

JOUR 542

Public Opinion and Persuasion

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Office Hours: TBD and by appointment.

Spring 2026

SJMC 320

Monday and Wednesday, 2:20pm–3:35pm

“To speak with precision of public opinion is a task not unlike coming to grips with the Holy Ghost.”

— V.O. Key, 1961, *Public Opinion and American Democracy*, p. 8

Course Description

This is a course introducing the concepts of public opinion and persuasion with emphasis on their relevance in the domains of civic life and strategic communication. Students will gain a foundation in the psychological study of attitudes, the role of public opinion in democracies, and how communication shapes and reflects beliefs of society. The course progresses to review major theories of persuasion and public opinion change. Ultimately, students will gather public opinion data and submit a report on their findings.

Student Learning Outcomes

Students who successfully complete this course will:

- Understand the meaning of public opinion and its role in a democracy.
- Be familiar with the predominant methods for scientific measurement of opinion.
- Know how mass media influence and reflect public opinion.
- Gain an understanding of the psychological and historical forces that help to explain the great diversity of opinions in free societies.
- Learn how to apply theories of persuasion for strategic communication purposes.
- Be savvy consumers of reporting of information that purports to be about public opinion.

Required Materials

Textbooks and readings

Perloff, R. M. (2023). *The dynamics of persuasion: Communication and attitudes in the 21st century* (8th ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003290056>

Technology requirements

Links to articles, assignments, quizzes, and rubrics are located on Blackboard. To participate in learning activities and complete assignments, you will need:

- Access to a working computer that has a current operating system with updates installed, plus speakers or headphones to hear lecture presentations
- Reliable Internet access and a UofSC email account

- A current Internet browser that is compatible with Blackboard (Google Chrome is the recommended browser for Blackboard)
- Microsoft Word as your word processing program
- Reliable data storage for your work, such as a USB drive or Office365 OneDrive cloud storage

If your computer does not have Microsoft Word, Office 365 ProPlus package is available to you free of charge and allows you to install Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Outlook, OneNote, Publisher, and Access on up to 5 PCs or Macs and Office apps on other mobile devices including tablets. Office 365 also includes unlimited cloud storage on OneDrive. To download Office 365 ProPlus, log into your student (University) email through a web browser, choose Settings (top right corner), and select software. If you have further questions or need help with the software, please contact the Service Desk

(https://www.sc.edu/about/offices_and_divisions/university_technology_services/support/servicedesk.php).

Minimal technical skills needed

Minimal technical skills are needed in this course. Most course work will be completed and submitted in Blackboard. Therefore, you must have consistent and reliable access to a computer and the Internet. The minimal technical skills you need to have include the ability to:

- Organize and save electronic files
- Use UofSC email and attached files
- Check email and Blackboard daily
- Download and upload documents
- Locate information with a browser
- Use Blackboard.

Evaluation

This class will use the standard USC grading scheme:

A	90-100%	B+	85-89.99%	B	80-84.99%
C+	75-79.99%	C	70-74.99%	D+	65-69.99%
D	60-64.99%	F	0-59.99%		

Assignments

The final grade in the class will tentatively consist of the following:

Assignment	% Total
Exam 1	20%
Exam 2	20%
Exam 3	20%
Topic Presentation + Report	25%
Poll Autopsy	15%
Total	100%

Exams (x3)

Three non-cumulative in-class exams will assess students' understanding of course concepts, theories, and evidence. Exams are administered in class via **Blackboard using Respondus LockDown Browser**. **No external resources** (notes, books, websites, AI tools, or other assistance) are permitted during exams. Questions will emphasize conceptual precision, application to examples, and interpretation of claims about public opinion and persuasion.

Poll Autopsy

Students will locate a recently published report of a public opinion poll (mass media, research firm, or academic source) and write a **methods-focused critique**. The paper should identify key design choices (e.g., sampling, mode, weighting, question wording, nonresponse, measurement validity) and evaluate whether the source's conclusions are warranted given the evidence and limitations. The goal is to become a skilled consumer of polling claims and to practice methodological reasoning rather than to "fact-check" the substantive topic.

