PUBLIC OPINION AND POLICY

POLSCI 4SS3

Winter 2024

Instructor: Dr. Gustavo Diaz
Email: diazg2@mcmaster.ca
Lecture: Thursdays 2:30-5:20 PM
Office: KTH 505
Office Hours: [Link to scheduling]
Website: [Link to website]

Contents

Course Description

This course explores quantitative research designs to answer questions about public opinion and policy in academia, government, and industry. We will examine how to conduct surveys to understand variation in public opinion or attitudes toward several subjects across the world. We will also examine empirical strategies to generate credible evidence to inform policy and decision-making in different contexts.

The main learning objective of this course is to develop standards to think about the appropriate research design before conducting a study. This is useful to those working with quantitative data either directly or indirectly. We will work towards that goal through a combination of reading, discussion, and hands-on practice.

Students will have the opportunity to practice working with statistical software to evaluate and compare the statistical properties of alternative research designs. Students will also get the chance to practice discussing and communicating research design choices to a general or expert audience through speech and writing.

This course contributes to the Research Methods and/or Analysis requirement for the Concurrent Certificate in Applied Social Sciences Research. As such, it relies heavily on statistics as the main tool to think about research design. Students are expected to have taken at least POLSCI 3NN3 – Statistical Analysis of Primary Data or have equivalent experience with statistics and statistical programming software. I expect us to understand the main findings of a quantitative social science study and work backwards from there to discuss the research design choices that researchers made. I also expect, but not assume, some experience with loading, cleaning, and analyzing data.

Course Objectives

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

- Understand the components of a research design and their properties
- Read and critically evaluate research outputs about public opinion and policy
- Work fluently with statistical programming software and learn new techniques on their own
- Design, evaluate, and implement quantitative studies using the workflow proposed in this course

Required Materials and Texts

Reading

The main textbook we will follow is:

- Blair, Graeme, Alexander Coppock, and Macartan Humphreys. 2022. *Research Design: Declaration, Diagnosis, Redesign*. Princeton University Press

You can read the digital copy of the book for free by using the link above or purchase the physical version if you choose. Purchasing the book is not necessary to succeed in this course. The rest of the syllabus refers to this book with the initials RD.

The companion textbook is:

- Grolemund, Garret and Hadley Wickham. 2017. *R for Data Science*. O'Reilly Media Inc

Once again, you can read the digital copy of this book for free with the link above. You are not required to read this book for this course but consulting it on occasion may help you overcome hurdles while working with statistical software. Since the digital version is constantly updated, I do not recommend buying a physical copy.

We will also read academic papers that discuss or apply the research designs we will cover. Most of these are available through the library's subscription. See this link for instructions to access library resources while off campus. If not available through the library or elsewhere online, I will upload them to the course website.

Software

We will use R and RStudio to program research designs and evaluate their properties. The advantage of R is that it is free and open source, meaning that you will be able to apply everything you learn in this course anywhere else. The disadvantage is a somewhat steep learning curve. I believe the investment is worthwhile for anyone working with data or in data-adjacent careers.

The computers in our classroom should have a recent installation of both programs. While I expect us to spend some class meeting time working with R, you will most likely need access to the software outside of the classroom. You are welcome to bring a laptop to class.

You can install R and RStudio on your personal computer. You can use this link for installation instructions on Windows and MacOS (ignore the parts about package building). See this link for installation instructions on Chromebooks, which is a bit more involved.

You can also use Posit Cloud to access RStudio from any web browser. A free account should be sufficient for the purposes of this course and has the advantage of letting you access your work across devices.

You should reach out to the instructor if you foresee any challenges with accessing computing resources outside of the classroom.

Class Format

Our class will be a mixture of seminar, discussion, and computer lab sessions.

Course Evaluation – Overview

1. Attendance and participation
2. Weekly lab assignments, due on Mondays at 5PM
3. Response papers, due on Wednesdays at 8:30 AM
4. Optional final project: Pre-analysis plan, due April 25 at 11:59 PM

Course Evaluation – Details

This course uses a labor-based grading agreement, commonly known as contract grading. In this course, instead of being given a final grade based on how "good" your submitted assignments are, your final grade will be based on the amount of labor you put into the course. I practice, this means you will receive full marks (up to a B+) for completing the baseline grading contract.

Assignments will not be given marks individually. Instead, you will receive a grade at the end of the term based on how many satisfactory assignments you submitted, how many extra assignments you submitted, and how often you missed class or submitted work late.

By enrolling in this course, you accept the general terms of the grading agreement. We will have an opportunity to discuss expectations and negotiate modifications to the grading agreement during the first course meeting. The Course Policies section below outlines the contract grading policies in more detail.

Attendance and participation

I expect you to engage actively in this class. At a minimum, I expect you to come to lecture ready to discuss the material and collaborate with your peers on weekly assignments. To meet the grading contract, you should miss no more than three classes and have a "satisfactory" participation mark toward the end of the semester.

