

POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR AND PUBLIC OPINION

200/300-level Undergraduate Course
Fall 20XX

Instructor: Mark Williamson	Time: Tuesdays 10am-12pm
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Course Description: Why do better-educated citizens tend to vote at higher rates? How accurate are the latest polls about the government's popularity? This course explores how the mass public thinks about politics. We look first at the behaviours of citizens, including why they choose to vote, why they vote for the parties that they do, and why they increasingly dislike supporters of other parties. We then turn to the beliefs and attitudes underpinning those behaviours, interrogating how voters form their opinions, how we might try to measure those opinions, and what consequences they have for politics. By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Understand the factors shaping voters' decisions about whether to turn out and which candidate to vote for in elections
- Evaluate theories of how individuals form and update their political opinions
- Identify how public attitudes influence policy development, democracy and conflict
- Critically consume public opinion data
- Develop their own survey questions and designs to answer research questions

Land Acknowledgement: This course takes place on the [traditional lands](#) of the Mississaugas of the Credit, Anishinaabeg, Chippewa, Haudenosaunee and Wendat peoples. This territory is subject to the [Dish With One Spoon Wampum](#), a treaty between the Anishinaabeg and Haudenosaunee nations that bound them to peacefully share and protect the land. Subsequent Indigenous nations and non-Indigenous settlers have been invited into this covenant. We are also meeting in a place covered by [Treaty 13 and the Williams Treaties](#), two agreements by which the Canadian and Ontario governments have historically failed to honourably abide.

Acknowledging the history of this land is a sign of respect toward its original peoples, but also a call for all those who benefit from the land today to work towards decolonization. I encourage you to learn more about the [Indigenous history of Toronto](#) (from the Haudenosaunee word *Tkarón:to*) and reflect on how you can use what you learn in this course to promote reconciliation.

COURSE ORGANIZATION

Class Meetings: We will have lectures every Tuesday from 10am to 12pm in [room]. In the event that a class needs to be cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances, a video recording of the lecture will be posted to the course webpage. See below for expectations of lecture attendance.

Office Hours: Tuesdays 2-4pm, virtually via zoom ([link](#)) or in-person at 714 Jorgenson Hall. Sign up online for a specific time at calendly.com/mark_williamson/office-hours.

Course Website: There is a course website on Brightspace. There is no assigned textbook. All important documents (syllabus, readings, lecture slides, assignments, etc.) will be posted there. It is your responsibility to regularly check the page for updates. Written assignments will also be submitted there.

EVALUATION

There are four components to your grade:

Participation: 10%

Survey Critique Memo: 25% (Due: October 21)

Design Your Own Survey:

- Outline: 5% (Due: November 1)
- Full Report: 30% (Due: December 10)

Final Exam: 30% (Date TBD)

Participation: Attendance will be taken using an online survey software that will be introduced in class. Students will be asked to answer questions on course content or to “test drive” survey methods discussed in lecture, but this part of your grade is only based on whether you participate and not the specific answers (right or wrong) that you give.

Students can miss up to three lectures, no questions asked, before absences impact their grade. Please do not come to class if you are sick. Please do get in touch with the professor if you have to miss more than three lectures due to illness.

Survey Critique Memo: You will practice applying the course material on survey methodology by critically evaluating a published survey report. Polling firms like Angus Reid, Environics and Leger routinely publish the results of polls on topical issues, which often get picked up in the media. In this assignment, you will write a brief memo discussing one of these reports that was published in the last two years. The memo should be no more than two pages and should answer the following questions:

- What research question(s) is the poll trying to answer?
- What is the sample? How were respondents recruited?
- What survey items does the poll use to answer the research question?
- Are the items effective in answering the research question? How might they have been designed better?
- What other changes to the survey methodology or survey instrument would you have recommended?
- Bonus (+5%): See if you can find a media article discussing the results. How well do you think the article’s author does in accurately interpreting the poll?

Students can select polls from those found here: [Angus Reid](#), [Environics](#), and [Leger](#). If you want to use another polling firm’s survey or you aren’t sure if your choice qualifies for the assignment, check with the professor.

Design Your Own Survey: The major assignment in this course is for you work in groups of 2 to 3 to propose a survey instrument that could be used to answer a research

question in the study of political behaviour and public opinion. Students may select their partner(s) themselves and a discussion board will be set up on the course Brightspace to facilitate creating groups interested in the same topic. Along with your assignment, each student will be asked to submit a short, confidential form evaluating the collaboration between group members.

