

POL382H1 Topics in Canadian Politics: Public Opinion and Voting

Section: L0101

Date/Time: Friday, 10AM-12PM

Location: BL 313

Instructor: Prof. Eric Merkley

Email: eric.merkley@utoronto.ca

Office: Room 3121, Sidney Smith Hall

Office Hours: 1:00-2:00 W or by appointment

1. Overview and Objectives

This course introduces students to the attitudes and behaviours of the mass public in Canada and other Western democracies. Themes include political participation, the mass media, and the nature of social, psychological, and economic, and elite-driven forces on public opinion and voting. It will also highlight the role of campaigns, issues, and leaders in elections. Over the course of the term students will engage in a number of important debates in the area of public opinion and voting, such as the on the relative importance of values and partisanship in shaping political behaviour, the nature of social cleavages in public opinion, the capacity of citizens to understand and participate in politics, the effects of the media and political campaigns on public opinion and voting, and the importance of public opinion in policy making. Students will also be given a brief introduction to public opinion polling and survey research methodology.

Over the course of the term students should be able to:

- Understand the strengths and limitations of survey methodology and critically consume public opinion information contained in election discourse
- Explain the fundamental characteristics of public opinion formation and change
- Identify important foundational influences on public opinion and voting and weigh in on important debates regarding their relative importance, like social groups and identities, ideology and partisanship
- Evaluate the ability of the news media and political campaigns to influence public opinion and voting
- Create survey questions and research designs to answer research questions in public opinion research in accordance with best practices

2. Course Format

Your attendance at in-person lectures is mandatory. You will be regularly asked quiz-style questions that require a response via Top Hat in lecture. Your participation in these in-class question-and-

answer sessions is the foundation of your class participation. COVID-19 permitting, each in-person lecture may also include group activities that reinforce the material covered. Participation in these activities will also be graded.

2.1 Lecture and Tutorial Delivery Mode

POL382 is taught primarily in-person. However, the Dean of the Faculty of Arts & Science has committed to online instruction at least through to January 28. As a result of this commitment, the first three lectures will be taught in an online-synchronous manner using Zoom, while the remainder of lectures will be taught in-person. This is marked on the course calendar provided below. Zoom links will be provided in Quercus in advance of each lecture.

3. Required Texts and Materials:

- Clawson, R. A., & Oxley, Z. M. (2020). *Public Opinion : Democratic Ideals, Democratic Practice* (4th ed.). Sage/CQ Press.
- Gidengil, E., Nevitte N., Blais A., Everitt J & Fournier P. (2012). *Dominance & Decline: Making Sense of Recent Canadian Elections*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- **Readings available through the library or electronically.** As listed below in the detailed syllabus, required readings for the course are usually available through the library. Links to these readings are provided. Others, labelled (Quercus), will be made available through Quercus. It is your responsibility to download all readings from the appropriate location. **Note:** reaction readings are only required for those doing a response paper for a given week.
- **Course webpage and emails.** There is a course webpage on Quercus. I will use this page to post important course documents (readings, syllabus, lecture slides, etc.), post announcements and send emails to you throughout the term. Lecture slides will be posted before each class. It is your responsibility to regularly check Quercus for updates. Written assignments will also be submitted through Quercus.

4. Grading and Assessed Coursework

Assignment	Date/Due Date	Percentage of Overall Grade
Lecture Participation (Top Hat/Activities)	All lectures	10%
Short Assignment 1	March 4, 11:59pm	10%
Short Assignment 2	April 1, 11:59pm	10%
Mid-term Exam	February 18th in class	15%
Research Outline	February 11th, 11:59pm	5%
Research Essay	April 8th, 11:59pm	25%
Final Exam	TBA	25%

4.1 Final Exam (25%)

There is a final exam. This exam will test you on all the material covered in the lectures, activities, and readings. The date and time of the final exam are to be set by the Registrar and will be released later in the term.

