

17.20: Introduction to the American Political Process
Paper Assignment #2
Due 11:00 AM on April 22nd

For the last two weeks you have been examining and constructing opinion poll questions for your policy area of interest (Remember, the policy area topics for this assignment are: Gulf War, Campaign Finance Reform, Gay Marriage, Tax Policy, Immigration Policy).

For this paper I would like you to assess the public opinion poll questions you have found and construct your own detailed survey to measure opinion in your issue area. Your survey should consist of 15-20 questions. This survey should be included as an appendix to your paper, *but does not count towards the 6-8 page-length requirement.*

In the first part of your paper, critique the polling questions you collected in the weekly assignment that was due April 1. Drawing on (and making references to) what you have learned from the reading and class material, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the polls as they were presented. What information was provided to help you interpret the data? What information was left out? What features of the polls might cause you to question the findings? Compare polls conducted by different organizations and at different periods in time. How are the results similar? How are they different? How do different question wordings give you different results?

Having critiqued the existing polls for your policy area, I would like you to build a better mousetrap. Use what you learned in class and the readings to write your own questionnaire. No question is perfect, so discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the question you have chosen. Think carefully about response categories, question wording, and the question order. Be prepared to speak specifically about what you're asking, how you're asking it, and what potential problems might arise. Think also about how your questions fit together.

Some useful questions to consider as you construct and describe your opinion poll are:

- Look for examples of good questions as you search through existing polls. How can you improve upon these questions? How might you tweak these polls to measure subtle nuances in public opinion in your policy area of interest?
- Why did you choose the questions you selected? Do your questions measure opinion in significantly different ways? What concerns do you address? What concerns do you ignore?
- How does your poll improve upon those reported in the media?
- Should you measure issue salience and opinion strength? Why or why not? How would you measure these concepts? Justify your measurement strategy.

Some helpful links for information concerning this paper:

Here is an excellent website that has links to several polling sources you can use to gather your questions and conduct your analysis.

<http://www.ceip.org/files/news/library/poll.asp>

Some specific websites you might want to visit are:

- The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (<http://people-press.org/>)
- *The Washington Post* polling site (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/politics/polls/>)
- The Polling Report (<http://www.pollingreport.com/>)
- The National Election Studies (<http://www.umich.edu/~nes/>)