Topic Presentation and Report

In teams, students will select a public opinion topic and deliver an **analytic, descriptive presentation** summarizing what is known using credible data and sources (e.g., reputable polls/surveys, academic research, official statistics where relevant). Presentations should (a) clearly define the opinion object, (b) describe levels/trends and subgroup differences where possible, and (c) discuss uncertainty/measurement limitations. Teams will also submit a brief **evidence dossier** (e.g., annotated bibliography + data/source appendix) documenting the sources used and how each supports the presentation's claims.

Grade Disputes

Any dispute about a grade must be done within one week of the grade posting. You should compose an email, making clear that you are challenging the grade, with information about the assignment and details (using the rubric and/or guidelines) of why you feel you should receive a different score. I may request that we meet to discuss it further. There is no guarantee of a grade change in response to such a challenge, but you can rest assured that you will not be penalized even if additional errors are discovered.

Course Policies

Reasonable Accommodation Policy

Reasonable accommodations are available for students with a documented disability. If you have a disability and may need accommodations to fully participate in this class, contact the Student Disability Resource Center: 777-6142, TDD 777-6744, email sasds@mailbox.sc.edu, or stop by LeConte College Room 112A. All accommodations must be approved through the Student Disability Resource Center.

Late policy

Late work may be accepted with full credit under most circumstances *with the important exceptions of quizzes and discussion questions*. Communication with the instructor is essential for receiving credit on late work. The goal is to be flexible, but not fall behind in the course. This policy may be changed at short notice if students are struggling to keep up without the motivation of late penalties.

Faculty feedback and response time

Allow 10-14 days for grades on major assignments, although sometimes you will receive feedback sooner. In general, expect a response to emails within 24 hours on business days. If you haven't gotten a response after a couple of days, feel free to reach out again.

Written assignments

All written work must be typed and should conform to APA formatting, citing, and referencing guidelines (see <http://www.apastyle.org/> and <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/>). Title pages and abstracts are never required, however. You will not be graded for adhering to all the details of APA formatting, but you must communicate clearly so as to avoid plagiarism and confusion.

Unless otherwise noted, assignments must be submitted no later than 11:59 p.m. on the assigned due date.

Academic misconduct

Honor Code

Every student has a role in maintaining the academic reputation of the university. It is imperative that you refrain from engaging in plagiarism, cheating, falsifying your work and/or assisting other students in violating the Honor Code. Two important components of the Honor Code:

- Faculty members are required to report potential violations of the Honor Code to the Office of Student Conduct and Academic Integrity.
- When a student is uncertain as to whether conduct would violate the Honor Code, it is their responsibility to seek clarification from the appropriate faculty member.

Your enrollment in this class signifies your willingness to accept these responsibilities and uphold the Honor Code of the University of South Carolina. Please review the Honor Code Policies. Any deviation from this expectation can result in a referral to the Office of Student Conduct and Academic Integrity.

Copyright

Lectures and course materials (which is inclusive of my presentations, tests, exams, outlines, and lecture notes) may be protected by copyright. You are encouraged to take notes and utilize course materials for your own educational purpose. However, you are not to reproduce or distribute this content without my expressed written permission. This includes sharing course materials to online social study sites like Course Hero and other services.

Students who publicly reproduce, distribute or modify course content maybe in violation of the university's Honor Code's Complicity policy, which states: sharing academic work with another student (either in person or electronically) without the permission of the instructor. To best understand the parameters around copyright and intellectual property review <http://www.sc.edu/policies/acaf133.pdf>.

Collaboration

A student's grades are to represent to what extent that individual student has mastered the course content. You should assume that you are to complete course work individually (without the use of another person or un-cited outside source) unless otherwise indicated by the instructor. It is your responsibility to seek clarification if you are unclear about what constitutes proper or improper collaboration. For skills assignments, you will be given a more specific definition of what constitutes collaboration because seeking outside help is one of the skills you should develop.