4.2 Midterm Exam (15%)

There is a midterm exam. This exam will test you on all the material covered in the first half of the course, including lectures and readings. This midterm will be held in class on February 18th.

4.3 Class Participation (10%)

We will be using **Top Hat Pro** (www.tophat.com) for class participation. In all lectures you will be asked to answer questions using Top Hat. Part of your participation mark will depend on your engagement with these questions. Your mark does not depend on whether you get the answers right. The questions are exercises to provoke discussion and learning. However, to get credit for participation at a given lecture, you must be present at the lecture and input responses to all questions using your own device (Apple or Android smartphones and tablets, laptops, or through text message). If this is logistically a problem, contact me immediately. For instructions on how to create a Top Hat account and enrol in our Top Hat Pro course, please refer to the invitation sent to your school email address or consult Top Hat's [Getting Started Guide](#).

If you already have a Top Hat account, go to <https://app.tophat.com/login> to be taken directly to our course. If you are new to Top Hat, follow the link in the email invitation you received or...

- Go to <https://app.tophat.com/register/student>
- Click "Search by school" and input the name of our school
- Search for our course with the following join code: 951095

If a paid subscription is required, it will be listed at checkout when you enrol in our Top Hat Pro course. Should you require assistance with Top Hat at any time please contact their Support Team directly by way of email (support@tophat.com), the in-app support button, or by calling 1-888-663-5491. Specific user information may be required by their technical support team when troubleshooting issues.

In addition to questions and structured discussion via Top Hat, most class meetings dedicate some time to practical exercises, for which you will be working with your peers in small groups. You will be asked to discuss specific questions with your group, share your answers with the class, and email your collective response to me at eric.merkley@utoronto.ca.

For classes featuring group activities, 50% of your grade will be Top Hat participation and 50% will be the group activity. In classes with no group activity, Top Hat will be 100% of your grade.

4.4 Short Assignments (10% X 2)

You will complete two short assignments in this course.

Response Paper

First, you will write one response paper on a reading that is designated on the syllabus as a “Reaction Reading”. This paper should be no longer than two pages and in a proper essay format. This paper will *briefly* summarize the reading by identifying the thesis and main arguments of the author. It should then draw out the implications of the argument or findings. You will be graded for the quality of the summary and analysis, along with the clarity and succinctness of the writing. Marks will be deducted if you exceed the page limit.

Deadlines for Response Paper

- Students whose last name starts with the letters A through M will complete a response paper on any one of the reaction readings from lectures 3 through 6. This assignment is due on Quercus by 11:59PM on March 4.
- Students whose last name starts with the letters N through Z will complete a response paper on any one of the reaction readings from lectures 7 through 10. This assignment is due on Quercus by 11:59PM on April 1.

Research Sketch

Second, you will write a brief sketch of a survey research proposal between two and three pages in length. I want you to do the following:

- Identify a research question in a sentence or two that can be evaluated using a public opinion survey.
- Define your central concepts/variables (e.g. independent (X) and dependent variables (Y)) in two or three sentences each. It is essential that these concepts can be measured using a public opinion survey.
- Briefly explain your argument for why one variable (X, your independent variable) should cause your other variable (Y, your dependent variable) in no more than a paragraph. Only provide citations if you are relying on external sources as the basis of your argument, but it is not necessary. The theory only needs to be plausible.
- Identify a potential confounding variable (Z). Briefly explain why it may confound a relationship between X and Y. Recall that confounders need to cause your dependent variable while being correlated with your independent variable. For example, we may see a correlation between education and vote choice, because a third variable (income) is correlated with education, but causes vote choice.
- Present survey questions meant to measure your independent, dependent, and confounding variables. Make sure to include both your questions and the response categories for those taking your proposed survey.
- Provide a brief critique of your proposed survey questions (independent and dependent variables only) based on validity **and** reliability grounds.

