

PUBLIC OPINION

Winter 2021

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Lecture: Mondays at 7 p.m.
Room: Virtual Classroom via Zoom

Office Hours: By appointment via
[Calendly](#)

Contents

Course Description.....	3
Course Objectives.....	3
Required Materials and Texts	3
Class Format.....	3
Course Evaluation – Overview.....	4
Course Evaluation – Details.....	4
Participation (15%)	4
Polling Analysis (25%), due February 12.....	4
Survey Design (20%), Draft due February 26, Final due March 12	4
Final Report (30%), due April 12.....	4
Presentation (10%), Due April 12	4
Weekly Course Schedule and Required Readings	5
Week 1 (January 11)	5
Week 2 (January 18)	5
Week 3 (January 25)	5
Week 4 (February 1).....	5
Week 5 (February 8).....	6
Week 6 (February 15).....	6
Week 7 (February 22).....	6
Week 8 (March 1)	7
Week 9 (March 8)	7
Week 10 (March 15)	7
Week 11 (March 22)	8
Week 12 (March 29)	8
Week 13 (April 5).....	8

Week 14 (April 12)	9
Course Policies	9
Submission of Assignments.....	9
Grades.....	9
Late Assignments	9
Absences, Missed Work, Illness	9
Courses with an On-Line Element	9
Online Proctoring.....	10
Authenticity / Plagiarism Detection	10
Copyright and Recording	10
Academic Accommodation for Religious, Indigenous or Spiritual Observances (RISO)	10
Academic Integrity Statement.....	11
Conduct Expectations.....	11
Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities.....	12
Faculty of Social Sciences E-mail Communication Policy	12
Course Modification.....	12
Extreme Circumstances.....	12

Course Description

In democratic societies elected officials are expected to act in the best interests of their constituents. To that end, understanding public opinion is a central concern in both the study and practice of politics.

This course explores the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological foundations of public opinion research. Topics include the nature and origins of public opinion, its measurement and interpretation, the ways in which it influences and is influenced by various actors, how and under what circumstances it changes, and its implications for governance and policymaking. Though public opinion as a field of study traverses conventional disciplinary boundaries, this course will focus largely on the ways in which it is taken up within political science.

The course also aims to develop practical skills in survey design and analysis, which are among the principal methods involved in public opinion polling. Students will learn how to design and field a survey, analyze the resulting data, and present findings.

Course Objectives

By the end of the course students should be able to:

- Evaluate competing theoretical claims about the nature of individual and mass political beliefs
- Explore the strengths and weaknesses of survey research and opinion polling for public policy
- Design and analyze a public opinion poll
- Critically assess the reported findings of public opinion polls

Required Materials and Texts

- Groves, Robert M., Floyd J. Fowler, Mick P. Couper, James M. Lepkowski, Eleanor Singer, and Roger To. *Survey Methodology*. 2nd ed. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009.

Class Format

Each week's session will be delivered in two parts:

1. a **pre-recorded, asynchronous lecture** that engages with theoretical frameworks for understanding public opinion; and
2. a **virtual, synchronous workshop** that provides training with respect to the research skills required in the measurement and analysis of public opinion.

Lectures will be made available on Avenue to Learn. Workshops will be conducted via Zoom every Monday beginning at 7 p.m. EST.

Course Evaluation – Overview

1. Participation – 15%
2. Polling Analysis – 25%, due February 12
3. Survey Design – 20%, draft due February 26; final due March 12
4. Final Report – 30%, due April 12
5. Presentation – 10%, due April 12

Course Evaluation – Details

Participation (15%)

Participation will be evaluated on the basis of active, thoughtful contributions to the discussions and exercises that take place in virtual sessions as well as those that occur in online forums associated with the course.

Polling Analysis (25%), due February 12

This exercise involves the analysis of results of a published study. Students will be asked to critically assess the design of the survey, the analysis of the data, and the interpretation of the findings by the study authors.

Survey Design (20%), Draft due February 26, Final due March 12

Students will work in teams to develop a survey for inclusion in a poll to be fielded to a nationally representative sample of Canadians. In addition to designing, refining, and programming the survey, teams will provide a written justification outlining the rationale for their design choices.