To obtain a satisfactory participation mark, you must make interventions conducive to a productive and respectful learning environment for yourself and others during class, office hours, online communications, or through other means that best suit your learning style.

We all have different interests and personalities, so I will keep an open mind about what constitutes satisfactory participation, and I encourage you to be proactive about pursuing the participation avenues that are most productive for you. I will grade your participation status as satisfactory (S) or unsatisfactory (U) once during mid-term recess and once after the last week of instruction. You can schedule a meeting with me at any point of the semester to discuss how to secure a satisfactory participation mark.

Weekly lab assignments, due on Mondays at 5PM

We will have weekly assignments aimed at practicing the application of course material with statistical software. These range from coding exercises to evaluating and improving research designs. You are encouraged to work on these assignments in groups during the lab sessions and beyond, but you must submit individual reports.

We will start working on the weekly assignments during our lab session. On most weeks, you will need additional time to finish them. There will be 11 weekly lab assignments in total, but only 9 marked as satisfactory are required to meet the baseline grading contract.

Response papers, due on Wednesdays at 8:30 AM

You can choose to write a response paper in the weeks that involve reading original research studies. A response paper is a short form document that summarizes the question, relevance, and research design of a study and then uses the course material to critically evaluate an aspect of its design or implementation. The main task is to identify questions and issues that require our attention during the discussion portion of our weekly meeting. You are expected to engage actively during class discussion in the weeks you write a response paper. In weeks with multiple assigned papers, you can choose whichever you prefer to discuss. The course website contains a template with guidelines on how to write a response paper for this course. Response papers are due 24 hours before our class meeting.

Response papers should be between 700 and 1,000 words. You are required to complete at least 3 response papers with a satisfactory mark to meet the baseline grading contract.

Optional: Pre-analysis plan, due on April 25 by 11:59 PM

Your optional final project is a pre-analysis plan. This is a document that outlines the steps of a future study addressing a novel question of academic interest or policy/industry relevance. This document identifies a problem or question that needs to be addressed, explains its relevance or novelty, proposes a research design, and evaluates its properties to guide implementation. The course website will host resources to write a pre-analysis plan. Pre-analysis plans should range from 3,000 to 4,000 words.

You can reach out to me via email to indicate your interest in completing this optional final assignment by April 4 at 11:59PM. I will circulate instructions for the pre-analysis plan to those who sign up on April 8 before 5PM.

Weekly Course Schedule and Required Readings

Week 1 January 11

Course introduction
Lab: Getting started

Week 2 January 18

The MIDA framework
Readings: RD sections 1-4

Lab: Introduction to R and RStudio

Week 3 January 25

Representative surveys
Readings: RD sections 5-7, 15

Schwarz, Norbert. 1999. "Self-reports: How the questions shape the answers." *American Psychologist* 54 (2): 93-105

Stephenson, Laura B., Allison Harell, Daniel Rubenson, and Peter John Loewen. 2021. "Measuring Preferences and Behaviors in the 2019 Canadian Election Study." *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue Canadienne de science politique* 54 (1): 118-124

Lab: Sampling and descriptive inference

Week 4 February 1

Sensitive questions
Readings: RD sections 8-9, 17

Blair, Graeme. 2015. "Survey Methods for Sensitive Topics." *Comparative Politics Newsletter* 12 (44): 12-16

Creighton, Matthew J. and Amaney Jamal. 2015. "Does Islam play a role in anti-immigrant sentiment? An experimental approach." *Social Science Research* 53 (1): 89-103

Oliveros, Virginia and Daniel W. Gingerich. 2020. "Lying About Corruption in Surveys: Evidence from a Joint Response Model." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 32 (2): 384-395

Lab: Reducing sensitivity bias

Week 5 February 8

Survey experiments
Readings: RD section 10

Tomz, Michael R. and Jessica L. P. Weeks. 2013. "Public Opinion and the Democratic Peace." *American Political Science Review* 107 (4): 849-865

Eggers, Andrew C., Nick Vivyan, and Markus Wagner. 2018. "Corruption, Accountability, and Gender: Do Female Politicians Face Higher Standards in Public Life?" *Journal of Politics* 80 (1): 321-326

Lab: Survey experimental designs

Week 6 February 15

Convenience samples
Readings:

Munger, Kevin, Ishita Gopal, Jonathan Nagler, Josuah A. Tucker. 2021. "Accessibility and generalizability: Are social media effects moderated by age or digital literacy?" *Research & Politics* 8 (2)

Coppock, Alexander, Thomas J. Leeper, and Kevin J. Mullinix. 2018. "Generalizability of heterogeneous treatment effect estimates across samples." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115 (49): 12441-12446

Lab: External validity

Week 7 February 22

Mid-term recess

Week 8 February 29

Evidence-informed policy
Readings: RD sections 11-13

Bowers, Jake, and Paul F. Testa. 2019. "Better Government, Better Science: The Promise of and Challenges Facing the Evidence-Informed Policy Movement." *Annual Review of Political Science* 22: 521-542

