Government 94nl
Election Polling and Public Opinion

Fall 2016, Harvard University
Tuesdays 6:00-8:00 pm.
Location: CGIS K-108

[Tentative Syllabus: August 19, 2016]

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Course Description

Political polls and other survey methodologies are frequently used to understand and explain both voter intentions and public opinion. This course will examine the theoretical and practical issues involved in using polls and surveys. We will explore the normative assumptions involved in polling, study possible sources of error in survey measures, and discuss the prospective implications of polling for policy and governance.

This course will provide us with an opportunity to critically examine the intersection between research methods and political discourse by focusing our attention on election and public opinion polls, particularly as they are reported in the media and used as a source of political information by the general public and political leaders. It is not necessary for students to have any specialized mathematical or statistical background for this course.

Seminar Requirements:

Seminar Participation:
Because this is a seminar, preparation and participation is expected. Each week, students should upload one or two questions or observations on the weeks readings to the course web site. These should be uploaded by 12:00 p.m. (noon) on the day of the class. Each week, one or two students will also be responsible for presenting short critical discussions of selected class materials.

Election Day Assignment:
Please predict the outcome of the 2016 presidential election. Who will win the election? How? Why? How certain are you of this outcome? What are the implications of this?

Write a short memorandum (2-5 pages) explaining your conclusions. Please use the material you have learned in this course, as well as available outside data (polls and surveys) to explain your conclusion. You may focus on any particular aspect or facet of this – you do not need to explain everything above – but be sure to come to clear concrete conclusions based on theory and evidence. Due: November 7, 2016.
no later than midnight. Please bring a copy of the memorandum to class and be prepared to discuss it in class.

Survey Critiques:
You will get more out of this course, and enjoy it more, if you are actively searching for and critiquing actual survey results. Each student will be responsible for writing two short (2 – 4 page) critiques of a survey, survey question, poll, or interpretation of a survey. The critique should focus on one particular aspect or issue of the report and should be some aspect of survey methodology covered in the course.
You should provide a copy of (or link to) to the relevant survey report or release you discuss, although any relevant parts for your discussion should be presented in your paper.

The first critique must be received by the start of class October 18, and the second is due by the start of class November 29. Critiques handed in after these deadlines will be penalized ½ letter grade (5 / 100 points) for each day or portion thereof (1 – 24 hours) it is late. Students who complete two critiques by November 15 will have the option of writing a third critique by December 9. In this case, the critique with the lowest grade will be dropped.

Research Proposal:
Each student is expected to write a 2 – 4 page research proposal on a topic of their choosing. The proposal ideally is a summary and outline of the paper they hope to present as their final work in this course, and students are encouraged to meet with the instructor early in the semester to discuss topics and approaches for the final paper. Proposals must be handed in at the start of class on October 28. The grade for the final research paper will be penalized ½ letter grade (5 / 100 points) if a research proposal is not submitted in good faith by this time.

Final Research Paper:
Each student is expected to write a final paper (15-20 pages, double spaced, 12 point) on a topic of their choosing. The final paper should be submitted in both electronic (*.doc or *.pdf) and paper versions. The final paper is due no later than 2:00 on December 16. The paper will be penalized ½ letter grade (5 / 100 points) for each day (1 – 24 hours) it is late.

Grading:
Seminar participation, including questions and discussions of readings (25%)
Survey Critiques: (20%).
Election Day Assignment (15%)
Final paper (40%).

Course Policies:

Accessibility, Services, and Support
Any student needing academic adjustments or accommodations is requested to present their letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) and speak with me by the end of the second week of the term. Failure to do so may result in my inability to respond in a timely manner. All discussions will remain confidential, although AEO may be consulted to discuss appropriate implementation. For more information, please contact me or AEO at 617-496-8707 (V), 617-496-3720 (V/TTY), 617-495-0815 (fax), aeo@fas.harvard.edu or www.aeo.fas.harvard.edu.
Late Assignments
Students should take careful note of the dates requirements are due. All assignments are due on
the designated day. Late assignments will be accepted at the discretion of the instructor, and will
be marked down a full letter grade for each class meeting late. The final paper will be penalized ½
letter grade (5 / 100 points) for each day (1 – 24 hours) it is late. All papers must be received by
Sunday, December 20, in order to receive any credit.

Absences
If any student must miss a class or due date owing to a religious observance, please inform me
during the first weeks of class so that we can make appropriate arrangements.

Availability
I will make every effort to be available to students outside of class. My regular office hours are
listed on the first page of the syllabus. If you wish to come at a different time, please don’t
hesitate to contact me.