- Identify your population of interest and propose a sampling method. Discuss any potential sources of sampling bias that may arise from your sampling method.

Note that you do not need to design perfect survey questions or choose perfect sampling strategies. You will be given full marks if you are able to critique your choices when evaluating validity, reliability and sampling bias. This activity should not be written in essay form. More detail on the grade breakdown can be found in the assignment handout on Quercus.

Deadlines for Research Sketch

- Students whose last name starts with the letters A through M will complete a research sketch on a research question related to lectures 7 through 10. This sketch is due on Quercus by 11:59PM on April 1.
- Students whose last name starts with the letters N through Z will complete a research sketch on a research question related to lectures 3 through 6. This sketch is due on Quercus by 11:59PM on March 4.

Extensions on deadlines will be given for documented emergencies only. Without documentation, late assignments will be penalized 3 points out of 100 per day, including weekends.

4.5 Research Paper and Outline (25% + 5%)

You have two options for your final paper. The first option is to write a secondary source research paper on a topic related to public opinion and voting. This will take the form of an argumentative essay based on key debates in the field of public opinion and voting research. You will be graded on the demonstration of your knowledge, the strength of the evidence and examples you bring to bear in support of your argument, as well as the quality of your essay structure and the clarity of your writing.

The second option is to write a research paper that includes a quantitative analysis of existing public opinion datasets, like the Canadian Election Study or the World Values Survey. You will be evaluated on the originality of your research question, their identification of key concepts, the coherence of your theory, the presentation and clarity of your hypotheses, survey-based measures, and quantitative analysis. You will also discuss of important limitations to your analysis related to confounding, measurement validity and reliability, and sampling bias. To take the second option, students should have completed POL232 and **must** consult with the instructor before submission of your outline.

There are two steps to this process. First, you will write an outline for this paper (worth 5%, between 600 and 900 words). For students writing an argumentative essay, this outline should cover your thesis statement, major arguments and topic sentences, and initial evidence in support for your arguments. For those of you doing a quantitative research paper, it should provide a preview of your research question, theory, variables, data and measures. The outline can consist of detailed bullet points, but evidence **must** be properly sourced. The outline is due on Quercus at 11:59PM on February 11th. It will be graded pass or fail. The main purpose of this task is to provide feedback for your research paper. Late outlines will be accepted for the purpose of providing feedback, but they will be assigned a zero unless prior accommodation has been made.

Next, you will write an 1800-2400 word, properly sourced, final paper that builds on your research outline and takes into account instructor feedback. The paper is due on April 8th at 11:59pm. This paper is worth 25% of your grade for the course.

Detailed instructions will be posted on Quercus. Extensions on deadlines will be given for documented emergencies only. Without documentation, late essays will be penalized 3 points out of 100 per day, including weekends.

5. Course Schedule and Readings

Section I. Definitions and Measurement

Topic 1 (January 14 – ONLINE SYNCHRONOUS) – Introduction/Public Opinion and Democracy

Readings:

- Course Syllabus
- Public Opinion, Ch. 1
- Dominance and Decline, Ch. 1
- Verba, S. (1996). “The Citizen as Respondent: Sample Surveys and American Democracy.” *American Political Science Review*, 90(1): 1-7.
https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/fedca1/cdi_proquest_journals_214432172.

Topic 2 (January 21 – ONLINE SYNCHRONOUS) – Measuring Public Opinion

Readings:

- Public Opinion, Ch. 1 (Appendix)
- Zaller, J., and Feldman, S. (1992). “A Simple Theory of the Survey Response: Answering Questions versus Revealing Preferences.” *American Journal of Political Science*. 36: 579-616.
https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/fedca1/cdi_proquest_journals_1301254872.
- Johnston, R. (2008). “Survey Methodology.” In Box-Steffensmeier, Brady, H. E., & Collier, D. *The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology*. Oxford University Press.
https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/14bjeso/alma991106658233606196.

