POLI 521: Canadian Political Behaviour

Department of Political Science
McGill University
Fall 2025

Instructor:	Mark Williamson	**Time**:	
Email:		**Place:**	

Course Description: How do voters choose which political parties and politicians to support? What is the role of public opinion in a democracy? How can we accurately measure peoples' political beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours? This course explores how the Canadian public thinks about and engages in politics, with a focus on recent developments in the study of political behaviour. Through seminar discussions, we will learn about cutting edge research on ideology, partisanship, polarization, social identities, information processing, and policy feedback. Students will gain exposure to key tools of political behaviour research – including surveys, experiments, and research designs for causal inference – and have the opportunity to apply them to their own areas of interest.

Learning Objectives: By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Understand theories of political behaviour and how they can be tested empirically
- Identify how public opinion shapes and is shaped by policymaking and the political context
- Critically consume public opinion data and academic research
- Develop their own designs to answer research questions

Prerequisites: This course is open to graduate students, final year Honours students, and other advanced undergraduates with the permission of the instructor. Students must have taken at least one 300 or 400-level course in Canadian Politics.

Land Acknowledgement: McGill University is on land which has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst Indigenous peoples, including the Haudenosaunee and Anishinabeg nations. We acknowledge and thank the diverse Indigenous people whose footsteps have marked this territory on which peoples of the world now gather.

Acknowledging the history of this land is a sign of respect toward its original peoples, but also a call to action for all those who benefit from the land today. I encourage you to learn more about the Indigenous history of Tiohtià:ke/Montreal and reflect on how you can use what you learn in this course to promote improved relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

Course Organization

Class Meetings: We will meet every Tuesday from 2:35 to 5:25pm in Leacock 424. See below for expectations of seminar attendance.

Drop-in Hours: The instructor holds drop-in hours to discuss course material and assignments on Wednesdays 4-5pm and Thursdays 1-2pm, either virtually via Zoom or in-person at Leacock 423. Please sign up for a meeting time within those time blocks using the link here.

Course Website: There is a course website on MyCourses. There is no assigned textbook. All important documents (syllabus, readings, etc.) will be posted there. It is your responsibility to regularly check the page for updates. Course assignments will also be submitted there.

Evaluation

There are four components to your grade:

> In-class participation: 20%
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> AI commentary critique: 5% (Due: Sept. 15)
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> Reading commentaries: 15% (Due: 3 Mondays throughout the term)
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> Discussion leadership: 15% (Due: Weeks 11/12)
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> Final project:
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> > – Outline: 10% (Due: October 24)
> > – Full report: 35% (Due: December 9)

Late policy: All assignments are due at 11:59pm on MyCourses on the dates specified above. 5 percentage points per day will be deducted for all late assignments, including on weekends, for up to a total of 25 points (5 days). Late assignments will not be accepted after five days and will instead be assigned a grade of zero. If you face extraordinary circumstances and require an extension, please contact the instructor (appropriate documentation is required). The late policy does not apply to the AI and reading commentaries, which must be submitted before class. Please note that "K" grades (i.e. extensions beyond the term) will not be granted for this class.

In-Class Participation: As this is a seminar course with no lecturing, your active participation is essential. You are expected to attend each class having completed the required readings and to be ready to engage thoughtfully with the material. Participation involves not only speaking but also actively listening, asking questions, and contributing to a collaborative learning environment. Some weeks, we will do a "tour of the table" and you will be expected to provide your thoughts on the readings for discussion by the class.

You will be graded based on your participation and engagement in seminar discussions (as well as the project feedback workshop, detailed below). Around Week 6, I will share a 'preview' of your participation grade; this is not your final grade, which may end up

being higher or lower. If you have concerns about your participation grade, please speak to the instructor.

If you are sick, please do not come to class. You are permitted one absence throughout the term, no questions asked. For this one-time absence, you do not need to notify me. Any absence beyond this will affect your participation grade. Please get in touch with the instructor if you have to miss more than one session due to illness. Alternatively, if you attend every class, your lowest participation grade will automatically be dropped.

To participate effectively, students must prepare before class to discuss the readings. The following questions may be helpful to guide your reading:

1. What are the central points or arguments being made in the reading?

2. What kind of evidence has the author(s) used to support their argument, and how did they develop or gather it?

3. If applicable: What are the dependent and independent variables? How were they measured?

4. How does the week's reading relate to other course material and themes?

5. How do you evaluate the author's arguments? In what respects are you persuaded, and in what respects are you not?

6. What are the implications of this research for how we think about politics and democracy?

AI Commentary Critique: This assignment, due Sept. 15, will help you practice engaging with other's interpretations of the readings and also to help discern how AI can and cannot assist with reading published research. You will issue a prompt to a generative AI chatbot of your choice (e.g. ChatGPT, Copilot, etc.) and ask it to write a one-page commentary based on the readings assigned for Week 3 (i.e. attaching these as PDFs). You can use the language from the assignment description below as a starting point.

