

**Public Opinion, Polling and Public Policy**  
**API 614m**  
**Harvard University**  
**John F. Kennedy School of Government**

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Public opinion polling has become an essential tool in public policy decision-making, election campaigns, and media reporting. This course focuses on helping students interested in these areas learn the basic skills required to design, use, and critically interpret election campaign and public policy surveys measuring public opinion. Class participants will have “hands on experience” analyzing and critically evaluating existing opinion surveys, designing polling questions, and interpreting and developing strategies from results. International students can design polls related to issues in their home country.

Class slides and supplementary materials specifically for DPI214m are available on the KSG course web page. Additional articles, poll data and other items related to Dr. Blendon’s research can be found at [www.hsph.harvard.edu/horp](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/horp).

**Course Objectives**

This course is designed to teach students about the following:

- (1) Fundamentals of designing questions for polls
- (2) Design and sampling techniques for polling
- (3) Focus groups as part of the polling development process
- (4) How to utilize polling results for public policy development, media reporting, and election campaigning
- (5) How polling techniques vary in different countries

**Course Participants**

This course is a methods course that will prepare students in designing and analyzing opinion polls. The course may not meet the needs of students interested in the more theoretical aspects of the role of public opinion in society. Enrollment is limited to those students taking the course for credit and is NOT open to auditors.

### **Course Requirements Overview**

Students will be expected to complete assigned readings and participate in class discussions. Students will have two take-home assignments—preparing one strategy memo and designing one poll. In addition, a final exam will be given in-class. There is also an in-class final exam which will be held on the last day of class.

For the poll question assignment, students will have a choice of writing a poll for an election or a national policy issue. One component of the final exam will be to write an issue poll.

### **Class Protocol**

Students are expected to attend all classes. Please email the teaching fellow if you expect to be absent. During class, ***cell phones must be turned off or to vibrate mode***. If you need to respond to a call, please step outside the room. During class, students are asked not to use the Internet for email or other purposes.

### **Electronic materials**

This class uses the available websites to post lecture slides, supplementary materials, and some announcements. Materials are posted on the KSG course website (which can be found at [www.ksg.harvard.edu](http://www.ksg.harvard.edu)).

We use the Kennedy School system to send mass emails, so ***we require all students to sign up on KSG website***. Cross-registered students can do this easily:

- Step 1: Go to [www.ksg.harvard.edu](http://www.ksg.harvard.edu)
- Step 2: Click on “login” in the upper right corner
- Step 3: Click the button on the login page (below the login lines) that says “Cross-registered student or auditor needing an account”
- Step 4: Follow the instructions
- Step 5: The Teaching Fellow or administrative assistant will admit you to the class electronically, and you will be notified by email with your login information

### **Course Grading**

Final grades for the course will be based on class participation, assignments, the midterm and the final exam.

1. Class Participation	20%
2. Strategy Memo	20%
3. Poll exercise	20%
4. Final exam	40%

Assignments are due at the beginning of class. Late materials will not be accepted without prior discussion with the teaching fellow and permission from the instructor.

### **Required Readings**

Students will be required to read journal articles each week as well as sections from the required book.

*Required Books:*

- Fowler F.J., Jr. *Survey Research Methods*. 3rd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001. ISBN 0761921915.

The book is available for purchase at the Harvard Square Coop or on-line.

*Required Additional Readings:*

Course packets with additional readings are available in the Kennedy School Course Materials Office. This is located on the ground floor of the Belfer Center building.

**Packet 1** contains course materials not on-line

On-line readings can be found on the course webpage and are noted “ON-LINE.”

The required book and a copy of the course packets are available on reserve at the Kennedy School Library.

**Recommended Readings**

You may find the following texts useful.