Topic 3 (January 28 – ONLINE SYNCHRONOUS) – Characterizing Public Opinion

Readings:

- Public Opinion, Ch. 4.

- Gidengil, E. (2004). *Citizens*. UBC Press, Ch. 3-4.
https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/14bjeso/alma991106027792806196.
- **Reaction Reading:** Kuklinski, J. H., and Quirk, P. J. (2000). “Reconsidering the Rational Public: Cognition, Heuristics, and Mass Opinion.” In Lupia, A., McCubbins, M., and Popkin, S., eds. *Elements of Political Reason*. New York: Cambridge University Press. (**Quercus**)

Section II. Foundational Influences on Voting

Topic 4 (February 4 – IN-PERSON) – Social Influences on Public Opinion

Readings:

- Public Opinion, Ch. 2 (pp.59-77)
- Dominance and Decline, Ch. 2
- Wilkins-Laflamme, S. (2016) “The Changing Religious Cleavage in Canadians’ Voting Behaviour.” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 49(3): 499-518.
https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/fedca1/cdi_proquest_journals_1832159079.
- **Reaction Reading:** Gidengil, E. (2007). “Beyond the Gender Gap.” *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 40(4): 815-31.
https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/fedca1/cdi_gale_infotracademiconefile_A172908096.

Topic 5 (February 11 – IN-PERSON) – Personality, Values, and Ideology

Research Outline Due

Readings:

- Public Opinion, Ch. 5 (pp. 151-168), Ch. 6
- Cochrane, C. (2015). *Left and Right: The Small World of Political Ideas*. McGill-Queen’s University Press, Ch. 8 “The Rise of Left/Right in Canadian Politics”
https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/14bjeso/alma991106963685906196.
- **Reaction Reading:** Nevitte, N. (1996). *The Decline of Deference: Canadian Value Change in Cross National Perspective*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Ch. 2.
https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/fedca1/cdi_askewsholts_vlebooks_9781442602519.

Mid-term Exam: February 18

Spring Reading Week: No class on February 25

Topic 6 (March 4 – IN-PERSON) – Partisan Identity

Short Assignment #1 Due

Readings:

- Public Opinion, Ch. 5 (remainder)
- Dominance and Decline, Ch. 4
- Belanger, E., and Stephenson, L. (2010). “Partisans and Parties: The Influence of Ideology and Brokerage on the Durability of Partisanship in Canada.” In Anderson, C., and Stephenson, L., Eds. *Voting Behaviour in Canada*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/14bjeso/alma991106119223306196.
- **Reaction Reading:** Merkley, E. (2021). “Ideological and Partisan Bias in the Canadian Public.” *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 54(2): 267–291.
https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/fedca1/cdi_crossref_primary_10_1017_S0008423921000147.

Section III. Proximate Influences on Voting

Topic 7 (March 11 – IN-PERSON) – Instrumental Theories of Voting

Readings:

- Dominance and Decline, Ch. 5, 8
- Anderson, C. (2010). “Economic Voting in Canada.” In Anderson, C., and Stephenson, L., Eds. *Voting Behaviour in Canada*, Vancouver: UBC Press.
https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/14bjeso/alma991106119223306196.
- **Reaction reading:** Downs, A. (1957). “An Economic Theory of Political Action in a Democracy.” *Journal of Political Economy*, 65: 135-150.
https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/fedca1/cdi_proquest_journals_1290550722.

Topic 8 (March 18 – IN-PERSON) – News Media

Readings:

- Public Opinion, Ch. 3
- Dobrzynska, A., Blais, A., and Nadeau, R. (2003). “Do the Media Have a Direct Impact on the Vote? The Case of the 1997 Canadian Election.” *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 15: 27-43.
https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/fedca1/cdi_gale_infotraccademiconefile_A100736955.

