American Public Opinion and Pressure Groups (POL-UA 9342001)

Fall 2017, Tuesdays, 2-5p

Location to be confirmed.

**SCHEDULING NOTE:** In addition to the regular Tuesday classes, we are also holding time for a make-up lecture, should it be required due to scheduling changes, on **Friday, November 3rd** from 2-5p.

**Instructor Details**

Steve McMahon

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Office hours by appointment. Tuesdays prior to class are generally the best time to meet, although other times may be arranged. Please call my cell to schedule.

**Prerequisites**

N/A

**Class Description**

This class will examine the origins of public opinion research, as well as the impact it has on news coverage, political campaigns, public discourse, elected officials, and in many cases, public policy outcomes. You will learn how to read, analyze, and critically-evaluate public opinion research; you will learn about “leading” and “trailing” research indicators; and you will understand why “character” attributes often matter more than “performance” attributes and issue positions. You will see how political campaigns, lobbyists, public relations professionals and others leverage public opinion to impact perceptions, as well as political, policy and business outcomes. Because this course is being taught in the nation’s capital, where politics and policy converge, we will be able to hear from political professionals from both political parties, congressional staffers, journalists, and others who will share their insights about how they apply public opinion research to conduct campaigns, shape policy, report the news, or address business challenges.

There is an existing and established core reading list for this course, which we will use as the foundational reading for the course. Each week’s lecture topic will cover the assigned reading topics and apply them to real-life examples, so that they can be more easily and clearly understood. My goal in this class is to merge the theory of public opinion with its application in the real world—to show you not just how research instruments are designed, fielded, weighted and interpreted, but also how they are used to get congressmen and senators and presidents elected; how they can be leveraged to help solve business or public
policy challenges; and how the information they contain can be critical to understanding how to best protect or enhance the reputation or business interests of a company or an industry.

Young people often tell me how much they enjoy political campaigns, and sometimes ask whether it’s possible to make a career of working on, running or analyzing campaigns (most of which depend in large measure on managing or shaping public opinion). If you are one of those young people, this course is designed to help you see the many ways you can do what you love, not just as an avocation, but as a career.

Classes will begin with a discussion of the reading assignment, and how it might apply to a specific aspect of public opinion research. Since I will be speaking not only to you, but also with you, I expect everyone to be prepared every week. Following the discussion on the core materials, we will often analyze and discuss a political or issue poll (including tracking and other polling from the previous week, since this is Washington, and there will be many public opinion research instruments released during the semester), and/or hear from a guest lecturer, who may be a public opinion researcher, a campaign operative, a congressional or committee staffer, or a member of the national news media who covers campaigns.

We will occasionally have special guests visit our class to explain how public opinion is formed, shaped and sometimes manipulated by politicians, campaign operatives, the media and interest groups. I always try to tie special guest lectures to the subjects we are studying at the time the guests are available, but these discussions inevitably include the politics, campaigns or current events of the day. Past speakers have included former Governor and presidential candidate Howard Dean, former Republican Party Chairman Michael Steele, Media personalities like David Gregory, Luke Russert, and Kristen Welker from NBC News, MSNBC’s Chris Matthews, the host of Hardball, Liz Sidoti of the Associated Press, as well as prominent media consultants and pollsters from recent Democratic and Republican presidential campaigns. Because most of these individuals are challenging to schedule more than a few weeks (or sometimes, days) in advance and/or have schedules that change frequently, I have not listed them on the syllabus for specific dates but I anticipate that there will be three to five of these special guests at various times throughout the semester. Maintaining the flexibility needed to accommodate their schedules may require us to occasionally move more quickly or more slowly through some of the subjects we will be covering in class, but previous classes have uniformly believed that the value of having these guests was well worth the disruption to a strict adherence to the syllabus schedule that they may have caused. I hope you’ll agree.

### Desired Outcomes

1. You will learn how to read, analyze, and critically-evaluate public opinion research;
2. You will understand the differences between “thermometer” and “projective” polling; between “character” and “performance” attributes, and you will be able to dazzle your friends and family with your astute observations;
3. You will learn how political campaigns, lobbyists, public relations professionals and others leverage public opinion to impact perceptions and outcomes.