Then, you will critique the AI's commentary based on your own reading of the materials. As a starting point, you can think about the following questions:

- What does the AI get right? What is it misunderstanding?

- What would you have liked to see to improve some of its arguments or questions?

- How useful are the discussion questions?

- How prepared would you feel to discuss the readings based on the AI's output?

In your submission, please include the AI's one page summary and then add your own one-page critique immediately after it in the same document. You will be assessed on the quality of your critiques and the connections you draw to the readings, but not on your assessment about whether the AI performed well or not.

Reading Commentaries: To facilitate discussion, you will be required to submit a one-page commentary based on one or more of the assigned readings for three weeks in the course. Your memo should be concise and to the point: list the set of questions or comments that follow from your reading of one or several of the paper(s). You should not summarize the readings. The commentary is not an essay, but should be written

sharply, preferably using bullet-points. An example will be posted to MyCourses. You will be graded on the quality and insightfulness of your comments. You do not need to cite additional references.

The memos will be posted to a shared folder (link to be provided), where all students in the class can (and should!) read the comments of other students in advance of the class. Commentaries are due on the Monday preceding the class in which the readings are assigned. Note: you may not submit a commentary for a week in which you are responsible for discussion leadership (see below).

Discussion Leadership: In groups of 5, you will facilitate 90 minutes of a class session in weeks 11 and 12 (Nov. 11 and 18). In your groups, you will choose a topic for the session, select two readings for the rest of the class to read in advance of class, and submit a 1-2 page lesson plan to the instructor by the preceding Tuesday (i.e. one week in advance; Nov. 4 or 11) that outlines key learning objectives, points of emphasis from the readings, and at least four potential discussion questions. Your discussion session should begin with an 8-10 minute presentation, followed by an open discussion of the readings with the class. The purpose of your introductory presentation is not to summarize the reading; instead, you can offer some reflections, dive deeper into a problem the reading presents or the empirical material, and/or build on other themes and discussions from the course.

Potential themes for these discussion sessions include, but are not limited to:

- Campaign effects and strategy
- Gender
- Economic voting
- Participation

- Regionalism
- Elite behaviour
- Misinformation and social media
- Research methods

Before you submit your lesson plan, you must run your topic by the instructor either over email or, ideally, during office hours. You will have an opportunity to sign up for a session after Week 2.

Final Project: Students have two options for their final project, which is due on Dec. 9. They can either (i) propose a survey instrument that could be used to answer a research question in the study of political behaviour and public opinion; or (ii) analyze existing data to answer such a research question. The specific requirements for each item differ slightly; a full assignment description will be posted to MyCourses. Students interested in option (ii) should have experience in data analysis, either through POLI 311/312 or elsewhere. Students are strongly encouraged to consult with the instructor about their project idea during office hours.

Regardless of which option you choose, you must submit a one-page outline of your project on Oct. 24. This outline should clearly lay out the following:

- Research Question: What do you want to learn?

- Theory and Hypotheses: What do you expect to find? Why?

- Variables: How will you measure the main concepts of interest in your study?

- Proposed Analysis: How will you use the data you collect to answer your research question?

Students will read each other's outlines in advance of class on November 4, when we will hold a "Project Feedback Workshop." More details will be provided on this session at a later date, but you do not need to prepare a presentation.

Course Policies

Language of Submission: In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded. Conformément à la Charte des droits de l'étudiant de l'Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté.

Academic Integrity: McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures" (see McGill's guide to academic honesty for more information).

Generative AI (based on student input): Students may use generative AI programs as a tool to support their learning in this class. This technology should not be used to write passages of written assignments, generate complete ideas, produce critiques of the readings, or serve as an authoritative source of factual information. Students are expected to complete the readings themselves and be the first and primary source for the ideas presented in all evaluation component (participation, commentaries, final project, etc.). That being said, AI is permitted and may be helpful for the following tasks: lightly editing written work (e.g. phrasing, word choice); testing the logic of students' own arguments and ideas; understanding difficult passages or interpreting statistical analyses in the readings; and identifying initial citations that students can use to find other relevant work (note: AI can generate fake citations; always cross-reference with Google Scholar or similar databases). In any case, if students use AI, they should include a brief disclosure at the end of their assignment to clarify how it was used. Students may not upload any other students' written work to any generative AI program (e.g. their commentaries, final project outlines). The instructor will not use AI detection software to vet student work. Finally, students are encouraged to consider the ethical, social, and environment consequences of AI use before deciding on whether and how to use this technology.