- Weisberg H.F., Krosnick J.A., and Bowen B.D. eds. *An Introduction to Survey Research, Polling and Data Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications (1996). ISBN 0803974027.
- Krueger R.A. *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications (1988), pp. 13-48. ISBN 0761920714
- Moore D.W. *The Superpollsters*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows (1992). ISBN 1568580231
- Converse J.M. and Presser S. *Survey Questions: Understanding the Standardized Questionnaire*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications (1986). ISBN 0803927436
- [www.pollster.com](http://www.pollster.com)
- [www.fivethirtyeight.com](http://www.fivethirtyeight.com)
- [www.pollingreport.com](http://www.pollingreport.com)
- <http://blogs.abcnews.com/thenumbers/>

## **Session 1: Introduction to Polling and Public Opinion/Key Course Issues**

*Robert J. Blendon*

### Assigned Readings:

- Erikson Robert S. and Kent L. Tedin “Polling: The Scientific Assessment of Public Opinion” in *American Public Opinion*. New York. Pearson Longman Press (2007).
- Jay, E. Deborah, “Survey Ethics.” In: Best, Samuel J and Benjamin Radcliff, eds. *Polling America: An Encyclopedia of Public Opinion*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press (2005).
- Monroe, A. “Public Opinion and Public Policy.” In: Best, Samuel J and Benjamin Radcliff, eds. *Polling America: An Encyclopedia of Public Opinion*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press (2005).
- American Association for Public Opinion Research Code of Professional Ethics and Practices [ON-LINE [http://www.aapor.org/pdfs/AAPOR\\_Code\\_2005.pdf](http://www.aapor.org/pdfs/AAPOR_Code_2005.pdf)]

## **Session 2: How To Write Quality Poll Questions**

*Robert Blendon*

### Assigned Readings:

- Bizer, G. “Attitude Strength.” In: Best, Samuel J and Benjamin Radcliff, eds. *Polling America: An Encyclopedia of Public Opinion*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press (2005).
- Converse J.M. and Presser S. *Survey Questions: Understanding the Standardized Questionnaire*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications (1986), pp. 31-39.
- Krosnick, J. “Maximizing Questionnaire Quality.” In: Robinson J.P., Shaver P.R., and Wrightsman L.S., eds. *Measures of Political Attitudes*. San Diego: Academic Press (1999).

## **STRATEGY MEMO ASSIGNMENT HANDED OUT IN CLASS**

## **Session 3: How to Design Election Polls**

*Robert J. Blendon*

### Assigned Readings:

- Cohen, M. “Polls as the Key to Victory: When to Use Vulnerability, Benchmark and Tracking Polls.” *Campaigns & Elections*, July 2004. 35. [ON-LINE]
- Merkle, D., G. Langer, and D. Lambert. “Methodological Issues in Pre-Election Polling: Lessons from ABC News’ 32 Night Tracking Poll.” Carballo, Marita and Ulf Hjelmars, Eds. *Public Opinion Polling in a Globalized World*. Springer: 2008.

## **POLL QUESTION ASSIGNMENT HANDED OUT IN CLASS**

#### **Session 4: Use of Polls for Election Strategy**

*Robert Blendon*

##### Assigned Readings:

Radcliff B. "Exit Polls." In: Best, Samuel J and Benjamin Radcliff, eds. *Polling America: An Encyclopedia of Public Opinion*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press (2005), pp 206-209.  
Steeper, Fred. "The Use of Voter Research in Campaigns." In Donsbach, Wolfgang, and Michael W. Traugott, Eds. *The Sage Handbook of Public Opinion Research*. Sage Publications. 2008.

#### **Session 5: How To Design Issue Polls**

*Robert Blendon*

##### Assigned Readings:

Fowler, Chapters 5 and 6  
Bradburn N., Sudman S. and Wansink B. *Asking Questions: The Definitive Guide to Questionnaire Design For Market Research, Political Polls, and Social and Health Surveys*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2004. Chapter 4.  
Downs, Anthony. "Up and Down with Ecology – The 'Issue Attention Cycle.'" *Public Interest*, 1972. 28: 38-50.

#### **Session 6: Class Exercise: Developing a Strategy Memo for Elections**

*Robert Blendon*

##### Assigned Readings

Barone, M. "Obama's America." *National Journal*, 11 July 2009.