Policy on Collaboration: Collaboration Permitted
Discussion and the exchange of ideas are essential to academic work. For assignments in this
course, you are encouraged to consult with your classmates on the choice of paper or
presentation topics and to share sources. You may find it useful to discuss your chosen topic with
your peers, particularly if you are working on the same topic as a classmate. However, you
should ensure that any written work you submit for evaluation is the result of your own research
and writing and that it reflects your own approach to the topic. You must also adhere to standard
citation practices in an academic setting and properly cite any books, articles, websites, lectures,
etc. that have helped you with your work. If you received any help with your writing (feedback
on drafts, etc), you must also acknowledge this assistance.

Syllabus and Course Scheduling
Public opinion and pre-election polls are newsworthy items, and controversies often emerge
during the course of a semester – especially in an election season! To preserve the ability of the
course to focus on new materials in a timely way, readings and scheduling are subject to change.
All changes in readings and topics will be reflected on the course web page, and significant
changes will be e-mailed to the class. Changes or modified readings will be announced at least
one week before a seminar meeting. Please review the course web page prior to beginning
seminar preparation to see if there have been any updates.
Required Readings:

Three books have been ordered for your purchase in the Harvard Coop:


Note: Students may find used editions of several of these books attractively priced through various online markets.

Most other readings will be available through the course web page or on reserve in the Harvard College Library. In a small number of cases, the course web site will direct you to interactive papers published on the World Wide Web.
Tentative Schedule and Readings:

L: On Reserve in Lamont Library

Note:
POQ: Public Opinion Quarterly
IJPOR: International Journal of Public Opinion Research
APSR: American Political Science Review
AJPS: American Journal of Political Science
JOP: Journal of Politics


Refers to a book that has is available for purchase through the Harvard Coop and is also available on reserve in the Lamont Library.

Refers to readings which will be available on-line, primarily through the course web-site.

Schedule:

Thursday, September 1, 2016: 5:00 pm – 6:00 pm. K-354
Special Introduction and Preview:

September 6:
Welcome; Introduction; Logistics

Weisberg pp. 1-71; pp 297-308; pp 325-331.

Hillygus, D. Sunshine. The Practice of Survey Research; Changes and Challenges. In: Berinsky. Pp 34 – 53

Gilens, Martin. Two Thirds Full; Citizen Competence and Democratic Governance In: Berinsky. pp 34 – 53

Sept. 13
What is public opinion?


September 20
Attitudes and Ideology


Krosnik et. al. "The Impact of No Opinion Options on Response Quality: Nonattitude Reduction or Invitation to Satisfice" POQ


September 27
Influences on Public Opinion


**October 4**

**Polls and the Press**

Ladd, Everett Carll: "Polling and the Press; A Clash of Institutional Imperatives" POQ 44:4 pp. 574-584


Selections


Traugott, Michael M. and Mee-Eun Lee. "Public Attention to Polls in an Election Year." (185-205 Lavrakas and Traugott)

Traugott, Michael. "Impact of Media Polls on the Public."

**October 11**

**Voter Turnout and Campaigns**

Steven Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*, chap 5


Masket, Seth E. *Did Obama’s Ground Game Matter?: The Influence of Local Field Offices During the 2008 Presidential Election* *Public Opin Q* (2009) 73 (5): 1023-1039
October 18
Pre Election Polls


Hillygus, D. Sunshine The Evolution of Election Polling in the United States Public Opin Q (Special Issue 2011) 75 (5): 962-981

Graefe, Andreas Accuracy of Vote Expectation Surveys in Forecasting Elections Public Opin Q (2014) 78 (S1): 204-232

Visser, Krosnick, Marquette and Curtin; "Improving Election Forecasting: Allocation of Unlikely Respondents, Identification of Likely Voters, and Response Order Effects."

For Reference:

Traugott, Michael W. and Christopher Wlezien. The Dynamics of Poll Performance During the 2008 Presidential Nomination Contest Public Opin Q (2009) 73 (5): 866-894

Traugott, Michael L.: "The Accuracy of Pre-Election Polls in the 2004 Presidential Election" (POQ


October 25
Controversies Surrounding Nonscientific Polls


Chris Mooney, "John Zogby's Creative Polls," The American Prospect vol. 14 no. 1, February 1, 2003

Tom Rosenstiel: "Political Polling and the News Media Culture: A Case of More Being Less" POQ 69(5)

Traugott, Michael and Mee-Eun Kang "Push Polls as Negative Persuasion Strategies" pp. 281-300 in Traugott and Lavrakas

November 1
November 8: Election Day

Mitofsky, Warren J. "A Short History of Exit Polls"


November 15
Public Opinion and Public Policy

Shapiro, Robery Y. Public Opinion and American Democracy Public Opin Q (Special Issue 2011) 75 (5): 982-101


November 22
Material and Readings to be assigned based on course focus and student preferences

November 29
Material and Readings to be assigned based on course focus and student preferences