PO 467: PUBLIC OPINION AND SURVEY DESIGN

Wilfrid Laurier University

Department of Political Science

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Class Time: Wednesday, 8:30–11:20
Classroom: DAWB 2–104
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Students with disabilities or in need of accommodations are encouraged to contact Laurier’s Accessible Learning Office (https://accessiblelearning.wlu.ca/) for information regarding its services and resources.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course has two goals. The first goal is to explore the central theories and selected key themes in the fields of public opinion and political behaviour. The second goal is to introduce students to the practice of survey research, part of which involves designing and executing a survey research project for a client.

The course is divided into three parts.

Part I serves as an overview of landmark scholarship in public opinion research. It engages with questions about the role of public opinion in representative democracy, and the structure and formation of individual attitudes and beliefs.

Part II is devoted to the practical aspects of measuring public opinion – in other words, the art and science of doing public opinion research. It examines survey questionnaire design, sampling,
and survey interviewing and data collection. It also introduces students to questions of research ethics relevant to survey research and professional standards in the survey research industry.

Part III is a (non-random, purposive) sample of research topics in public opinion and political behaviour that are active areas of research.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

• Develop knowledge of core concepts and theories in the fields of public opinion, political behaviour, and survey methodology.

• Understand and evaluate different methodologies used to measure and explain public opinion, their strengths and limitations, and how they can be applied to new research questions.

• Develop an appreciation of the challenges of relating theory to empirical data in public opinion research, and the social sciences more broadly.

• Demonstrate through one’s written work and seminar discussions the ability to synthesize, engage critically with, and extend the scholarly literature on public opinion.

• Acquire knowledge of the dynamics of public opinion and political behaviour on a range of substantive topics – in Canada, and in other national contexts.

REQUIRED TEXTS

There are three required texts for the course:


All texts are available for purchase at the WLU bookstore, or may be purchased online through various booksellers. The Andres and Zaller texts have also been put on reserve at the WLU library; the Berinsky text is available as an e-book through the WLU library.

Most required articles and chapters have been made available electronically via WLU’s online reserve system, ARES – https://ares.wlu.ca/. Please note that I receive usage reports from ARES.
that allows me to identify access. Other resources are available online, or on reserve at the WLU library (where indicated).

Students should also consult and MyLearningSpace (MLS – https://mylearningspace.wlu.ca/) for additional course resources.

**COURSE ASSESSMENT**

10%  Class participation – ongoing
10%  Discussion leadership – once during term
20%  Book review, 700–900 words – due February 1
20%  Survey design – due March 1
5%   Ethics review – due March 8
35%  Research essay, 3000–3500 words due March 29
100%

Since this is an advanced seminar, students are expected to come to class having read the assigned readings and prepared to discuss the material.

Students will be required to lead discussion once during the term. This will entail delivering a short (15 minutes maximum) summary presentation of the required readings at the start of the seminar, followed by 2–3 proposed questions to start discussion. Students will work alone or in groups of two in leading discussion (depending on class numbers).

Being able to summarize briefly a large amount of text and engaging critically with the work of others are important skills at the senior undergraduate and graduate levels. To practice these skills, students will write a book review of 700–900 words (or 2–3 pages) modelled on those published in scholarly journals. A (non-exhaustive) list of books appears below. Students are encouraged to consult relevant journals such as the *Canadian Journal of Political Science* and *Public Opinion Quarterly* for examples of such reviews. Book reviews are due in class on **February 1**.

Working in small groups (3-4 students in each), students will draw upon our readings and class discussions to develop a survey for an on-campus client. Representative(s) will be on hand to discuss their needs during class **February 8**. Following this meeting, groups will have two
weeks to develop their survey instrument. Each group will then present their surveys to the client, outlining the reasoning behind their design during class on **March 1**. Following this meeting, the group surveys will be used as the basis for an online survey that will be administered to Laurier students. The results of this study will be presented in our final class (schedule permitting).

Students will complete individual ethics review reports based on their group work. Students will follow the WLU Research Ethics Board Review Form to complete this assignment. The ethics reviews are due in class on **March 8**.

The research essay will be an extended analysis of 3000–3500 words (or 12–15 pages) of a subject of the student’s choosing, related to the course material, and approved by the course instructor. Research essays are due in class on **March 29**.

**BOOKS FOR REVIEW**

The titles listed below are a list of recent (or semi-recent) books on public opinion and political behaviour. Students may choose any title from the list on which to write their book review. This list, however, is not exhaustive, and students are welcome choose another title that deals with some aspect of public opinion (and subject to the approval of the course instructor).


A NOTE ON QUANTITATIVE METHODS

This is not a course in quantitative methods as such. Rather, it is a course that engages with landmark and current research in public opinion and political behaviour – a field of social science that is often quantitative in character, sometimes heavily so. A solid grasp of basic quantitative methods is therefore essential to success in this course (hence the course prerequisites).

At the same time, much current research in public opinion and political behaviour employs quantitative methods beyond what is covered in introductory social science research methods (but not that far beyond). The ability to understand and interpret the results from multivariate data analyses – even if you are not familiar with how to implement them yourself – is critical to being able to engage with most current published work in public opinion and political behaviour. The readings below are intended to acquaint students with multiple linear regression, logistic regression, and factor analysis – techniques that will appear repeatedly throughout the term.


COURSE POLICIES, OR, THE FINE PRINT

Please note the following carefully. Registration in the course constitutes your agreement to the following rules. I don’t mean to sound harsh here, but it’s best to be clear on all of this at the outset.