Lab: Hypothesis testing

Week 9 March 7

Field experiments I
Readings: RD section 18

Banerjee, Abhijit, Esther Duflo, and Garima Sharma. 2021. "Long-Term Effects of the Targeting the Ultra Poor Program." *American Economic Review: Insights* 3 (4): 471-486

Pennycook, Gordon, Ziv Epstein, Mohsen Mosleh, Antonio A. Arechar, Dean Eckles, and David G. Rand. 2021. "Shifting attention to accuracy can reduce misinformation online." *Nature* 592: 590-595

Lab: Field experimental designs I

Week 10 March 14

Field experiments II
Readings: RD sections 20-22

Kalla, Joshua, Frances Rosenbluth, and Dawn Langan Teele. 2018. "Are You My Mentor? A Field Experiment on Gender, Ethnicity, and Political Self-Starters." *Journal of Politics* 80 (1): 337-341

Diaz, Gustavo, and Erin Rossiter. 2022. "Balancing Precision and Retention in Experimental Design." *Working Paper*

Lab: Field experimental designs II

Week 11 March 21

Beyond experimentation
Readings: RD section 23

Deaton, Angus, and Nancy Cartwright. 2018. "Understanding and misunderstanding randomized controlled trials." *Social Science & Medicine* 210: 2-21

Slough, Tara, Daniel Rubenson, Ro'ee Levy, et al. 2021. "Adoption of community monitoring improves common pool resource management across contexts." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118 (29): e2015367118

Lab: Limitations of experiments

Week 12 March 28

Quasi-experiments
Readings: RD section 16

Hoekstra, Mark. 2009. "The Effect of Attending the Flagship State University on Earnings: A Discontinuity-Based Approach." *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 91 (4): 717-724

Leninger, Arndt, Marie-Lou Sohnius, Thorsten Faas, Sigrid Roßteutscher, and Armin Schäfer. 2022. "Temporary Disenfranchisement: Negative Side Effects of Lowering the Voting Age." *American Political Science Review*

Lab: Quasi-experimental designs I

Week 13 April 4

No class due to instructor travel

Course Policies

Submission of Assignments

Prompts for assignments will be available on the course website. You should upload assignments via Avenue.

Assignments should use the author-date citation style of the Chicago Manual of Style (https://www-chicagomanualofstyle-org.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-2.html). You do not need to include citations for the weekly lab assignments, but you can do so if you wish.

You can use the templates available on the course website to format your assignments, slight modifications within RStudio are acceptable. If you write assignments outside RStudio, they should be double-spaced, 12pt font, with 1-inch margins. Assignments do not require a cover sheet. Figures, tables, and bibliography are not part of word counts. You can use this tool to count words in PDF documents.

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

To receive a B+ (79 points), you should:

- Miss no more than 3 class meetings.
- Miss no more than 9 weekly lab assignments.
- Miss no more than 3 response papers.
- Be delayed (by a maximum of 24 hours) on more than one assignment.
- Be late (by a maximum of 7 days) on no more than one assignment.
- Have a satisfactory participation status by the end of the semester.

Each missed class meeting or delayed or late assignment beyond this threshold will lower your grade by 3.5 points. Not delivering and assignment at all will lower your grade by 7.5 points.

To improve your grade points, you can:

- Complete extra weekly lab assignments or response papers, each additional assignment in this category will increase your grade by 3.5 points.
- Complete the optional final assignment for 10 points.

You may choose to complete as many extra or optional assignments to improve your grade, the only limitation is that the number of response papers you complete should not exceed the number of weekly lab assignments you complete by the end of the semester. You must receive approval from the instructor before submitting each extra assignment.

For further details on the motivation and implementation of contract grading in this course, please visit the course website. [Direct URL to contract grading page to come].

Late Assignments

In this course, assignments are designed to be cumulative; each assignment builds on the last. For this reason, it is important to not fall behind and to complete assignments on time. Assignments are considered delayed if they are submitted after one hour but within 24 hours of the due date. Assignments will be considered late if they are submitted after 24 hours but before 7 days of the due date. Assignments not submitted within 7 days of the due date will be considered as not delivered.

Use of the MSAF form will automatically move the due date 72 hours, with no other possibility of extension or late submission without additional confirmation of the circumstances by the Faculty advising office. If you use the MSAF form for an assignment, you do not need to email me. Just turn in the assignment within 72 hours via Avenue or to the Political Science office (KTH 527). There is a drop box for after hours.

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 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.

Generative AI: Unrestricted Use

Students may use generative AI throughout this course in whatever way enhances their learning; no special documentation or citation is required.

Tools such as ChatGPT and Copilot can be valuable sources to learn how to code in R. However, assignments in this course are designed so that an answer generated by a large language model without scrutiny will be easily spotted and likely considered as unsatisfactory.

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, 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.