### Assessment Components

Five separate components of this course contribute to your grade:

- Two short essays (each worth 20 percent of your grade). These papers, between 4 to
6 pages in length, will require you to briefly analyze a question regarding public opinion. Assignments with details about these papers will be handed out in class. These papers are due at the beginning of class on September 19th and December 5th. I grade based on two criteria: 1) a clear understanding of the material; and 2) an organized, thoughtful and well-written (and proof-read) expression of your ideas, beginning with a thesis statement or paragraph, and ending with a conclusion that persuasively argues for the conclusion you are reaching. Writing and grammatical skills are essential to success in life—and will be important to your success in this class, so please take the time to organize your thoughts and think about how to present them most effectively. And remember, this is how I grade not just essays, but exams, too.

- **A midterm examination** (20 percent). This in-class written exam will cover all material presented in class through September 26th. It will include questions in short-answer and brief-essay format. This exam will be held on October 3rd.

- **A final examination** (20 percent). This two-hour written exam will cover material from the entire semester, with a focus on material presented after the midterm exam. According to the Registrar’s office, this exam is currently scheduled to be held in our classroom on Tuesday, December 12th.

- **Class attendance and participation** (20 percent):

  Attending class is mandatory. Cell phones and electronic equipment should be turned off in class. The lectures will present material not covered in the readings, synthesize ideas and concepts, and apply what you have read and studied to the world of campaigns, politics and public policy. Ideas will be discussed and debated, which requires listening and participation—from everyone. NYU has a strict policy regarding class attendance, which is mandatory. If you seek to be excused from a class, please follow the NYU Washington procedures outlined in the “Attendance Policy” section below. And please do not assume you have been excused until you are officially excused by NYU and can demonstrate that to my satisfaction.

Failure to submit or fulfill any required course component results in failure of the class.
**Assessment Expectations**

**Grade A:** The student makes excellent use of empirical and theoretical material and offers well-structured arguments in his/her work. The student writes comprehensive essays / exam questions and his/her work shows strong evidence of critical thought and extensive reading.

**Grade B:** The candidate shows a good understanding of the problem and has demonstrated the ability to formulate and execute a coherent research strategy.

**Grade C:** The work is acceptable and shows a basic grasp of the research problem. However, the work fails to organize findings coherently and is in need of improvement.

**Grade D:** The work passes because some relevant points are made. However, there may be a problem of poor definition, lack of critical awareness, poor research.

**Grade F:** The work shows that the research problem is not understood; there is little or no critical awareness and the research is clearly negligible.

**Attendance Policy**

Study abroad at Global Academic Centers is an academically intensive and immersive experience, in which students from a wide range of backgrounds exchange ideas in discussion-based seminars. Learning in such an environment depends on the active participation of all students. And since classes typically meet once or twice a week, even a single absence can cause a student to miss a significant portion of a course. To ensure the integrity of this academic experience, class attendance at the centers is mandatory, and unexcused absences will affect students' semester grades. Students are responsible for making up any work missed due to absence. Repeated absences in a course may result in failure. At all Global Academic Centers, unexcused absences will be penalized with a two percent deduction from the student's final course grade.

To seek an excused absence for medical reasons, students must use the online absence reporting form within 24 hours of their first missed class. Students may be required to produce a doctor’s note with that day’s date, especially if the student has missed any classes already that semester or if exams/presentations or papers occurred or were due in the missed class.

Non-medical absences must be discussed with the Academic Program Coordinator at least 7 days before the missed date(s) in question. If faculty members do not receive notification of an excused absence, the student has not procured an excused absence.

NYU Washington, DC expects students to arrive to class promptly (both at the beginning and after any breaks), to be attentive, and to remain for the duration of the class. If full class attendance and participation becomes a problem, it is the prerogative of each instructor to apply the rule for unexcused absences, which may include a two percent deduction from the student’s final course grade.

Students are responsible for making up any work missed due to absence. This means they should initiate email and/ or office hour discussions to discuss any missed lectures and assignments and arrange a timeline for submitting missed work.
Final exams must be taken at their designated times. Final exams may not be taken early, and students should not plan to leave Washington, DC before the end of the finals week.

Please note that for classes involving a field trip or other external visit, transportation difficulties are never grounds for an excused absence. It is the student’s responsibility to arrive at the announced meeting point in a punctual and timely fashion. Staff members may always be reached by cell phone for advice regarding public transportation.

### Late Submission of Work

1. Written work due in class must be submitted during the class time to the professor.

2. Late work should be emailed to the faculty as soon as it is completed. If the assignment must be submitted in person, the Program Coordinator for Academics can collect on behalf of the faculty between the hours of 10-6, M-F.