Communication: Please check your McGill email and MyCourses regularly for course updates. When emailing the instructor, please use your McGill email account and include POLI 521 in your subject line. I will do my best to respond within 48 hours – please do not expect instant replies to emails, especially in the evening or over the weekend. Please email for logistical issues or clarification. For more substantive issues, please see me during drop-in hours.

Decorum: Students are expected to arrive to class on time and behave in a manner that is respectful to the professors and to fellow students. Opinions held by other students should be respected; harassment, derogatory comments, personal attacks on others, or interrupting the class will not be tolerated. Please avoid the use of cell phones and electronics for non-class related purposes.

Accommodation: Students experiencing an extraordinary personal situation, or a temporary illness may request additional assistance and support in order to meet certain academic obligations. The Student Accessibility and Achievement Office is available to meet with students to discuss ways to provide some flexibility in the program and to accommodate particular circumstances. Students must be prepared to provide supporting documentation when seeking considerations. Students who wish to request academic accommodation must do so before the last day of the term as specified in the University Calendar.

Students who register with Student Accessibility and Achievement have the same personal rights and responsibilities and academic rights and responsibilities as all McGill students. For more information, please consult the McGill Student Rights and Responsibilities web page and the Policy Concerning the Rights of Students with Disabilities.

Students who, because of religious commitments, cannot undertake or submit an assessment task in a course have the right to request reasonable accommodation in fulfilling the assessment in accordance with the Policy for the Accommodation of Religious Holy Days. Pregnant students and students caring for dependents have the right to request reasonable accommodation in fulfilling an assessment in a course in accordance with the Guidelines for the Academic Accommodation of Pregnant Students and Students Caring for Dependants.

Extraordinary Circumstances: In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's or instructor's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

Course Outline & Readings

Note: weekly readings and topics are subject to change. Refer to MyCourses for the most up-to-date version of the syllabus. All readings, videos and other course materials will be posted on MyCourses. For each week in the term, several readings are listed; you are expected to read the *required* materials, but may also find the *recommended* items to be useful background on topics that you are especially interested in. Please read articles/chapters before the indicated date in the schedule below.

Week 1: Introduction + Survey methods   **Sept. 2**

Required:

- This syllabus
- Rosalee A. Clawson and Zoe M. Oxley. 2020. *Public opinion: Democratic ideals, democratic practice.* CQ Press (Ch.1 Appendix)
- Canadian Election Study 2021 Codebook (skim)

Recommended:

- Charles Breton et al. 2017. Telephone versus online survey modes for election studies: Comparing Canadian public opinion and vote choice in the 2015 federal election. *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 50 (4): 1005–1036
- Andrew Keeter, Courtney Mercer, and Scott Keeter. 2024. *Online opt-in polls can produce misleading results, especially for young people and Hispanic adults.* Technical report. Pew Research Center, March

- Pew Research Center. 2018. "Methods 101: Question Wording." (Youtube Video). (link).

- Herb Asher. 2016. *Polling and the public: What every citizen should know.* CQ Press

- Lonna Rae Atkeson and R. Michael Alvarez. 2018. *The Oxford handbook of polling and survey methods.* Oxford University Press

Week 2: Overview + Tools of political behaviour research   Sept. 9

Required:

- Cameron D. Anderson and Laura B. Stephenson. 2011. The Puzzle of Elections and Voting in Canada. In *The Puzzle of Elections and Voting in Canada,* 1–39. University of British Columbia Press, January

- Kosuke Imai and Nora Webb Williams. 2022. *Quantitative Social Science: An Introduction in Tidyverse.* Princeton University Press (Sections 2.3 to 2.4)

- Miller, Steven. (2014). "Reading a Regression Table: A Guide for Students."

