graduate school, I had this idea that I would read every article on the syllabus twice. It was horrible.

As I progressed through my academic career, I learned how to read articles quickly and efficiently. Some things I skim. Others I read with rapt attention. My goal in designing this course around many current articles in political science is to give you the opportunity to practice this skill and develop strategies that will help you

in this class and beyond. It takes time and effort. You should read articles closely, highlighting key points and questions and making some effort to understand what a table or figure is trying to convey. Oh, and please do read the footnotes.[1]

If something is unclear in a text, don't worry, it's generally not your fault. Academic writing is often quite bad. It's filled with jargon, run-on sentences, and lot of tables and figures without much context or guidance on how to interpret them. Bad writing can be a sign of a conceptual confusion in the author's arguments or the field in general. Sometimes, though it's unavoidable. To read a lot of academic work in public opinion, you need to be able to process things like a regression table or an experimental design. These things sound harder than they actually are. We'll take extra care to ensure that you develop this foundation. If you don't understand something on the first read through, make a note, bring it up in class or send me an email.

---

[1]For example, in many major texts within our field you will find important clarifying points and details. In this particular footnote, dear reader, you'll find that by sending me a picture of a cute animal before the third week of class, I will add one point of extra credit to your participation grade. Now I'm going to write some extra gobbledygook to discourage the skimmers from reading too closely.

Schedule

The general outline of topics for the course is as follows. You should come to class having read the articles and chapters listed below that day. This schedule is preliminary and the readings and topics for some weeks may change.

Week 1 — Introduction and Course Overview

January 22, 2026

Topics **What am I getting myself into?**

Readings None

Week 2 — What is Public Opinion and How Do we Study it

January 27, 2026—January 29, 2026

Topics **What is public opinion? How do we measure public opinion? What role does public opinion play in democracy?**

Readings Achen, C. H. and Bartels, L. M. (2017). *Democracy for realists: Why elections do not produce responsive government*. Princeton University Press **Chapter 1-2**

Berinsky, A. J. (2017). Measuring Public Opinion with Surveys. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 20(1):309–329

Optional Andrew Gelman's post: Why are we making probabilistic election forecasts? (and why don't we put so much effort into them?)

Week 3 — Ideology and Issues

February 3, 2026—February 5, 2026

Topics **Do people hold coherent world views? Do people hold meaningful policy attitudes?**

Readings Converse, P. E. (1964). The nature of belief systems in mass publics. In Apter, D., editor, *Ideology and discontent*. Free Press

Ansolabehere, S., Rodden, J., and Snyder, J. M. (2008). The strength of issues: Using multiple measures to gauge preference stability, ideological constraint, and issue voting. *American Political Science Review*, 102(2):215–232

Freeder, S., Lenz, G. S., and Turney, S. (2019). The Importance of Knowing "What Goes with What": Reinterpreting the Evidence on Policy Attitude Stability. *Journal of Politics*, 81(1):274–290

Take Pew's: Political Typology Quiz

Optional Read more about the Pew's methodology and findings here

Week 4 — Political Knowledge and Information

February 10, 2026—February 12, 2026

Topics **Do people know basic political facts? How should we measure political knowledge? Why do people believe factually incorrect information**

Readings Jerit, J., Barabas, J., and Bolsen, T. (2006). Citizens, knowledge, and the information environment. *American Journal of Political Science*, 50(2):266–282

Weaver, V., Prowse, G., and Piston, S. (2019). Too much knowledge, too little power: An assessment of political knowledge in highly policed communities. *The journal of politics*, 81(3):1153–1166

Jerit, J. and Zhao, Y. (2020). Political misinformation. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 23(1):77–94

Take Pew's: Civic Knowledge Quiz

Optional Read some of Pew's work on this topic here

Sections **February 10, 2026—Choosing survey research topics**

Week 5 — Models of Political Cognition

NO CLASS February 17, 2026—February 19, 2026

Topics **How do people think about politics and form political attitudes?**

Readings Feldman, S. and Zaller, J. (1992). The political culture of ambivalence: Ideological responses to the welfare state. *American Journal of Political Science*, 36(1):268–307

Lodge, M. and Taber, C. S. (2013). *The rationalizing voter*. Cambridge University Press Chapter 1 (skim)

Chapter 2

DUE **February 17, 2026—Upload research topic to Canvas**

Week 6 — Models of Democratic Choice

February 24, 2026—February 26, 2026

Topics **Retrospective Voting and Models of Democratic Accountability**

Readings Achen, C. H. and Bartels, L. M. (2017). *Democracy for realists: Why elections do not produce responsive government*. Princeton University Press **Chapters 4 – 6**