Your proposed survey should take around 5 to 10 minutes to complete. You will complete this course requirement in two steps. First, you will write a one-page outline describing your research question, theory, and proposed survey measures. This can be written in bullet points, but must provide sufficient detail that a reader can understand the general idea of the project. This requirement is evaluated pass/fail.

Second, after receiving feedback from the professor on your outline, you will revise your proposal and write a full draft of between 10 to 12 double-spaced pages (excluding the appendix with your questionnaire; see below). Your final report should include the following sections:

- **Research Question:** What do you want to know? Why is this important? Has anyone else tried to answer this question before? What did they find?
- **Theory and Hypotheses:** What do you expect to find? Why?
- **Variables:** How will you measure the main variables of interest in your study? How have others approached the measurement of these concepts?
- **Survey Design:** Discuss any important choices you made in designing your survey to address issues of, for example, causality, measurement error or sampling bias. Is there an experiment embedded in it? Do you redirect respondents to certain questions based on their earlier responses? Do you do anything to deal with sensitive questions or non-opinions?
- **Sample:** Describe who will be recruited to participate in your survey. Why do you focus on this sample? How many respondents do you need?
- **Pre-testing:** Before you finalize your survey questions, ask 5 friends or family members to complete your survey and ask them for feedback. In this section, explain what you heard and how you adjusted your final survey instrument. Were any questions unclear? Did they interpret the questions how you intended? How long did it take them to complete the survey?
- **Proposed Analysis:** How will you use the data you collect to answer your research question? What findings would support or refute your hypotheses?
- **Appendix:** Include here the full questionnaire for your survey, along with any notes about survey logic or experimental conditions.

Teams will be evaluated on the originality of their research question; the review of relevant studies and their relation to your project; the choices made in measuring your variables and adjusting the design to the needs of the project; and the appropriateness of the proposed analysis. We will go over an example survey proposal and grading scheme in lecture.

Exams: There is one final exam for this course, the date of which will be announced by the registrar's office during the term. We will discuss format and details of the exam in the weeks leading up to it. A review sheet will be distributed via Brightspace. The exam

will focus on the concepts and arguments covered in lectures, as well as those covered in readings.

Exams will be rescheduled only if the university as a whole decides to shut down. There will be no make-up exams for students who have made conflicting travel arrangements or created other scheduling conflicts on the day of the exam. Both exams take place during regularly scheduled classes.

COURSE POLICIES

Academic Integrity: Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. Toronto Metropolitan University's [Policy 60](#) outlines the behaviours that constitute academic dishonesty and the processes for addressing academic offences. Academic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to: providing false information to receive an extension on an exam or assignment; using someone else's ideas or words without appropriate acknowledgement; submission of essentially the same written assignment for two different courses without the prior permission of faculty members; falsifying sources or facts; using unauthorized aids in exams; looking at someone else's answers during an exam; obtaining or providing unauthorized assistance on an exam or assignment. Suspected cases of academic dishonesty will be investigated following university procedures. If you have questions or concerns about what constitutes academic dishonesty, appropriate research methods or the use of citations, please reach out to me directly.

Accommodations: If you have a need for accommodation documented through the Academic Accommodation Support centre, please have documentation sent to the professor or speak with the professor at your earliest convenience so that I can make sure you receive appropriate accommodation throughout the semester.

Children in Class: For students with children, it is understandable that unforeseen disruptions can occur in childcare. Bringing a child to class with you when such disruptions occur is acceptable. In these cases, all students should work together to create a welcoming environment for both the parent and child.

Decorum: Students are expected to arrive to class on time and behave in a manner that is respectful to the professors and to fellow students. Opinions held by other students should be respected; harassment, derogatory comments, personal attacks on others, or interrupting the class will not be tolerated. Please avoid the use of cell phones and electronics for non-class related purposes.

Regrading: If you have concerns about a grade, you may ask to have the professor regrade your exam or assignment, with the understanding that your grade could be revised up or down. Please make requests for re-grades within 10 days of having received the assignment/exam back.

