

Public Opinion and American Democracy
Barnard College
Spring 2019

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Class location: Empirical Reasoning Center, Milstein Center
Class time: Mondays and Wednesdays, 10:10-11:25am

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

There is widespread discussion and anxiety surrounding the state of democracy today, both in the United States and around the world. Has democracy in fact eroded in recent years? If so, how and why? And if not, why do so many people think it has? In this course, we will think critically about the state of American democracy in connection with a cross-university consortium on Democratic Erosion (www.democratic-erosion.com). We will draw many of our reading materials from the core Democratic Erosion syllabus, building a common foundation from which to engage in a dialogue with students across the nation and the world on challenges facing democracy.

We will also bring our own perspective to this forum. Our class will focus in particular on the public's role in democracy. Much of the dialogue on democratic erosion in the United States has been about whether the American public is sufficiently committed to civil rights and other key democratic principles, equipped with accurate information to evaluate policy alternatives and political representatives, and willing to base their political decisions on such information rather than other factors like partisan loyalty or racial resentment. Should we be concerned about the American public's ability to carry out the imperatives of democracy?

While this question is critical, it is not new. Scholars have long doubted the ability of humans, and American voters in particular, to perform the tasks required of them by democratic theorists. In 2016, political scientists Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels published a provocative and widely discussed book on this subject titled *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. American democracy has never really worked well, they argue, because it is based on fundamental misunderstandings of the public and its capabilities. This raises the question: are problems

with American democracy that are being discussed today acute or chronic? Put differently, has democracy really eroded or are long-standing deficiencies simply becoming more visible? Either way, how should we think about democracy moving forward?

In sum, over the course of the semester, students will think critically about normative and empirical questions about public opinion and American democracy, and the relationship between them, in historical and comparative perspective. For details on how the semester will develop, see notes in italics on the week-by-week outline.

This class will also have a significant technical component, and will be taught in connection with the Empirical Reasoning Center. Students will learn to access, manage, and analyze data measuring public views on political candidates, officeholders, institutions, and issues using R. This will allow students to investigate their own questions about the public. Do you think it would be useful to break down answers to a particular survey question by party? Urbanity? Race? Something else? Would you like to see if answers have changed over time? This class will give students the skills to do so, facilitating critical thinking about questions motivating this class, and also preparing students for research projects in other courses and beyond Barnard. To balance the different aims of the course, our class time will be split between lecture, discussion, and hands-on lessons in the Empirical Reasoning Center's computer lab.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Readings and assignments are geared toward helping students achieve the following objectives:

1. Understand how public characteristics and views have been measured over time, and think critically about the strengths and weaknesses of different measurement strategies.
2. Become familiar with key elements of the political science canon on public opinion and representation, and evaluate them theoretically and empirically.
3. Consider how these scholarly works might enrich our understanding of current events, and how current events might lead us to reevaluate questions and arguments presented in scholarly work.
4. Learn how to access, manage, and analyze important sources of data on the public.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Your final grade will reflect 4 components: class participation, homework assignments, and a take-home final exam.

Final grade breakdown:

| | |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| Class participation | 15% |
| Homework assignments (4 x 15%) | 60% |
| Take-home final exam | 25% |

Class Participation

Overview. While our class meetings will involve some lecturing, they will also include discussions and group activities. Your contributions in class will account for 15% of your final grade. Since you cannot contribute if you are not present, frequent absence will affect your grade. Students will be evaluated not only on the number of contributions to discussions and group activities, but also the depth of their engagement with class materials.

The Democratic Erosion blog (<http://democratic-erosion.com/blog/>) provides another venue for class participation. There will be regular posts to this blog from students in similar courses across the world. Students in this class may gain participation credit for commenting on other students' posts in a way that demonstrates critical thinking about the readings and lecture materials. (As explained in more detail below, students may gain extra credit on the final exam for writing blog posts. This is separate from the participation grade.) Engagement with the blog is optional—that is, students can receive an A for class participation simply by contributing to discussions in class. This is merely an alternative way to participate. If you choose to contribute to the blog, please send me a link to your comments.