• This course will require students to think critically and analytically. Students will be required to engage with different theories of public opinion and political behaviour, as well as analyze and interpret public opinion data, and data from other sources. My role as instructor is to show you different ways to approach the subject, not to tell you what to think (or write about).
• The option of additional work to improve your course grade is not available for this course.

• Students must submit all work in a timely manner to receive a passing grade for the course.

• Students must submit their written work in hard copy on 8.5x11 paper with one-inch margins using a standard 12-point font such as Times New Roman.

• Word limits for written work will be enforced, with overlength and underlength papers being penalized. Conforming to a set word/page limit is an important writing skill, and it forms part of the evaluation.

• You must submit your assignments on the due date by 12:00 (noon). Assignments not submitted on the due date and time without a valid reason (e.g., serious illness or bereavement) will receive a penalty of 2.5% of the assignment grade per calendar day.

• Students are advised to keep all rough work and both electronic and paper copies of their submitted written work. These should be retained until the graded work is returned.

• I will grant reasonable extensions for the submission of assignments for good reasons (e.g., serious illness or bereavement). Multiple assignments coming due at the same time (which is a lot like the real world!) or work in other courses do not constitute “good reasons.” If you have several assignments due at the same time, you should manage your time accordingly.

• If you request an extension for another reason, please request it in advance if at all possible, and be prepared to provide relevant documentation.

• I ask that you not disrupt our teaching or your classmates’ learning. So, please avoid the following behaviours: habitually coming to class late; conversing with neighbours during class; packing up before class is finished; taking (or making!) calls on your cell phone.

• As a part-time instructor with other professional obligations, I will typically not be on campus except on days when class is scheduled. This does not mean that I am not available to you. I am available by email, phone, and also by Skype (contact details to be provided in class).

• Academic integrity is greatly valued in this course. Academic misconduct occurs in a variety of forms. Students are required to familiarise themselves with the University policies on Plagiarism Academic Dishonesty as well as the associated penalties which can be severe.
Plagiarism: According to the Academic Calendar (2016-17), plagiarism “involves using the thoughts, ideas, or writings of another person passing them off as your own (adapted from the Oxford English Dictionary definition). It can involve taking credit for ideas that were not your own or using the words of others without properly citing them.” Further information can be found online. Should you have any questions about these issues please feel free to discuss them with me. Collaboration: all of the work produced by students needs to be the product of their own individual efforts. Although discussion of topics is to be expected this work needs to reflect original individual ideas be written independently.

JOURNALS

Many journals carry articles of concern to students of public opinion, political behaviour, and survey methodology. Some of the journals in political science (as well as those from cognate disciplines such as sociology, psychology, communication, and statistics) are listed below. These should be noted and used as necessary, especially in researching and writing your research papers.

- Acta Politica
- Advances in Experimental Social Psychology
- American Behavioral Scientist
- American Journal of Political Science
- American Journal of Sociology
- American Political Science Review
- American Sociological Review
- Annual Review of Political Science
- Annual Review of Psychology
- Annual Review of Sociology
- Behavior Research Methods
- British Journal of Political Science
- Canadian Journal of Political Science
- Comparative Political Studies
- Electoral Studies
- Party Politics
- Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin
- Personality and Social Psychology Review
- Perspectives on Psychological Science
- Policy Studies Journal
- Political Analysis
- Political Behavior
- Political Communication
- Political Psychology
- Political Research Quarterly
- Political Science Research and Methods
- Psychological Bulletin
- Public Choice
- Public Opinion Quarterly
- Quality and Quantity
CLASS SCHEDULE AND COURSE READINGS

Part I: Theories and Foundations

1. January 4: The Substance of Public Opinion; Public Opinion and Democracy

Required reading


Required reading – quantitative methods background


Further reading


2. January 11: Political Knowledge, Political Sophistication, and Citizen Competence

Required reading


Required reading – quantitative methods background


Further reading


3. January 18: Opinion Formation and Opinion Change

*Required reading*


*Further reading*


*Required reading*


Further reading


Part II: Measuring Public Opinion

5. February 1: The Practice of Survey Research – Questionnaire Design, Sampling, Fieldwork

Required reading


Further reading


6. February 8: Client visit
No required reading this week – the Dillman et al., Groves et al., Donsbach and Traugott, and Weisberg books (see February 1, week 5 above) are recommended further reading on designing surveys.

7. February 15: The Practice of Survey Research – Ethics and Professional Standards

Required reading


Further reading

February 20–24: Reading week; no class

8. March 1: Group Presentations

Part III: Current Topics in Public Opinion and Political Behaviour

9. March 8: Personality and Political Behaviour

Required reading


Required reading – quantitative methods background


Further reading


10. **March 15: Public Opinion and Immigration**

*Required reading*


*Further reading*


Kaufmann, Eric, and Gareth Harris. 2015. “‘White Flight’ or Positive Contact? Local Diversity and Attitudes to Immigration in Britain.” *Comparative Political Studies* 48(12): 1563–90.


11. March 22: Public Opinion and Foreign Policy

Required reading


Further reading


On behalf of WLUSU (wlusu.com)

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1.519.886.FOOT x3668

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Counselling Services are available to help students deal with emotional, psychological and social challenges of university. Counselling, consultation or referrals are available at the Student Wellness Centre. Peer Help Line, a confidential listening, referral, information and support line, is available during evening hours to provide support.