Final Report (30%), due April 12

Teams will analyze the data from the survey once it has been fielded and produce a final report summarizing their findings and conclusions.

Presentation (10%), Due April 12

Teams will present their report findings in the final session.

Weekly Course Schedule and Required Readings

Week 1 (January 11)

Lecture: Course Introduction (via Zoom)

No readings

Week 2 (January 18)

Lecture: What is public opinion?

Readings

Lippmann, Walter. "The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads."
Introduction. In *Public Opinion*, 3–32. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & Co.,
1922.

Workshop: Introduction to survey research

Readings

Groves et al., Chapter 1

Week 3 (January 25)

Lecture: The bases of public opinion

Readings

Converse, Philip E. "Changing conceptions of public opinion in the political
process." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 51 (1987): S12–S24.

Zaller, John. "Information, Predispositions and Opinion." In *The Nature and
Origins of Mass Opinion*, 6–39. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press,
1992.

Workshop: Inference and error in survey research

Readings

Groves et al., Chapter 2

Week 4 (February 1)

Lecture: Ideology

Readings

Cochrane, Christopher. "Left/Right Ideology and Canadian Politics." *Canadian
Journal of Political Science* 43, no. 3 (September 2010): 583–605.

Iyengar, Shanto, Gaurav Sood and Yphtach Lelkes. "Affect, Not Ideology: A
Social Identity Perspective on Polarization." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76, no.
3 (Fall 2012): 405–431.

Workshop: Survey design

Readings

Groves et al., Chapter 7

Week 5 (February 8)

Lecture: Political information

Readings

Converse, Philip E. "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics." In *Ideology and Discontent*, edited by David E. Apter, 206–61. New York, NY: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964.

Festinger, Leon. "Voluntary and Involuntary Exposure to Information: Theory." In *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, 123–137. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957.

Workshop: Construct validity

Readings

DeSante, Christopher and Candis Watts Smith. "Fear, Institutionalized Racism, and Empathy: The Underlying Dimensions of Whites' Racial Attitudes." In *PS: Political Science & Politics* 54, no. 3 (2020): 639–645.

Notes: Polling Analysis Assignment due on February 12.

Week 6 (February 15)

Midterm Recess

No classes

Week 7 (February 22)

Lecture: The rational public

Readings

Page, Benjamin I. and Robert Shapiro. "Rational Public Opinion." In *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences*, 1–36. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Bélanger, Éric and François Petry. "The Rational Public? A Canadian Test of the Page and Shapiro Argument." *International Journal of Public Opinion* 17, no. 2 (2005): 190-212.

Workshop: Survey experiments

Readings

Mutz, Diana C. "Direct and Indirect Treatments." In *Population-Based Survey Experiments*, 37–53. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011.

Notes: Draft survey design due February 26

Week 8 (March 1)

Lecture: Political psychology

Readings

Kuklinski, James H. and Paul J. Quirk. "Reconsidering the rational public: Cognition, heuristics, and mass opinion." In *Elements of reason: Cognition, choice, and the bounds of rationality*, edited by Arthur Lupia, Mathew McCubbins, and Samuel Popkin, 153–182. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Sniderman, Paul M., Richard A. Brody, and Phillip E. Tetlock. "The role of heuristics in political reasoning: a theory sketch." In *Reasoning and Choice: Explorations in Political Psychology*, 14–30. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Workshop: Survey evaluation

Readings

Groves et al., Chapter 8

Week 9 (March 8)

Lecture: Media effects

Readings

Norris, Pippa. "Negative News, Negative Public?" In *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Postindustrial Societies*, 183–207. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Iyengar, Shanto and Donald R Kinder. "The Agenda-Setting Effect." In *News that Matters: Television and American Opinion*, 16–33. University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Workshop: Survey programming

Readings

"Survey Platform Overview." [Qualtrics](#).

Notes: Final survey design due March 12

Week 10 (March 15)

Lecture: Polling effects

Readings

Mutz, Diana. "Impersonal influence: Effects of representations of public opinion on political attitudes." *Political Behavior* 14, no. 2 (June 1992): 89–122.