Cell phone and laptop policy. Cell phones must be silenced and placed out of sight (e.g. in a bag) during class. Students are encouraged to limit their use of laptops in class. Research shows that electronic note taking significantly reduces students' grades. There is also a "secondhand smoke" effect. That is, your laptop can distract others sitting nearby, particularly if you are using it for anything other than note taking. Repeated use of electronic devices in a manner that is distracting to others (including the instructor) will affect your participation grade.

Homework Assignments

In lieu of major points of evaluation before the final (e.g., midterm, paper assignment), there will be four take-home assignments, each worth 15% of your final grade, over the course of the semester. These assignments will have technical and substantive components. The former will test your skills in managing and analyzing public opinion data in R, and the latter will test your understanding of concepts and arguments covered in lectures and readings.

Due dates are as follows:

Homework 1: 2/11
Homework 2: 3/4
Homework 3: 4/1
Homework 4: 4/29

These assignments are due at the beginning of class, and will be distributed a week before their due date. Part of your last assignment will be known from the outset, however. For the substantive portion of your last homework assignment, you will complete the Democratic Erosion's "Do Something" task (see below for details).

Students may work with one partner on these assignments. These partnerships should be disclosed on the front page of the assignment upon submittal. If the partners have completed the entire assignment together, including the substantive questions, they should submit one document to the instructor. In these cases, the partners will receive exactly the same grade. If they have completed any part of the assignment independently (e.g., perhaps they did the technical section together but the substantive section independently), they should submit separate documents to the instructor with an explanation of what was done together and what was done independently. Parts completed independently will be graded separately. Students may, but do not have to have the same partner for every assignment. Students are also free to complete these assignments on their own if they prefer.

Final Exam

The final exam will be a take-home exam distributed on the last day of class and due by the end of our scheduled exam slot, as determined by the College. If, for example, the College schedules our final exam from 1-4pm on Friday May 10th, then the take-home final exam will be due by 4pm on Friday May 10th. I will announce the concrete date and time once the College releases the final exam schedule.

Students may earn up to 10 points of extra credit on the final exam by publishing a piece on the Democratic Erosion blog. You have until the last day of class to complete this *optional* assignment. If you publish something to the blog, please send me a copy. Only one such post will be accepted for extra credit, and it will be graded on a 10-point scale. I will circulate guidelines for writing excellent posts from the Democratic Erosion consortium.

"Do something"

For the substantive section of the last homework, students will follow the Democratic Erosion consortium's "Do something" assignment, detailed below.

"Finally, over the course of the semester each student is responsible for attending a political event in the area around their university. The type of event they attend is up to them: it could be a protest, a pro- or anti-Trump rally, a town hall meeting with local or state representatives, an Indivisible meeting, etc. Afterwards they write a blog post reflecting on their experience, drawing on the readings from class to help inform their reflections."

Students may, but are not required to, publish their blog post on the Democratic Erosion blog. Either way, attach a copy of the post to your last homework assignment. There will also be a short technical section, as with other homework assignments, distributed a week before the homework is due.

“A PASTRY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS”

We are a diverse community in many ways (e.g., with respect to age, race, geography, ideology, income, educational background, religion, sexuality, gender identification, and life experiences, among other things) and this is a pillar of our strength. Establishing an open and inclusive learning environment for all students is of the utmost importance. We will have a few discussions in class about this, and I hope to continue them outside of class as well. To this end, I will be hosting two informal “student hours” outside of class (space and time TBD) over the course of the semester. Pastries and coffee will be served. Please come so I do not have to eat pastries by myself.

