

PUBLIC OPINION AND POLICY
POLSCI 4SS3
Winter 2023

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Contents

Course Description.....	3
Course Objectives.....	3
Required Materials and Texts	3
Reading	3
Software	4
Class Format.....	5
Course Evaluation – Overview	5
Course Evaluation – Details	5
Attendance and participation (10%).....	5
Weekly lab assignments (30%), due on Fridays at 5PM.....	5
Response papers (30%), due on Tuesdays at 8:30 AM	5
Final project meetings (10%)	6
Final project: Pre-analysis plan (20%), due on April 21 by 11:59 PM	6
Weekly Course Schedule and Required Readings	7
Week 1 January 11	7
Week 2 January 18.....	7
Week 3 January 25.....	7
Week 4 February 1	8
Week 5 February 8	8
Week 6 February 15	8
Week 7 February 22	9
Week 8 March 1.....	9
Week 9 March 8.....	9
Week 10 March 15.....	9
Week 11 March 22.....	9

Week 12 March 29.....	10
Week 13 April 5	10
Week 14 April 12	10
Course Policies	11
Submission of Assignments.....	11
Grades.....	11
Late Assignments	11
Absences, Missed Work, Illness	12
Courses With An On-Line Element	12
Online Proctoring.....	12
Authenticity / Plagiarism Detection	12
Copyright and Recording	13
Academic Accommodation for Religious, Indigenous or Spiritual Observances (RISO)	13
Academic Integrity Statement.....	13
Conduct Expectations.....	14
Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities.....	14
Faculty of Social Sciences E-mail Communication Policy	14
Course Modification	14
Extreme Circumstances.....	14

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 decisions in different contexts.

The main learning objective of this course 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 in preparation to write a pre-analysis plan document that outlines the steps of a future study that addresses a novel question of academic interest or policy/industry relevance.

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 4NN3 – Statistical Analysis 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 understand 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](#). Forthcoming at Princeton University Press

You can read the digital copy of the book for free by using the link above. The physical version is not available for purchase yet. 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 in 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 – 10%
2. Weekly lab assignments - 30%, due on Fridays at 5PM
3. Response papers - 30% total, due on Tuesdays at 9AM
4. Final project meetings – 10% total
5. Final project: Pre-analysis plan - 20%, due April 21 at 11:59 PM

Course Evaluation – Details

Attendance and participation (10%)

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 obtain a good participation grade, you must also 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 learning styles, so I will keep an open mind about what constitutes good participation, and I encourage you to be proactive about pursuing the participation avenues that are most productive for you.

Weekly lab assignments (30%), due on Fridays 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 12 weekly lab assignments in total and your best 10 will count towards your final grade (3% each). You can choose to submit only 10 weekly assignments or complete more than the minimum required.

Response papers (30%), due on Tuesdays at 8:30 AM

You can choose to write a response paper on weeks that include reading original 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, if you choose to complete more, only the best three will count towards your final grade (10% each).

Final project meetings (10%)

In preparation for your final project, you will have at least two meetings to report progress and receive feedback on your final project (as a group, if applicable). At least one of the meetings should happen before the mid-term recess. You should sign up for office hours (preferably virtually to accommodate for group schedules) and clarify in the subject line that this is a project meeting. The minimum number of meetings required may change based on roster size.

In the first meeting, we will discuss project ideas and identify elements of the course material that you should pay attention to. In subsequent meetings, you should submit a document outlining your current progress 24 hours before the meeting time. This can either be a working draft of your final project, or a separate document altogether. The purpose of this exercise is for you to get continuous feedback on writing a pre-analysis plan. Based on the specifics of your project, I may ask you to schedule additional meetings. You are also welcomed to schedule additional meetings if you deem it necessary.

Final project meetings count for 10% of your total grade. This grade will be updated after every meeting and should serve as an indication of the work required to receive a satisfactory score in your final project. Not all group members need to attend a meeting, but every group member should attend at least one meeting.

Final project: Pre-analysis plan (20%), due on April 21 by 11:59 PM

Your final project is a pre-analysis plan. This is a document that outlines the steps of a future study that addresses 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, and we will discuss expectations throughout the semester. Final projects should range from 5,000 to 6,000 words.

During the first week of our course, you will complete a survey to share details about your research interests and career goals. Based on your answers, I will create research themes that students can sign up to form groups on a first-come first-served basis. I

anticipate groups of 3-4 people. The details of group formation will change depending on interests and roster size.

If you already have a research topic you want to work on, you may choose to write an individual project instead. However, note that the expectations are the same as if you were working with a group. You should consult with me as early as possible to determine if your individual project suits the course objectives. The instructor reserves the right to accept or reject individual project proposals.

Weekly Course Schedule and Required Readings

Week 1 January 11

Course introduction

Lab: Complete survey of research interests

Week 2 January 18

Representative surveys

Readings: RD sections 1-4

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: Introduction to R and RStudio, sampling from populations

Week 3 January 25

Panel surveys

Readings: RD sections 5-7, 15

Esaïasson, Peter and Mikael Persson. 2014. ["Does Studying Political Science Affect Civic Attitudes?: A Panel Comparison of Students of Politics, Law, and Mass Communication."](#) *Journal of Political Science Education* 10 (4): 375-385

Claes, Ellen, and Marc Hooghe. 2017. ["The Effect of Political Science Education on Political Trust and Interest: Results from a 5-year Panel Study."](#) *Journal of Political Science Education* 13 (1): 33-45

Lab: 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:

Ahler, Douglas J., Carolyn E. Roush, and Gaurav Sood. 2021. "[The micro-task market for lemons: Data quality on Amazon's Mechanical Turk.](#)" *Political Science Research & Methods*

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

Lab: External validity

Week 7 February 22

Mid-term recess

Week 8 March 1

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 8

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 15

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 22

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 29

Quasi-experiments I

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

Lab: Quasi-experimental designs I

Week 13 April 5

Quasi-experiments II

Readings: RD section 16

Leninger, Arndt, Marie-Lou Sohnus, 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 II

Week 14 April 12

Flex class or open lab session

Course Policies

Submission of Assignments

Prompts for assignments will be available in 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 in the course website to format your assignments, slight modifications within RStudio are acceptable. If you write assignments outside RStudio, they should be double-spaced, 12 pt 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

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 turned in within one hour of the due date will only be eligible for 95% of the total value. Assignments turned after one hour but within 24 hours of the due date will be eligible for a maximum grade of B+. Assignments received after 24 hours of the due date will be eligible for a maximum grade of C+. Late assignments will not be accepted after 48 hours after the original due date.

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.

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.