3. Late work will be reduced for a fraction of a letter grade (e.g: A to A-, A- to B+, etc.) for every day it is late, including weekends.

4. Written work during the semester that is submitted 5 days after the submission date (including weekends) without an agreed extension fails and is given a zero.

5. Students who arrive to class late for an exam do not have automatic approval to take extra time to complete the exam.

6. Students who miss an exam (including the final) without previously arranged permission will receive a zero on that exam.

7. Assignments due during finals week that are submitted more than 3 days late without previously arranged extensions will not be accepted and will receive a zero. Any exceptions or extensions for work during finals week must be discussed with the Site Director.

### Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities who believe that they may need accommodations in a class are encouraged to contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at (212) 998-4980 as soon as possible to better ensure that such accommodations are implemented in a timely fashion. For more information, see [Study Away and Disability](#).

### Plagiarism Policy

As the University's policy on "Academic Integrity for Students at NYU" states: "At NYU, a commitment to excellence, fairness, honesty, and respect within and outside the classroom is essential to maintaining the integrity of our community. By accepting membership in this community, students take responsibility for demonstrating these values in their own conduct and for recognizing and supporting these values in others."
Students at Global Academic Centers must follow the University and school policies.

The presentation of another person's words, ideas, judgment, images or data as though they were your own, whether intentionally or unintentionally, constitutes an act of plagiarism.

NYU Washington, DC takes plagiarism very seriously; penalties follow and may exceed those set out by your home school. All your written work must be submitted as a hard copy AND in electronic form to the instructor. Your instructor may ask you to sign a declaration of authorship form.

It is also an offense to submit work for assignments from two different courses that is substantially the same (be it oral presentations or written work). If there is an overlap of the subject of your assignment with one that you produced for another course (either in the current or any previous semester), you MUST inform your professor.

For guidelines on academic honesty, clarification of the definition of plagiarism, examples of procedures and sanctions, and resources to support proper citation, please see:

http://www.nyu.edu/about/policies-guidelines-compliance/policies-and-guidelines/academic-integrity-for-students-at-nyu.html

http://gls.nyu.edu/page/gls.academicintegrity

http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity


Religious Observances

Students observing a religious holiday during regularly scheduled class time are entitled to miss class without any penalty to their grade. This is for the holiday only and does not include the days of travel that may come before and/or after the holiday.

Students must notify their professor and the Washington, DC Academics team in writing via email at least 7 days before being absent for this purpose.
**Required Text(s)**


**Make sure you read this [8th] edition, which is updated with the latest polling and election results.**

(EPA) Pollock III, Philip H. 2005. The Essentials of Political Analysis Washington: CQ Press. 3rd edition. You may also buy the 2nd edition; if so, let me know and I'll tell you the corresponding page numbers.


2016 2016 and Beyond: How Republicans Can Elect a President in the New America by Whit Ayres, Resurgent Republic Press. **Note: we will be using this book to debate the proposition based on what we have learned in class, as well as what happened in the 2016 presidential campaign.**

Additional readings will be assigned via email or made available by me between classes, so please plan on regularly checking your email for such assignments. Generally speaking, these will touch upon a current campaign, event, recent poll, or other emerging political story that is being covered or broadly discussed in the media during the semester.

**Additional Required Equipment**

I assume everyone has or has easy access to a computer and the internet for outside reading and research assignments. I will be assigning additional reading on current topics via email between classes for discussion in class. Other outside reading will include real-time polling and analysis from websites like realclearpolitics.com, which we will be discussing in class each week. If you do not have access to email, a computer or the internet, please let me know.

**Internet Research Guidelines**

N/A

**Session 1**

Public Opinion; What is it, Why it Matters and To Whom; How Public Opinion Research is Done Today

Tuesday, August 29

- TOC, Ch 1: Opinion Flows
- APO, Ch. 1.

Plus, skim/surf/Explore:
- Realclearpolitics.com [take a look at past 2016 presidential and senate polls online]
• Politico.com [read whatever stories about politics and/or campaigns that interest you]

*And Please log on and look around the following: The American Presidency Project*

www.presidency.ucsb.edu

**Session 2**

**History and How Polling is Done; Key Concepts and Terms; Polling Design and Pitfalls**

Tuesday, September 5

• EPA, Chapter 2
• APO, Sections 2.1-2.4

Special Guest: Dr. Doug Usher, Democratic Pollster

**Session 3**

**What Do Americans Know? Political Information, Response Instability, and Survey Response**

Tuesday, September 12

• APO, Ch. 3.
• Take the Pew Political Intelligence/News IQ Test at http://www.pewresearch.org/quiz/the-news-iq-quiz/

**Session 4**

**Analyzing Data and the Consequences of Political Knowledge**

Tuesday, September 19

• EPA pp. 54-67; 78-90; 94-110.