Late submissions: Extensions on assignments (i.e., permission to turn in an assignment late without the penalty, or to schedule a makeup exam) will be granted by the professor only when deemed absolutely necessary: because of religious obligations, or medical emergency or illness, or for reasons of accommodation that are documented by a counselor. Please email or speak to the professor as soon as you know about any unforeseen

circumstances that conflict with assignments or exams. There will be no make-up exams due to travel or other scheduling conflicts.

Late final assignments will be deducted 1/3 of a grade for each 24-hour period in which they are late. In other words, if they are turned in any time after 5:00pm on the due date and before 5:00pm the next day, an assignment that would under normal circumstances receive an A would receive an A-, an assignment that might normally receive an A- would receive a B+ and so forth.

COURSE OUTLINE & READINGS

Note: weekly readings and topics are subject to change. Refer to Brightspace for the most up-to-date version of the syllabus. All readings, videos and other course materials will be posted on Brightspace. For each week in the term, several readings are listed; you are expected to read the *required* materials, but may also find the *Recommended* items to be useful background on topics that you are especially interested in. We may also discuss some of the Recommended readings in the lecture slides. Please read articles/chapters **before** the indicated lecture in the schedule below.

Week 1: Introduction

Required:

- Cameron D. Anderson and Laura B. Stephenson. 2011. The Puzzle of Elections and Voting in Canada. In *The Puzzle of Elections and Voting in Canada*, 1–39. University of British Columbia Press, January
- Herb Asher. 2016. *Polling and the public: What every citizen should know*. CQ Press (Ch.1)

Week 2: Voter Turnout

Required:

- Macartan Humphreys. 2016. *Political Games*. WW Norton & Company (Ch. 20, “Is it rational to vote?”)
- Waabshkigaabo. 2021. As an Anishinaabe citizen, I can’t vote in good conscience in federal elections. *CBC News* (September)
- André Bear. 2021. As an Indigenous sovereigntist, I will vote in this year’s federal election. *CBC News* (September). <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/first-person-andre-bear-vote-federal-election-1.6178086>

Recommended:

- Alan S. Gerber, Donald P. Green, and Christopher W. Larimer. 2008. Social Pressure and Voter Turnout: Evidence from a Large-Scale Field Experiment. *American Political Science Review* 102, no. 1 (February): 33–48

Week 3: Vote Choice

Required:

- Macartan Humphreys. 2016. *Political Games*. WW Norton & Company (Ch. 40, “The Median Voter Theorem”)
- Kai Arzheimer, Jocelyn Evans, and Michael S. Lewis-Beck. 2017. *The SAGE Handbook of Electoral Behaviour*. London, UNITED KINGDOM: SAGE Publications, Limited (Ch. 16, “Strategic Voting”)

Recommended:

- Elisabeth Gidengil. 2022. Voting Behaviour in Canada: The State of the Discipline. *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 55, no. 4 (December): 916–938

Week 4: Partisanship, Ideology and Polarization

Required:

- Rosalee A. Clawson and Zoe M. Oxley. 2020. *Public opinion: Democratic ideals, democratic practice*. CQ Press (Ch.5)
- Richard Johnston. 2023. Affective Polarization in the Canadian Party System, 1988–2021. *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 56, no. 2 (June): 372–395

Recommended:

- Nicholas J. Caruana, R. Michael McGregor, and Laura B. Stephenson. 2015. The Power of the Dark Side: Negative Partisanship and Political Behaviour in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 4 (December): 771–789
- Christopher Cochrane. 2015. *Left and Right: The Small World of Political Ideas*. McGill-Queen’s Press - MQUP, October (Ch. 8, “The Rise of Left/Right in Canadian Politics”)

Week 5: Measuring Public Opinion

Required:

- Pew Research Center. 2018. “Methods 101: Question Wording.” (Youtube Video). ([link](#)).
- Herb Asher. 2016. *Polling and the public: What every citizen should know*. CQ Press (Ch.3)
- John Zaller and Stanley Feldman. 1992. A simple theory of the survey response: Answering questions versus revealing preferences. *American journal of political science*, 579–616

Recommended:

- Andrew Keeter, Courtney Mercer, and Scott Keeter. 2024. *Online opt-in polls can produce misleading results, especially for young people and Hispanic adults*. Technical report. Pew Research Center, March
- Edana Beauvais and Mark Williamson. 2024. *The prevalence and correlates of residential school denialism in Canada*. Working Paper.

