

DRAFT: January 31, 2002

PUAF 698P
Public Opinion and Public Policy

Professors Destler and Kull

Spring 2002
Thursdays, 1:30-4:00
Van Munching 1109

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Policymakers and journalists frequently make assertions about public opinion on current public policy issues. But are these assertions correct? In this course we will delve deeply into the question of where the American public stands and whether policymakers are reading the public correctly. We begin by addressing fundamental questions—what *is* public opinion? Is it stable or capricious? What are its sources? How can we know public preferences? Next we consider the relation of opinion to policy—what it is, what it should be, the channels through which public opinion has impact, the degree to which actual policy reflects what the public wants. The bulk of the seminar, however, will be devoted to investigating public attitudes on specific policy issues. Initially these will be issues (generally broad) selected by the instructors. Thereafter the issues (perhaps narrower) will be chosen by students, who will present their findings to the seminar orally, and then write them up in final seminar papers.

Course participation will benefit from, and student research will require, regular use of websites that report and analysis survey findings. The Americans and the World website, maintained by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) which focuses on international issues, can be found at <http://www.americans-world.org>. *Pollingreport.com* has raw data on a wide variety of topics.

Since this is a discussion seminar, students should come to class prepared to talk about the readings in depth and raise questions about them. In addition, each student will submit one short (5-page) paper on a general issue and a 5000-word research paper analyzing public opinion on the subject of her/his choice.

Books for Purchase:

Carroll J. Glynn, Susan Herbst, Garrett J. O'Keefe, and Robert Y. Shapiro, *Public Opinion* (Westview Press, 1999).

Steven Kull and I. M. Destler, *Misreading the Public: The Myth of a New Isolationism* (Brookings Institution Press, 1999).

Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences* (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

COURSE SCHEDULE

WEEKS ONE AND TWO (January 31, February 7): *What Is Public Opinion?*

These two sessions will be a broad exploration of public opinion: differing views of what it is, how predominant views have changed over time, and normative issues concerning the role public opinion should play in determining public policy. An opening (ungraded) exercise will seek students' initial views about the nature and content of public opinion. Partly in response to student perceptions, the professors will discuss varying assessments of the nature and "rationality" of public opinion. How informed is the typical citizen? Does lack of information render public views "irrational?" Attention will also be given to means of measuring public opinion (standard "polls," focus groups, etc.), though this is not a course in survey design.

Readings: *Public Opinion*, chaps. 1-3. *The Rational Public*, chaps. 1-2. Kull, "Vox Americani," *Foreign Policy*, Sept-Oct 2001.

WEEK THREE (February 14): *The Sources of Public Opinion*

Psychological and sociological perspectives on the sources of public opinion

Readings: *Public Opinion*, chaps. 4-6. *The Rational Public*, pp. 321-39.

WEEKS FOUR AND FIVE: *Opinion, Democracy, and Policy* (February 21 and 28)

Public opinion and democracy in theory and practice. What *should* be the role of public opinion? The impact of the media. The impact of electoral campaigns.

Readings: *Public Opinion*, chaps 7-8, 11-12. *The Rational Public*, pp. 339-54 and chap. 10. Steven Kull et al, *Expecting More Say: The American Public and its Role in Government Decisionmaking* (COPA, 2000).

How do public attitudes affect policy? Does policy reflect public preferences? How do public officials interpret public opinion? Do they read it accurately? If not, why not? Are politicians "out of step" with the public? We plan to show a video, *Democracy in Crisis*, at one of these sessions.

Readings: *Public Opinion*, chap. 9. *Misreading the Public*, chaps. 1, 7-11, and ONE of the issue chapters (2-6); I. M. Destler, "The Reasonable Public and the Polarized Policy Process," in Anthony Lake and David Ochmanek, editors, *The Real and the Ideal: Essays in Honor of Richard H. Ullman* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), pp. 75-90.

WEEKS SIX THROUGH NINE: *Major Issues* (March 7 through April 4)

A Video, *Vox Populi*, will be shown in whole or in part during this portion of the course.

March 7: *Foreign Policy and Terrorism*

Readings: *The Rational Public*, chaps 5-6 (skim), *Misreading the Public*, chaps 2-6; Section on Terrorism, Americans and the World website. *on Terrorism*.(COPA, November 2001).

March 14: *Health Care*

Readings: *The Rational Public*, chap. 3. Steven Kull et al, *Americans on Health Care Policy* (COPA, 2000). Selection from Jacobs and Shapiro, *Politicians Don't Pander*.

March 21: *The Environment and Global Warming*

Readings: Section on Global Warming, Americans and the World website, *The Rational Public*, chap. 4 (skim), others tba.

SPRING BREAK

April 4: *Globalization*

Readings: Kull et al, *Americans on Globalization* (PIPA, 2000), and/or Section on Globalization, Americans and the World website; *The Rational Public*, chap 4 (skim). Others tba.

WEEKS TEN THROUGH THIRTEEN: *Student Presentations* (April 11 to May 2)

Each student will take a topic (not covered in depth March 7-April 4) and report on (1) what public opinion is on the main issues; (2) how the public addresses key value conflicts; (3) how public policy should be changed in light of public opinion (if at all); and (4) any other relevant question the student wishes to raise.

WEEK FOURTEEN: *To Be Announced* (May 9)