- Tolley, E. (2015). *Framed: Media and the Coverage of Race in Canadian Politics*. Vancouver: UBC Press, Ch. 2.
https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/fedca1/cdi_prquest_ebookcentral_EBC4397155.
- **Reaction Reading:** Zaller, J. (2003). “A New Standard of News Quality: Burglar Alarms for the Monitorial Citizen.” *Political Communication*, 20(2): 109–130.
https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/fedca1/cdi_informaworld_taylorfrancis_310_1080_10584600390211136.

Topic 9 (March 25 – IN-PERSON) – Political Campaigns

Readings:

- Dominance and Decline, Ch. 7
- Bittner, A. (2018). “Leaders Always Mattered: The Persistence of Personality in Canadian Elections.” *Electoral Studies*, 54: 297–302.
https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/fedca1/cdi_gale_infotraccademiconefile_A547963893.
- Fournier, P., Nadeau, R., Blais, A., Gidengil, E., and Nevitte, N. (2004). “Time-of-Voting Decision and Susceptibility to Campaign Effects.” *Electoral Studies* 23: 661-81.
https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/fedca1/cdi_crossref_primary_10_1016_j_electstud_2003_09_001.
- **Reaction Reading:** Matthews, J. S. (2010). “Enlightenment, Equalization or What? Campaigns, Learning, and the Economy in Canadian Elections.” In Anderson, C., and Stephenson, L., Eds. *Voting Behaviour in Canada*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/14bjeso/alma9_91106119223306196.

Section IV. Participation and Policy

Topic 10 (April 1 – IN-PERSON) – Political Participation

Short Assignment #2 Due

Readings:

- Blais, A. et al. (2004). “Where Does Turnout Decline Come From?” *European Journal of Political Research*, 43(2): 221-236.
https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/fedca1/cdi_crossref_primary_10_1111_j_1475_6765_2004_00152_x.
- Nevitte, N. (1996). *The Decline of Deference: Canadian Value Change in Cross National Perspective*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Ch 4.
https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/fedca1/cdi_askewsholts_vlebooks_9781442602519.

- **Reaction Reading:** Rubenson, Blais, A., Fournier, P., Gidengil, E., & Nevitte, N. (2007). “Does Low Turnout Matter? Evidence from the 2000 Canadian Federal Election.” *Electoral Studies*, 26(3): 589–597.
https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/fedca1/cdi_gal_e_infotracademiconefile_A190801319.

Topic 11 (April 8 – IN-PERSON) – Public Opinion and Policy/Conclusions

Final Paper Due (April 8)

Readings:

- Public Opinion, Ch. 12
- Soroka, S. N., and Wlezien, C. (2004). “Opinion Representation and Policy Feedback: Canada in Comparative Perspective.” *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 37(3): 531–559.
https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/fedca1/cdi_pr_oquest_journals_204489709.

6. Course Policies

6.1 Contacting the Course Instructor

I strongly recommend asking substantive questions about course content and requirements in scheduled office hours or by appointment. Email should be reserved strictly for time sensitive questions or quick points of clarification. We will try to respond within 24 hours, but emails received during the weekend will be answered on Monday and we will not respond to emails on the due date of an assignment.

6.2 Possible Changes to the Syllabus

I reserve the right to make adjustments to the course syllabus depending on evolving COVID-19 policies set by the University of Toronto and the Faculty of Arts & Science. I will give notice to students in the event of any changes, and amended syllabi will be posted on Quercus.

6.3 Re-grading

If you would like anything re-graded, you must prepare a single-page memo outlining your case for re-grading. The memo needs to be serious and specific. I will then re-examine a particular assignment. Know, however, that a given grade can either increase or decrease.

6.4 Missing Class and Late Assignments

Attendance and participation is required at all class sessions. Late assignments will be penalized 3 points out of 100 per day (excluding the outline, which will be graded zero), including weekends, except in the event of a documented serious illness or serious personal emergency (see section on Accommodation below). Missed examinations will result in a grade of zero except in the event of a documented illness or emergency.