Week 6: Reading Week**Week 7: Survey Experiments and Causal Inference***Required:*

- Elena Llaudet and Kosuke Imai. 2022. *Data analysis for social science: A friendly and practical introduction*. Princeton University Press (Ch. 2)
- Brian J. Gaines, James H. Kuklinski, and Paul J. Quirk. 2007. The logic of the survey experiment reexamined. *Political Analysis* 15 (1): 1–20

Recommended:

- James H. Kuklinski, Michael D. Cobb, and Martin Gilens. 1997. Racial Attitudes and the "New South". *The Journal of Politics* 59, no. 2 (May): 323–349
- Diana C. Mutz. 2011. *Population-Based Survey Experiments*. Princeton University Press
- Paul M. Sniderman. 2018. Some Advances in the Design of Survey Experiments. *Annual Review of Political Science* 21, no. 1 (May): 259–275

Week 8: Political Knowledge, Sophistication and Non-Opinions*Required:*

- Jeffery J. Mondak and Mary R. Anderson. 2004. The Knowledge Gap: A Reexamination of Gender-Based Differences in Political Knowledge. *The Journal of Politics* 66, no. 2 (May): 492–512
- Elisabeth Gidengil et al. 2004. *Citizens*. Vancouver, Canada: UBC Press (Ch. 3, "What do Canadians know about politics?")
- Robert C. Luskin and John G. Bullock. 2011. "Don't Know" Means "Don't Know": DK Responses and the Public's Level of Political Knowledge. *The Journal of Politics* 73, no. 2 (April): 547–557

Week 9: Opinion Formation*Required:*

- Rosalee A. Clawson and Zoe M. Oxley. 2020. *Public opinion: Democratic ideals, democratic practice*. CQ Press (Ch. 2, 6)
- Allyson L. Holbrook. 2011. Attitude change experiments in political science. In *Cambridge Handbook of Experimental Political Science*, edited by James N. Druckman et al., 141–154

Week 10: Media and Misinformation*Required:*

- Shanto Iyengar. 2019. *Media Politics: A Citizen's Guide*. W. W. Norton (Ch. 8)

- Adam J. Berinsky. 2023. *Political Rumors: Why We Accept Misinformation and How to Fight It*. Princeton University Press (Ch. 1)

Recommended:

- Aengus Bridgman et al. 2020. The causes and consequences of COVID-19 misperceptions: Understanding the role of news and social media. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 1 (3)
- Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler. 2010. When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions. *Political Behavior* 32, no. 2 (June): 303–330
- Kevin Arceneaux and Martin Johnson. 2013. *Changing minds or changing channels?: Partisan news in an age of choice*. University of Chicago Press
- Erin Tolley. 2015. *Framed: Media and the coverage of race in Canadian politics*. UBC Press

Week 11: Group Identities and Intergroup Attitudes

Required:

- Maya Sen and Omar Wasow. 2016. Race as a bundle of sticks: Designs that estimate effects of seemingly immutable characteristics. *Annual Review of Political Science* 19 (1): 499–522
- Edana Beauvais and Dietlind Stolle. 2022. The Politics of White Identity and Settlers' Indigenous Resentment in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique* 55 (1): 59–83

Recommended:

- Rosalee A. Clawson and Zoe M. Oxley. 2020. *Public opinion: Democratic ideals, democratic practice*. CQ Press (Ch. 7)
- Elizabeth Levy Paluck and Donald P. Green. 2009. Prejudice Reduction: What Works? A Review and Assessment of Research and Practice. *Annual Review of Psychology* 60 (1): 339–367
- Patrick J. Egan. 2020. Identity as Dependent Variable: How Americans Shift Their Identities to Align with Their Politics. *American Journal of Political Science* 64 (3): 699–716. Accessed January 3, 2023

Week 12: Policy Responsiveness

Required:

- David E. Broockman and Daniel M. Butler. 2017. The Causal Effects of Elite Position-Taking on Voter Attitudes: Field Experiments with Elite Communication. *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 1 (January): 208–221
- Daniel M. Butler and David W. Nickerson. 2011. Can learning constituency opinion affect how legislators vote? Results from a field experiment. *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 6 (1): 55–83

Recommended:

- Rosalee A. Clawson and Zoe M. Oxley. 2020. *Public opinion: Democratic ideals, democratic practice*. CQ Press (Ch. 12)