Sections February 24, 2026—Designing survey modules in Qualtrics

Week 7 — Social Groups and Identities

March 3, 2026—March 5, 2026

Topics **How social identities shape politics**

Readings Achen, C. H. and Bartels, L. M. (2017). *Democracy for realists: Why elections do not produce responsive government*. Princeton University Press **Chapters 8 – 10**

Huddy, L. (2018). The Group Foundations of Democratic Political Behavior. *Critical review*, 30(1-2):71–86

Sections **March 3, 2026—Designing survey modules in Qualtrics**

DUE: MARCH 10, 2026—FIRST TERM PAPER ON CANVAS BEFORE CLASS

Week 8 — Partisanship

March 10, 2026—March 12, 2026

Topics **Partisanship as a social identity; Affective Polarization**

Readings Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., and Westwood, S. J. (2019). The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22(1):129–146

West, E. A. and Iyengar, S. (2022). Partisanship as a social identity: Implications for polarization. *Political Behavior*, 44(2):807–838

Druckman, J. N., Klar, S., Krupnikov, Y., Levendusky, M., and Ryan, J. B. (2022). (Mis)estimating Affective Polarization. *The journal of politics*, 84(2):1106–1117

Week 9 — Race

March 17, 2026—March 19, 2026

Topics **Racial identities; How to measure racial prejudice and its effects**

Readings Junn, J., Mendelberg, T., and Czaja, E. (2012). Race and the group bases of public opinion. In *New Directions in Public Opinion*, pages 119–138. Routledge

White, I. K., Laird, C. N., and Allen, T. D. (2014). Selling out?: The politics of navigating conflicts between racial group interest and self-interest. *American Political Science Review*, 108(4):783–800

Tesler, M. (2012). The Spillover of Racialization into Health Care: How President Obama Polarized Public Opinion by Racial Attitudes and Race. *American Journal of Political Science*, 56(3):690–704

Kam, C. D. and Burge, C. D. (2019). TRENDS: Racial Resentment and Public Opinion across the Racial Divide. *Political research quarterly*, 72(4):767–784

DUE **March 19, 2026—Share your Survey Module on Qualtrics**

Week 10 — Spring Break

March 31, 2026—April 2, 2026

Week 11 — Gender and Sexuality

April 7, 2026—April 9, 2026

Topics **Gender identities; Gender stereotypes; Sexual Identity, The 2024 Election**

Readings Huddy, L. and Terkildsen, N. (1993). Gender Stereotypes and the Perception of Male and Female Candidates. *American Journal of Political Science*, 37(1):119

Egan, P. J. (2012). Group cohesion without group mobilization: The case of Lesbians, Gays and Bisexuals. *British Journal of Political Science*, 42(3):597–616

Sections **April 7, 2026—Planning your analysis**

Week 12 — Origins of Political Predispositions

April 14, 2026—April 16, 2026

Topics **Political socialization; Biology and politics**

Readings Jennings, M. K., Stoker, L., and Bowers, J. (2009). Politics across generations: Family transmission reexamined. *The journal of politics*, 71(3):782–799

Prior, M. (2010). You've either got it or you don't? The stability of political interest over the life cycle. *The journal of politics*, 72(03):747–766

Alford, J. R., Funk, C. L., and Hibbing, J. R. (2005). Are political orientations genetically transmitted. *American Political Science Review*, 99(2):153–167

DUE **April 14, 2026—Upload your planned analyses to Canvas**

Week 13 — Influence and Persuasion

April 21, 2026—April 23, 2026

Topics **Political discussion; Political persuasion**

Readings Mutz, D. C. (2002a). Cross-Cutting Social Networks: Testing Democratic Theory in Practice. *American Political Science Review*, 96(1):111–126

Mutz, D. C. (2002b). The Consequences of Cross-Cutting Networks for Political Participation. *American Journal of Political Science*, pages 838–855

Kalla, J. L., Levine, A. S., and Broockman, D. E. (2022). Personalizing Moral Reframing in Interpersonal Conversation: A Field Experiment. *The journal of politics*, 84(2):1239–1243

Sections **April 21, 2026—Interpreting your Results and Preparing your presentations**

Week 14 — Class Survey

April 28, 2026—April 30, 2026

Topics **Interpreting and presenting your results**
  DUE **May 3, 2026—Upload your presentations to Canvas**

Week 15 — Class Presentations

May 5, 2026

Topics **Tuesday: Presentations**

DUE: MAY 12, 2026—SECOND TERM PAPER BY 11:59 PM ON CANVAS