Reusing course materials

The use of previous semester course materials is not allowed in this course. This applies to homework, projects, and quizzes. Because these aids are not available to all students within the course, their use by any individual student undermines the fundamental principles of fairness and disrupts your professor's ability to accurately evaluate your work. Any potential violations will be forwarded to the Office of Student Conduct and Academic Integrity for review.

Diversity and inclusion

The university is committed to a campus environment that is inclusive, safe, and respectful for all persons, and one that fully embraces the Carolinian Creed. To that end, all course activities will be conducted in an atmosphere of friendly participation and interaction among colleagues, recognizing and appreciating the unique experiences, background, and point of view each student brings. You are expected at all times to apply the highest academic standards to this course and to treat others with dignity and respect.

Changing nature of this syllabus

The assignments, policies, and readings in this syllabus are subject to change at any time. If this occurs, the changes will be announced and an updated version of the syllabus will be posted to Blackboard.

Unless otherwise specified, quizzes, discussion posts, and other assignments are due at 11:59 PM on the date they are due.

If the information on Blackboard contradicts this syllabus, assume the information on Blackboard is correct.

Schedule

This schedule provides a broad overview of the topics covered for the course and due dates for assignments. More details will be available on Blackboard, where you will access any necessary materials.

Unit 1

Date	Topic	Readings due
Mon Jan 12	Course intro; persuasion vs. public opinion	Perloff Ch. 1
Wed Jan 14	Foundations of persuasion	Perloff Ch. 2
Mon Jan 19	No class (MLK Day)	—
Wed Jan 21	Historical/scientific/ethical foundations	Perloff Ch. 3

Date	Topic	Readings due
Mon Jan 26	Attitudes: definition & structure	Perloff Ch. 4
Wed Jan 28	Defining public opinion	Herbst (2015)
Mon Feb 2	Public opinion in politics; opinion/action	Kinder (1998) (<i>as assigned/excerpted</i>)
Wed Feb 4	Survey research practice	Hillygus (2015)
Mon Feb 9	Attitude measurement	Perloff Ch. 9
Wed Feb 11	Question wording / measurement effects	Schwarz (1999)
Mon Feb 16	Knowledge & competence (nonattitudes; political knowledge)	Visser, Holbrook, & Krosnick (SAGE <i>handbook chapter</i>)
Wed Feb 18	Exam review + catch-up day (light/no new reading)	(<i>Optional catch-up day</i>)
Mon Feb 23	EXAM 1 (20%)	Covers Unit 1

Unit 2

Date	Topic	Readings due
Wed Feb 25	Media & public opinion I: knowledge gap	Lind (2020) "Media use and the knowledge gap"
Mon Mar 2	Media & public opinion I (continued): choice environments	Prior (2005)
Wed Mar 4	Media & public opinion II: news quality / "burglar alarms"	Zaller (2003); Bennett (2003)
Mon Mar 9	No class (Spring Break)	—
Wed Mar 11	No class (Spring Break)	—
Mon Mar 16	Attitudes → behavior	Perloff Ch. 5
Wed Mar 18	Attitude functions	Perloff Ch. 6
Mon Mar 23	EXAM 2 (20%)	Covers Unit 2

Unit 3

Date	Topic	Readings due
Wed Mar 25	Processing persuasive communications	Perloff Ch. 10
Mon Mar 30	"Who says it" I: authority/charisma	Perloff Ch. 11
Wed Apr 1	"Who says it" II: credibility/attractiveness	Perloff Ch. 12
Mon Apr 6	Message factors	Perloff Ch. 13
Wed Apr 8	Exam review + catch-up + * project work day	(No new reading)*

Date	Topic	Readings due
Mon Apr 13	EXAM 3 (20%)	Covers Unit 3 (Ch. 10–15)
Wed Apr 15	Contexts overview + project work day	Perloff Ch. 16–18
Mon Apr 20	Team presentations	—
Wed Apr 22	Team presentations	—
Mon Apr 27	Team presentations + wrap-up / course eval reminder	—