**FIRST SHORT ESSAY DUE AT BEGINNING OF CLASS**

**Session 5**

**The Role of Self-Interest; Socializing Citizens and Partisans**

Tuesday, September 26

• APO, Ch. 5

**Session 6**

**MID-TERM EXAM**

Tuesday, October 3

**Mid Term Exam**

**NOTE: There Will Be NO CLASS ON OCTOBER 10th** due to NYU Fall Break

**NOTE: THERE MAY BE A MAKEUP CLASS ON FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 3RD FROM 2-5p**
Session 7
The Miracle of Aggregation and Trends Over Time
Tuesday, October 17
- APO, Ch. 4
- TOC, Ch. 2

Session 8
The Issue Evolution Theory: Left and Right Movement and The Outsider in Politics
Tuesday, October 24
- TOC, Ch. 3

Session 9
The Nation’s Attitudes: What’s Changed and The Role of Media
Tuesday, October 31
- APO, Ch. 8
- Special Guest Speaker from NBC News

NOTE: THERE MAY BE A MAKEUP CLASS ON FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 4TH FROM 2-5p

Session 10
Media Effects on Election. Pre-Election Polls and Predictions
Tuesday, November 7
- Review RealClearPolitics National and Battleground Presidential Polls
- TOC, Ch. 4
- We will also discuss and evaluate a National Election Day Exit Poll Questionnaire

Session 11
Predicting Election Outcomes: Were/Are Pre-Election Polls Right?
Tuesday, November 14
- APO, Ch. 9
- APO, Section 2.5
- Fair, Ray C. (2002) Predicting Presidential Elections and Other Things. Ch. 3 (R)
- Paul R. Abramson, John H. Aldrich, and David W. Rohde (2007). Change and Continuity in the 2004 and 2006 Elections. Ch. 8 (R)
- National Election Pool Election Day Questionnaire, 2004. (B)
- We will compare National exit poll results to actual results

Session 12
Do Elected Officials Listen to Us? Who’s Leading Whom?
Tuesday, November 21  
•  APO, Ch. 10 and 11.

**Session 13**  
**Red States and Blue States; Mid-Terms versus Presidential Elections**

Tuesday, November 28  
•  *2016 and Beyond*, by Whit Ayres, Chapters 1-5 (pp 1-96)

**Session 14**  
**Can Republicans Win in The New America**

Tuesday, December 5  
•  *2016 and Beyond*, by Whit Ayres, Chapters 6-10 (pp 97-210)
•  Special Guest: Whit Ayres

**SECOND SHORT ESSAY DUE AT BEGINNING OF CLASS**

**Session 15**  
**Leveraging Public Opinion to Impact Policy or Business Outcomes: The BP Story**

Tuesday, December 12  
**FINAL EXAM**

**Classroom Etiquette**
Phones and other electronic devices should be turned off and put away during class.

**Required Co-curricular Activities**
[Click here and enter information about required activities, whether organised by NYU or not.]
[i.e. anything from visitors, guest speakers, special events etc.]

**Suggested Co-curricular Activities**
[Click here and enter information about suggested activities, societies, lectures, etc.]
[i.e. anything from visitors, guest speakers, special events etc.]

**Your Instructor**
Steve McMahon is an attorney and longtime political strategist who has worked on dozens of Democratic political campaigns at every level, and has advised some of America's leading companies, for over 20 years. He was a senior advisor in three presidential campaigns, and the lead strategist in Howard Dean's 2004 presidential campaign, which revolutionized the use of the internet in political campaigns and helped launch
the strategies and tactics of other insurgent campaigns that followed, including then-Senator Barak Obama’s 2008 campaign and Bernie Sanders’s 2016 campaign. McMahon is a co-founder of Purple Strategies (www.purplestrategies.com), one of Washington's leading public affairs firms that leverages political strategies to move and shape public opinion on behalf of some of America’s leading companies and brands. He appears regularly as a political commentator on MSNBC, CNN, CNBC and other television networks. Steve began his career on the Senate and political staff of United States Senator Edward M. Kennedy.