Public Opinion and Public Policy
in Advanced Industrial Democracies
(POL-GA.3300.001)

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Overview

To what extent do those who run democratic governments follow the will of the people when they make policy? This semester, we will explore this question with readings of empirical analyses—both classic and contemporary—of the relationship between public opinion and public policy. Many of our examples will come from the United States, where political scientists’ investigations of this relationship began in earnest some fifty years ago. But our reach will extend to other advanced industrial democracies, allowing us to expand both our substantive breadth and to compare the impact of varying characteristics of national political institutions. Our focus will be both substantive (assessing what we know about the opinion-policy relationship and the questions that remain) and methodological (how scholars should go about answering these questions, with a particular emphasis on measurement). Of course, in the background will lurk important normative questions as well.

Logistics

class meetings: Wednesdays, 2 – 3:50 pm
19 W. 4th Street, Room 212

contact info: email (best way to reach me): patrick.egan@nyu.edu
office phone: (212) 992-8078

office hours: Tuesdays, 2 -4 pm (and by appointment, if necessary)
19 W. 4th Street, Room 327
Prerequisites

Enough familiarity with quantitative analysis to comprehend and critique standard multiple regression and measurement models. (This can be satisfied by successful completion of—or concurrent enrollment in—the NYU Politics Department’s Quant I and Quant II courses.) Successful completion of the NYU Politics Department’s American Government and Politics core Ph.D. seminar is also encouraged.

Requirements

Grades will be based upon the following criteria:

- Attendance and active participation in seminar.
- Presentations of seminar readings. We’ll discuss the schedule for these presentations in our first meeting. The formats of these presentations will vary with the nature of the readings.
- A final research paper (of 25 to 40 pages in length) that advances your own scholarship on a relevant topic.
  - The topic of the paper must be approved by me no later than one week before the beginning of Spring Break (March 4). You will make brief presentations of your research plans in seminar on March 23.
  - You will make a presentation on your findings to seminar participants on our last meeting on May 4. The paper is due on Wednesday, May 11.

Readings

All assigned journal articles may be found online via JSTOR and other electronic archives. Happily, the NYU Libraries now make most of the assigned readings from books available online, as well. Any other readings that come from books will be made available within a week of the relevant seminar meeting date.
Schedule

I. Overview

What kinds of theoretical expectations do we bring to the study of the relationship between the preferences of citizens and the policies generated by representative governments? What is the landscape of current research, and where do the interesting questions lie?

Week 1: January 27  Introduction to the seminar. Assignments of weekly presentations.

Week 2: February 3  The state of the field.


Additional background reading about public opinion for the uninitiated:

Start with a light introduction:


Now something more thorough:

II. Measurement

How should we empirically measure the relationship between public opinion and public policy? To what sorts of concerns should we be attuned when measuring citizens’ preferences, the outputs of governments, and the extent to which they correspond with one another?

Week 3: February 10  Theoretical concerns about empirical analyses.


Week 4: February 17  Recent advances in measurement.


III. The Opinion-Policy Relationship

How do our analytical strategies change—and the findings diverge—as our lens shifts from examining relationships between constituents and legislators, subnational polities and policies, and the citizenries of nations and national policies? How have the approaches changed over time?

Week 5: February 24

Dyadic Representation.


Week 6: March 2

Relationships at the Subnational Level.


Week 7: March 9

Relationships at the National Level I.

Note: we will need to reschedule this class.


March 16

Spring break.
Week 8: March 23  Relationships at the National Level II.


IV. The Mediating Effects of Institutions

How does the opinion-policy relationship vary with political institutions within countries (in particular, the executive and judicial branches); how is it mediated by political parties; and how is it affected by institutions varying across nations (in particular, those in majoritarian versus proportional systems)?

Week 9: March 30 The Executive and the Judiciary.


Week 10: April 6 The Role of Parties.


Week 11: April 13  Majoritarian and Proportional Systems.


V. The Role of Elections

How can elections play a role in strengthening the opinion-policy relationship?

Week 12: April 20  Elections and representation.


VI. Inequalities and Elites

As elected officials make policy, do they pay attention to the preferences of some citizens than others?

Week 13: April 27  Inequality and representation.


Week 14: May 4  Student presentations of research projects.