This is meant to be a space where students and the instructor can gather—outside the classroom setting— and talk about their experiences in class and on campus with respect to inclusivity, hear about others’ experiences, and brainstorm ideas for how we can do better. You do not need to come prepared with anything specific to say, or even say anything at all. Students are equally welcome to speak and to listen.

BARNARD COLLEGE WELLNESS STATEMENT

It is important for undergraduates to recognize and identify the different pressures, burdens, and stressors you may be facing, whether personal, emotional, physical, financial, mental, or academic. We as a community urge you to make yourself—your own health, sanity, and wellness—your priority throughout this term and your career here. Sleep, exercise, and eating well can all be a part of a healthy regimen to cope with stress. Resources exist to support you in several sectors of your life, and we encourage you to make use of them. Should you have any questions about navigating these resources, please visit these sites:

- <http://barnard.edu/primarycare>
- <http://barnard.edu/counseling>
- <http://barnard.edu/wellwoman/about>
- [Stressbusters Support Network](#)

BARNARD HONOR CODE

Students are expected to comply with the Barnard Honor Code (<http://barnard.edu/dos/honorcode>) for all course requirements.

BARNARD COLLEGE OFFICE OF DISABILITIES SERVICES (ODS)

Accommodations will be made for students with disabilities in accordance with college policy. For details, see the ODS webpage (<http://barnard.edu/provost/teaching/courses>).

COURSE TEXTS AND SOFTWARE

The books listed below have been ordered through Book Culture and placed on reserve at Barnard Library. I have also purchased a copy of the Chang book for the Empirical Reasoning Center's lab. You are welcome to use it when you are working in the lab. Please do not take it out of the room, so it is always there for students to share. I have also deposited two copies of the Achen and Bartels (2016) and Wheelan (2013) books in the Barnard FLIP Library (<https://library.barnard.edu/flip>). These may be taken out in accordance with the FLIP library's policies.

The prices listed here indicate the cost to purchase a new paperback copy. Please note that used and electronic versions are often available at a lower cost. All other materials are available through Courseworks.

Required

- Achen, Christopher and Larry Bartels. 2016. *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. Princeton: Princeton University Press (\$29.95).
- Wheelan, Charles. 2013. *Naked Statistics: Stripping the Dread from the Data*. New York: W.W. Norton (\$16.95).

Recommended

- Chang, Winston. 2018. *R Graphics Cookbook, 2nd Edition*. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, Inc. (\$69.99).

AFFORDABLE ACCESS TO COURSE TEXTS

All students deserve to be able to access course texts. The high costs of textbooks and other course materials prohibit access and perpetuate inequity, and Barnard librarians are partnering with students, faculty, and staff to increase access. By the first day of advance registration for each term, you should be able to view on CourseWorks information provided by your faculty about required texts (including ISBN or author, title, publisher and copyright date) and their prices. Once you have selected your classes, here are some cost-free methods for accessing course texts, recommended by the Barnard Library: find out if your faculty has placed the texts on reserve at Barnard Library or another Columbia library, and look for course texts using *CLIO* (library catalog), *Borrow Direct* (request books from partner libraries), *Interlibrary Loan* (request book chapters from any library), and *NYPL*. Students with financial need or insecurity can check items out from the FLIP lending libraries in the Barnard Library and Butler Library and can consult with the *Dean of*

Studies and the *Financial Aid Office* about additional affordable alternatives for getting access to course texts. Talk with your librarian and visit the *Barnard Library Textbook Affordability guide* (library.barnard.edu/textbook-affordability) for more details.

COURSE OUTLINE

Please note:

- This week-by-week schedule is approximate, and subject to change. Please look out for e-mails from the instructor about adjustments to readings and/or the schedule. All changes to readings will be announced at least a week in advance.
- Readings from the Democratic Erosion consortium's syllabus are marked with a [DE].