#### **STRATEGY MEMO DUE (Be prepared to discuss memos in class)**

#### **Session 7: Race, Public Opinion and Polling**

*Guest: Kalahn Taylor-Clark, PhD*

##### Assigned Readings:

McDermott, ML "Race and Gender Cues in Low-Information Elections" *Political Research Quarterly* 1998. 51(4): 895-918. [ON-LINE]  
"Obama's Candidacy Underscores Crosscurrents of Race and Politics," ABC News/Washington Post June 22, 2008 Available at  
<http://www.abcnews.com/images/PollingUnit/1065a4RaceandPolitics.pdf>

## **Session 8: Basic Statistical and Sampling Issues for Polls**

*Robert Blendon and John Benson*

### Assigned Readings:

Fowler, Chapters 3 and 11

Keeter S., Miller C., Kohut A., Groves R.M., and Presser S. "Consequences of Reducing Nonresponse in a National Telephone Survey." *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 2000. 64: 125-148. [ON-LINE]

Green, D. and Gerber A. "Improving the Accuracy of Election Forecasts." *Campaigns & Elections*, May 2004. 25(4): 51-52.

Morin, R. "Smackdown in Maryland: RBS versus RDD." *Public Perspective*, January/February 2003. 7-9 & 41. [ON-LINE]

Lavrakas, Paul A. "Surveys by Telephone." In Donsbach, Wolfgang, and Michael W. Traugott, Eds. *The Sage Handbook of Public Opinion Research*. Sage Publications. 2008.

## **Session 9 Focus Groups**

*Guest: Gillian SteelFisher, PhD*

### Assigned Readings:

Hueber, G. "Focus Group." In: Best, Samuel J and Benjamin Radcliff, eds. *Polling America: An Encyclopedia of Public Opinion*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press (2005).

Davies, M and M Prince. "Focus Group Applications." In: Best, Samuel J and Benjamin Radcliff, eds. *Polling America: An Encyclopedia of Public Opinion*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press (2005).

John, L J Liesman and P Kiser. "Focus Group Assembly." In: Best, Samuel J and Benjamin Radcliff, eds. *Polling America: An Encyclopedia of Public Opinion*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press (2005).

Worthington, C. "Focus Group Moderating." In: Best, Samuel J and Benjamin Radcliff, eds. *Polling America: An Encyclopedia of Public Opinion*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press (2005).

Watts, M. "Watching Debates: A Focus Group Analysis of Voters." *Campaigns & Elections*, June 2002. 27-28, 30, 32, and 44.

## **Session 11 Contracting for Polls - Nuts & Bolts**

*John Benson*

## **POLL QUESTION ASSIGNMENT DUE**

## **Session 12 Public Opinion Polling Abroad and Internet Polling**

*Guest: Humphrey Taylor, Chairman of The Harris Poll/Harris Interactive*

### Assigned Readings:

Mitofsky W.J. "Pollsters.com." *Public Perspective*, 1999. 10(4): 24-26 [ON-LINE]

Taylor H. and Terhanian G. "No Witchcraft Here." *Public Perspective*, 1999. 10(5): 42-43. [ON-LINE]

- Vehovar, V, V Dolmicar and K Lozar Manfreda. "Internet Survey Methods." In: Best, Samuel J and Benjamin Radcliff, eds. *Polling America: An Encyclopedia of Public Opinion*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press (2005).
- Taylor, H. "The Value of Polls in Promoting Good Government and Democracy." In: Manza, J. et al, eds. *Navigating Public Opinion: Polls, Policy, and the Future of American Democracy*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press (2002).
- Taylor, H. "The Case for Publishing (Some) Online Polls" *The Polling Report* January 15, 2007; 23(1). [ON-LINE]
- Ansu-Kyeremeh, K. "The Challenges of Surveying Public Opinion in an Emerging Democracy." *International Journal of Public Opinion*. 11(1): 59-74. [ON-LINE]

**Session 11: Course Review and Wrap-Up**

**Session 12: FINAL EXAM IN CLASS**