Kilibarda, Anja, Clifton van der Linden, and Yannick Dufresne. "Do Campaign Events Matter? New Evidence from Voting Advice Applications." *Political Science Quarterly* 135, no. 2 (2020): 261–282.

Workshop: Sample design

Groves et al., Chapter 4

Week 11 (March 22)

Lecture: Public policy

Readings

Page, Benjamin I. and Robert Y. Shapiro. "Effects of Public Opinion on Policy."
American Political Science Review 77, no. 1 (March 1983): 175–190.

Soroka, Stuart N. and Christopher Wlezien. "Politics, Public Opinion, and Policy."
In *Degrees of Democracy: Politics, Public Opinion, and Policy*, 1–21.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Workshop: Data Analysis I

No readings

Week 12 (March 29)

Lecture: Democratic representation

Readings

Downs, Anthony. "An Economic Theory of Political Action in a Democracy."
Journal of Political Economy 65, no. 2 (1957): 135–150.

Hertel-Fernandez, Alexander, Matto Mildemberger, and Leah C. Stokes.
"Legislative Staff and Representation in Congress." *American Political
Science Review* 113, no. 1 (2019): 1–18.

Workshop: Data Analysis II

No readings

Week 13 (April 5)

Lecture: Voting behaviour

Readings

Lewis-Beck, Michael S, William G. Jacoby, Helmut Norpoth and Herbert F.
Weisberg. "Theoretical orientation." In *The American Voter Revisited*, 19–28.
University of Michigan Press, 2008.

Johnston, Richard. "Party identification: Unmoved mover or sum of preferences?"
Annual Review of Political Science 9 (2006), 329–351.

Workshop: Presenting research findings

No readings

Week 14 (April 12)

Final Presentations

Notes: Final report and presentation due April 12

Course Policies

Submission of Assignments

Assignments are to be submitted to the appropriate submissions folder on the course's Avenue to Learn page by 11:59 p.m. on the due date.

Grades

Grades will be based on the McMaster University grading scale:

MARK	GRADE
90-100	A+
85-90	A
80-84	A-
77-79	B+
73-76	B
70-72	B-
67-69	C+
63-66	C
60-62	C-
57-59	D+
53-56	D
50-52	D-
0-49	F

Late Assignments

Four days grace will be given for late assignments in order to accommodate the common reasons for late submission, including those giving rise to the use of the MSAF. After four days, the assignments will be assessed a penalty of 5 percentage points per day, including each day of a weekend.

Absences, Missed Work, Illness

McMaster Student Absence Form (MSAF): In the event of an absence for medical or other reasons, students should review and follow the Academic Regulation in the Undergraduate Calendar "Requests for Relief for Missed Academic Term Work".

Courses with an On-Line Element

Some courses may use on-line elements (e.g. e-mail, Avenue to Learn (A2L), LearnLink, web pages, capa, Moodle, ThinkingCap, etc.). Students should be aware that, when they access the electronic components of a course using these elements, private information such as first and last names, user names for the McMaster e-mail

accounts, and program affiliation may become apparent to all other students in the same course. The available information is dependent on the technology used. Continuation in a course that uses on-line elements will be deemed consent to this disclosure. If you have any questions or concerns about such disclosure please discuss this with the course instructor.

Online Proctoring

Some courses may use online proctoring software for tests and exams. This software may require students to turn on their video camera, present identification, monitor and record their computer activities, and/or lock/restrict their browser or other applications/software during tests or exams. This software may be required to be installed before the test/exam begins.

Authenticity / Plagiarism Detection

Some courses may use a web-based service (Turnitin.com) to reveal authenticity and ownership of student submitted work. For courses using such software, students will be expected to submit their work electronically either directly to Turnitin.com or via an online learning platform (e.g. A2L, etc.) using plagiarism detection (a service supported by Turnitin.com) so it can be checked for academic dishonesty.

Students who do not wish their work to be submitted through the plagiarism detection software must inform the Instructor before the assignment is due. No penalty will be assigned to a student who does not submit work to the plagiarism detection software.