Week 1

Wed 1/23. Introduction to the course; discussion of inclusiveness and deliberation in the classroom

- Assigned reading
 - Wheelan, Charles. 2013. *Naked Statistics: Stripping the Dread from the Data*. New York: W.W. Norton. Chapters 1-3 (pp. 1-57).
 - Note: I realize that you will not have done this reading by 1/23, since this is when you will receive the syllabus. This reading is meant to complement the first four Foundational R Skills classes.
- In addition to the assigned reading, please also fill out the following short survey for the Democratic Erosion project:
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSef4xAjiNmwm9CJaB2twYst9ABNWRI3R6A6VKg6tH0fbo_LXQ/viewform?usp=sf_link

Week 2

Mon 1/28. Foundational R skills (full lab day)

Wed 1/30. Definitions and theories of democracy and democratic consolidation

What is democracy? We will consider different definitions of democracy and ideas about the role of the public therein.

- Assigned reading [Please note there are four readings in total for this week; the fourth is listed on the next page.]
 - Schumpeter, Joseph. 1947. *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. New York: Harper & Brothers. Chapter 22. [DE]
 - Dahl, Robert. 1972. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven: Yale University Press. Chapter 1. [DE]

- Diamond, Larry. 2002. "Thinking About Hybrid Regimes." *Journal of Democracy* 13(2): pp. 21-35. [DE]
- Lipset, Seymour Martin. 1959. "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy." *American Political Science Review* 53(1): pp. 69-105. [DE]

Week 3

Mon 2/4: Foundational R skills (full lab day)

Wed 2/6: Definitions and theories of democratic erosion

What does it mean for democracy to erode? How can we tell if it's happening? How can it be measured? We will discuss these questions broadly, with especially close attention to characteristics of the public.

- Assigned reading
 - Lust, Ellen & David Waldner. 2015. *Unwelcome Change: Understanding, Evaluating, and Extending Theories of Democratic Backsliding*. Washington, DC: USAID. pp. 1-15. [DE]
 - Lieberman, Robert C. et al. 2017. "Trumpism and American Democracy: History, Comparison, and the Predicament of Liberal Democracy in the United States." Rochester, NY. Social Science Research Network Scholarly Paper 3028990. [DE]
 - Isaac, Jeffrey C. "How Hannah Arendt's classic work on totalitarianism illuminates today's America." *The Washington Post*. December 17, 2016. [DE]
 - Levitsky, Steven & Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown. Chapter 1. [DE]

Week 4

Mon 2/11: Foundational R skills (full lab day)

- **Homework #1 due**

Wed 2/13: Measuring public views

How do we know what we know about the public? We will talk about different ways to measure public views, along with their strengths and weaknesses. We will also talk about criteria for assessing the quality of surveys, and things to keep in mind when interpreting responses to survey questions.

- Assigned reading

- Zaller, John, and Stanley Feldman. "A Simple Theory of the Survey Response: Answering Questions versus Revealing Preferences." *American Journal of Political Science* 36, no. 3 (1992): 579-616.
- Berinsky, Adam. 2005. *Silent Voices: Public Opinion and Political Representation in America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Introduction.
- Wheelan, Charles. 2013. *Naked Statistics: Stripping the Dread from the Data*. New York: W.W. Norton. Chapter 10 (pp. 169-83).

Week 5

Mon 2/18: Foundational R Skills (full lab day)

Wed 2/20: Public knowledge, interest, and attention

How much does the public know and care about politics, and to what extent does this matter? Is it possible to compensate for lack of knowledge and attention with heuristics?

- Assigned reading
 - Bartels, Larry. 2005. "Homer Gets a Tax Cut: Inequality and Public Policy in the American Mind." *Perspectives on Politics* 3(1): 15-31.
 - Lupia, Arthur, Adam Seth Levine, Jesse O. Menning and Gisela Sin. 2007. "Were Bush Tax Cut Supporters 'Simply Ignorant?' A Second Look at Conservatives and Liberals in 'Homer Gets a Tax Cut.'" *Perspectives on Politics* 5(4): 773-784.
 - Lupia, Arthur. 1994. "Shortcuts Versus Encyclopedias: Information and Voting Behavior in California Insurance Reform Elections." *American Political Science Review* 88(1): 63-76.