6.5 Accommodation for Emergency Situations

Students who need additional time for an assignment or will miss a lecture, tutorial, or exam for a medical or serious personal reason **must contact me before the due date or exam/lecture date** and as soon as the problem arises. All requests for accommodation must be made to me directly via email.

Some documentation will usually be required to make accommodation. For the 2021-22 year, students who are absent from academic participation for any reason (e.g., COVID, cold, flu and other illness or injury, family situation) and who require consideration for missed academic work are to record their absence through the ACORN online absence declaration. Please note that accommodations will not be made for foreseeable circumstances, such as having multiple papers due in the same week. Accommodations are reserved for unforeseeable events that are outside a student's control (e.g., illness, a death in the family).

Requests for accommodation **made on or after an assignment's due date, or after the missed exam or lecture will not be considered.** Due date extensions will not usually be granted for work lost due to computer crashes or the loss of a computer file. There are simple and free ways of regularly and automatically backing up your work. Students are strongly advised to backup copies of their essays and assignments before submitting via Quercus. These backups should be kept until the marked assignments have been returned.

6.6 Other Accommodations

The University of Toronto is committed to accessibility. If you require accommodations or have any accessibility concerns, please visit <http://studentlife.utoronto.ca/accessibility> as soon as possible.

The University provides academic accommodations for students with disabilities in accordance with the terms of the Ontario Human Rights Code. This occurs through a collaborative process that acknowledges a collective obligation to develop an accessible learning environment that both meets the needs of students and preserves the essential academic requirements of the University's courses and programs.

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. If you have a disability that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach me and/or the [Accessibility Services office](#).

The University provides reasonable accommodation of the needs of students who observe religious holy days other than those already accommodated by ordinary scheduling and statutory holidays. Students have a responsibility to alert members of the teaching staff in a timely fashion to upcoming religious observances and anticipated absences and instructors will make every reasonable effort to avoid scheduling tests, examinations or other compulsory activities at these times. Please reach out to me as early as possible to communicate any anticipated absences related to religious observances, and to discuss any possible related implications for course work.

6.7 Equity and Harassment

The University of Toronto is committed to equity, human rights and respect for diversity. All members of the learning environment in this course should strive to create an atmosphere of mutual respect where all members of our community can express themselves, engage with each other, and respect one another's differences. U of T does not condone discrimination or harassment against any persons or communities.

6.8 Academic Integrity and Responsibility

Academic integrity is essential to the pursuit of learning and scholarship in a university, and to ensuring that a degree from the University of Toronto is a strong signal of each student's individual academic achievement. As a result, the University treats cases of cheating and plagiarism very seriously. The [University of Toronto's Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters](#) outlines the behaviours that constitute academic dishonesty and the processes for addressing academic offences. Potential offences include, but are not limited to:

In papers and assignments:

- Using someone else's ideas or words without appropriate acknowledgement.
- Submitting your own work in more than one course without the permission of the instructor in all relevant courses
- Making up sources or facts
- Obtaining or providing unauthorized assistance on any assignment

On tests and exams:

- Using or possessing unauthorized aids
- Looking at someone else's answers during an exam or test
- Misrepresenting your identity

In academic work:

- Falsifying institutional documents or grades
- Falsifying or altering any documentation required by the University, including (but not limited to) doctor's notes

All suspected cases of academic dishonesty will be investigated following procedures outlined in the *Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters*. If you have questions or concerns about what constitutes appropriate academic behaviour or appropriate research and citation methods, please reach out to me. Note that you are expected to seek out additional information on academic integrity from me or from other institutional resources (for example, the [University of Toronto website on Academic Integrity](#)).

6.9 Plagiarism Detection

Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to the University's plagiarism detection tool for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the tool's reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University's use of this tool are described on the Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation web site (<https://uoft.me/pdt-faq>)