All submitted work is subject to normal verification that standards of academic integrity have been upheld (e.g., on-line search, other software, etc.). For more details about [McMaster's use of Turnitin.com](http://www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity) please go to www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity.

Copyright and Recording

Students are advised that lectures, demonstrations, performances, and any other course material provided by an instructor include copyright protected works. The Copyright Act and copyright law protect every original literary, dramatic, musical and artistic work, **including lectures** by University instructors

The recording of lectures, tutorials, or other methods of instruction may occur during a course. Recording may be done by either the instructor for the purpose of authorized distribution, or by a student for the purpose of personal study. Students should be aware that their voice and/or image may be recorded by others during the class. Please speak with the instructor if this is a concern for you.

Academic Accommodation for Religious, Indigenous or Spiritual Observances (RISO)

Students requiring academic accommodation based on religious, indigenous or spiritual observances should follow the procedures set out in the [RISO](#) policy. Students should

submit their request to their Faculty Office ***normally within 10 working days*** of the beginning of term in which they anticipate a need for accommodation or to the Registrar's Office prior to their examinations. Students should also contact their instructors as soon as possible to make alternative arrangements for classes, assignments, and tests.

Academic Integrity Statement

You are expected to exhibit honesty and use ethical behaviour in all aspects of the learning process. Academic credentials you earn are rooted in principles of honesty and academic integrity. **It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty.**

Academic dishonesty is to knowingly act or fail to act in a way that results or could result in unearned academic credit or advantage. This behaviour can result in serious consequences, e.g. the grade of zero on an assignment, loss of credit with a notation on the transcript (notation reads: "Grade of F assigned for academic dishonesty"), and/or suspension or expulsion from the university. For information on the various types of academic dishonesty please refer to the [Academic Integrity Policy](https://secretariat.mcmaster.ca/university-policies-procedures-guidelines/), located at <https://secretariat.mcmaster.ca/university-policies-procedures-guidelines/>

The following illustrates only three forms of academic dishonesty:

- plagiarism, e.g. the submission of work that is not one's own or for which other credit has been obtained.
- improper collaboration in group work.
- copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.

Conduct Expectations

As a McMaster student, you have the right to experience, and the responsibility to demonstrate, respectful and dignified interactions within all of our living, learning and working communities. These expectations are described in the [Code of Student Rights & Responsibilities](#) (the "Code"). All students share the responsibility of maintaining a positive environment for the academic and personal growth of all McMaster community members, **whether in person or online.**

It is essential that students be mindful of their interactions online, as the Code remains in effect in virtual learning environments. The Code applies to any interactions that adversely affect, disrupt, or interfere with reasonable participation in University activities. Student disruptions or behaviours that interfere with university functions on online platforms (e.g. use of Avenue 2 Learn, WebEx or Zoom for delivery), will be taken very seriously and will be investigated. Outcomes may include restriction or removal of the involved students' access to these platforms

Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities who require academic accommodation must contact [Student Accessibility Services](#) (SAS) at 905-525-9140 ext. 28652 or sas@mcmaster.ca to make arrangements with a Program Coordinator. For further information, consult McMaster University's [Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities](#) policy.

Faculty of Social Sciences E-mail Communication Policy

Effective September 1, 2010, it is the policy of the Faculty of Social Sciences that all e-mail communication sent from students to instructors (including TAs), and from students to staff, must originate from the student's own McMaster University e-mail account. This policy protects confidentiality and confirms the identity of the student. It is the student's responsibility to ensure that communication is sent to the university from a McMaster account. If an instructor becomes aware that a communication has come from an alternate address, the instructor may not reply at his or her discretion.

Course Modification

The instructor and university reserve the right to modify elements of the course during the term. The university may change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances. If either type of modification becomes necessary, reasonable notice and communication with the students will be given with explanation and the opportunity to comment on changes. It is the responsibility of the student to check his/her McMaster email and course websites weekly during the term and to note any changes.

Extreme Circumstances

The University reserves the right to change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances (e.g., severe weather, labour disruptions, etc.). Changes will be communicated through regular McMaster communication channels, such as McMaster Daily News, A2L and/or McMaster email.