Week 6

Mon 2/25: Short lab session; propaganda, disinformation and the media

Today, we will discuss two readings from the Democratic Erosion consortium's list on "Propaganda, Disinformation, and the Media" and one supplementary reading by a leading scholar on rumors in American politics.

- Assigned reading
 - Rodriguez, Barrera et al. 2017. "Facts, Alternative Facts, and Fact Checking in Times of Post-Truth Politics." Working paper. [DE]
 - Gunther, Richard et al. 2018. "Fake News Did Have a Significant Impact on the Vote in the 2016 Election." Working paper. [DE]
 - Berinsky, Adam. 2017. "Rumors and Health Care Reform: Experiments in Political Misinformation." *British Journal of Political Science* 47(2): 241-62.

Wed 2/27: Factors shaping political preferences I.

Today, we will start a two-class unit on factors shaping people's political preferences. We will begin by thinking about people as individuals; a later unit will cover group-related factors. Topics will include: ideology, family, personality, self-interest, values, and historical events.

Week 7

Mon 3/4: Short lab lesson; factors shaping political preferences II.

- **Homework #2 due.**

Wed 3/6: Factors shaping evaluation of political representatives.

What kinds of factors shape people's evaluations of their political representatives, and what implications does this have for elections as instruments of democracy?

- Assigned reading
 - Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*, read chapters 5-6 (pp. 116-176), skim chapter 7 (pp. 177-212).

Week 8

Mon 3/11: Short lab lesson; responsiveness to public opinion; direct democracy.

Today, we will discuss the extent to which lawmakers respond to public opinion in making policy. We will also discuss "representational inequality" (the notion that lawmakers are not equally responsive to all citizens), and consider whether the public interest is better served through tools of direct democracy (e.g., referenda).

- Assigned reading
 - Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*, Chapter 3.

Wed 3/13: Groups, political preferences, and democracy I

We will now begin a three-class unit on group-centered views of public opinion and American democracy, discussing ways in which group membership and attitudes toward groups shape public preferences and evaluations of candidates.

- Assigned reading
 - Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*, skim chapter 8 (pp. 213-231).

- Gay, Claudine, Jennifer Hochschild, and Ariel White. 2016. "Americans' Belief in Linked Fate: Does the Measure Capture the Concept?" *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* 1(1): 117-44.
- Sears, David O. and P.J. Henry. 2005. "Over Thirty Years Later: A Contemporary Look at Symbolic Racism and Its Critics." In *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, ed. Mark P. Zanna. New York: Academic Press, pp. 95-150.

Week 9

No class (spring break)

Week 10

Mon 3/25: Short lab lesson; groups, political preferences, and democracy II.

Wed 3/27: Groups, political preferences, and democracy III.

- Assigned reading
 - Cramer, Katherine. 2016. *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chapters 1, 3-6.

Week 11

Mon 4/1: Short lab lesson; partisanship and polarization.

Today, we will begin a two-class unit on partisanship and polarization, which will draw in part on readings from the Democratic Erosion syllabus. To what extent and in what ways has party polarization increased in the American public? Is polarization leading to democratic erosion?

- **Homework #3 due.**

Wed 4/3: Partisanship and polarization.

- Assigned reading
 - Mason, Lilliana. 2018. *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chapters 1 and 3.
 - McCoy, Jennifer, Tahmina Rahman, and Murat Somer. 2018. "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities" in Special Issue on Polarization and Democracy: A Janus-faced Relationship with Pernicious Consequences. *American Behavioral Scientist* (62)1: pp. 16-42.

Week 12

Mon 4/8: Short lab session; public views on democratic principles; public views on government.

Today, we will begin a two-class unit on the substance of public views about democracy and government. We will start by talking about the public's commitment to key democratic principles like civil liberties, putting the present moment in historical perspective. We will also discuss public views on government, and theories as to why Americans are so dissatisfied with their political leaders and institutions today. Finally, we will consider the Democratic Erosion consortium's readings on "populism and demagoguery" in light of our earlier discussion of public views on government and democratic principles.

Wed 4/10: Populism and demagoguery.

- Assigned reading
 - Müller, Jan-Werner. 2016. *What Is Populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
 - Berman, Sheri. 2017. "The Pipe Dream of Undemocratic Liberalism." *Journal of Democracy* 28(3): 29-38.
 - Kendall-Taylor, Andrea & Erica Frantz. "How Democracies Fall Apart: Why Populism is a Pathway to Autocracy." *Foreign Affairs*. December 5, 2016.

Week 13

Today, we will begin a four-class unit on the 2008 and 2016 elections. Did fundamentally different publics elect Barack Obama and Donald Trump? If so, what changed and why? What impacted support for each president before and after their elections, and what implications does this have for our thinking about democracy?

Mon 4/15: Short lab lesson; election and presidency of Barack Obama.

Wed 4/17: Election and presidency of Barack Obama.

- Assigned reading
 - Tesler, Michael and David O. Sears. 2010. *Obama's Race: The 2008 Election and the Dream of a Post-Racial America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Selection TBD.
 - Tesler, Michael. 2016. *Post-Racial or Most-Racial? Race and Politics in the Obama Era*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Selection TBD.

Week 14

Mon 4/22: Short lab lesson; election and presidency of Donald Trump.

- Assigned reading
 - Sides, John, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavrek. 2018. *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Selection TBD.
 - Wood, Thomas. [“Racism motivated Trump voters more than authoritarianism.”](#) The Washington Post. April 17, 2017.
 - Kuhn, David Paul. [“Sorry, Liberals. Bigotry Didn’t Elect Donald Trump.”](#) The New York Times. December 26, 2016.

Wed 4/24: Election and presidency of Donald Trump.

Week 15

Mon 4/29: Short lab lesson; discuss experiences with “Do something” assignment.

- **Homework #4 due.**

Wed 5/1: Resistance

Today, we will discuss readings drawn from the Democratic Erosion syllabus on “resistance”.

- Assigned reading
 - Kitschelt, Herbert. 1986. “Political Opportunity Structures and Political Protest.” *British Journal of Political Science* 16: pp. 57-85.
 - Stephan, Maria & Erica Chenoweth. 2008. “Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict.” *International Security* 33(1): pp. 7-44. Read pp. 7-17 and 25-32.
 - Kestenbaum, Dave. [“Act Six: A Change in the Office Climate,”](#) in [“608: The Revolution Starts at Noon.”](#) *This American Life*. January 20, 2017: 53:28 – 1:04:15.
 - Gerken, Heather. [“We’re about to See States’ Rights Used Defensively against Trump.”](#) *Vox*. December 12, 2016.
 - [Senate Joint Resolution No. 19](#), 2005 Montana Legislature.
 - Riddell, Kelly. [“Anti-Trump Left a Threat to American Democracy.”](#) *The Washington Times*. December 19, 2016.

Week 16

Mon 5/6: Potential next steps in your technical training, and why you should take them; descriptive representation.

In our final meeting, we will discuss the notion of descriptive representation as a remedy for acute and/or chronic problems facing American democracy.

- Assigned reading
 - Mansbridge, Jane. 1999. "Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent 'Yes'." *Journal of Politics* 61(3): 628-657.
 - Harris, Fredrick. 2014. *The Price of the Ticket: Barack Obama and the Rise and Decline of Black Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press. Selection TBD.
 - Wheelan, Naked Statistics, Chapter 10 ("Regression Analysis: The Miracle Elixir"), pp. 185-207.