Recommended:

- Elisabeth Gidengil. 2022. Voting Behaviour in Canada: The State of the Discipline. *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 55, no. 4 (December): 916–938

- Brian J. Gaines, James H. Kuklinski, and Paul J. Quirk. 2007. The logic of the survey experiment reexamined. *Political Analysis* 15 (1): 1–20

AI Critique Due: Sept. 15

Week 3: Foundational influences on vote choice   Sept. 16

Required:

- Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme. 2016. The Changing Religious Cleavage in Canadians' Voting Behaviour. *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique* 49, no. 3 (September): 499–518

- David A. Armstrong II, Jack Lucas, and Zack Taylor. 2022. The urban-rural divide in Canadian Federal elections, 1896–2019. *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique* 55 (1): 84–106

- Elisabeth Gidengil et al. 2012. *Dominance and decline: Making sense of recent Canadian elections.* University of Toronto Press (Chapter 3)

Recommended:

- Laura B. Stephenson et al. 2019. *Provincial Battles, National Prize?: Elections in a Federal State.* McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP (Chapter 2)

Week 4: Proximate influences on vote choice   Sept. 23

Required:

- Amanda Bittner. 2018. Leaders always mattered: The persistence of personality in Canadian elections. *Electoral Studies* 54:297–302

- Jason Roy and Christopher Alcantara. 2015. The Candidate Effect: Does the Local Candidate Matter? *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 25, no. 2 (April): 195–214

- Cameron D. Anderson. 2010. Economic Voting in Canada: Assessing the Effects of Subjective Perceptions and Electoral Context. In *Voting Behaviour in Canada,* edited by Cameron D. Anderson and Laura Stephenson, 139–162

Recommended:

- Patrick Fournier et al. 2004. Time-of-voting decision and susceptibility to campaign effects. *Electoral studies* 23 (4): 661–681

- Éric Bélanger and Bonnie M. Meguid. 2008. Issue salience, issue ownership, and issue-based vote choice. Publisher: Elsevier, *Electoral studies* 27 (3): 477–491

- Andrew C. Eggers, Daniel Rubenson, and Peter J. Loewen. 2022. Who Votes More Strategically? Evidence from Canada. *The Journal of Politics* 84, no. 3 (July): 1862–1868

Week 5: Special Topic: Public opinion and reconciliation   Sept. 30

Required:

- Christopher Alcantara et al. 2025. Determinants of Attitudes Toward Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. *The Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* (May): 1–23

- Edana Beauvais and Dietlind Stolle. 2022. The Politics of White Identity and Settlers' Indigenous Resentment in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique* 55 (1): 59–83

- Williamson, Mark. (2024) "Personal responsibility and attitudes toward intergroup reconciliation" (Working Paper).

- One of the following:

  - Joyce Green. 2025. Enacting Reconciliation. In *Visions of the Heart: Issues Involving Indigenous Peoples in Canada,* 6th ed., edited by Gina Starblanket and David Long. Oxford University Press

  - Rachel Yacaaʔał George. 2017. Inclusion is just the Canadian word for assimilation: Self-determination and the reconciliation paradigm in Canada. In *Surviving Canada: Indigenous peoples celebrate 150 years of betrayal*, edited by Kiera L. Ladner and Myra J. Tait, 49–62. Winnipeg, MB: ARP Books.

  - Glen Sean Coulthard. 2014. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition.* University of Minnesota Press (Chapter 4)

  - Kiera Ladner. 2018. Proceed with caution: Reflections on resurgence and reconciliation. In *Resurgence and reconciliation: Indigenous-settler relations and earth teachings,* edited by Michael Asch, John Borrows, and James Tully, 245–264. University of Toronto Press

Recommended:

- Kiera Ladner. 2017. Taking the field: 50 years of Indigenous politics in the CJPS. *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique* 50 (1): 163–179

Week 6: Ideology, partisanship, polarization Oct. 7

Required:

- Christopher Cochrane. 2015. *Left and Right: The Small World of Political Ideas.* McGill-Queen's Press - MQUP, October (Ch. 8, "The Rise of Left/Right in Canadian Politics")

- Éric Bélanger and Laura B. Stephenson. 2010. Parties and partisans: the influence of ideology and brokerage on the durability of partisanship in Canada. In *Voting Behaviour in Canada,* edited by Cameron D. Anderson and Laura Stephenson, 107–136

- Eric Merkley. 2021. Ideological and Partisan Bias in the Canadian Public. *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique* 54, no. 2 (June): 267–291

Recommended:

- Nicholas J. Caruana, R. Michael McGregor, and Laura B. Stephenson. 2015. The Power of the Dark Side: Negative Partisanship and Political Behaviour in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 4 (December): 771–789

- Richard Johnston. 2023. Affective Polarization in the Canadian Party System, 1988–2021. *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 56, no. 2 (June): 372–395

- Eric Merkley. 2022. Polarization Eh? Ideological Divergence and Partisan Sorting in the Canadian Mass Public. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (December): 932–943

- Clarke, Harold D., Jane Jenson, Lawrence LeDuc and Jon H. Pammett. 2019. Absent Mandate: Strategies and Choices in Canadian Elections. University of Toronto Press. (Chapter 2)

Week 7: Reading Week Oct. 14

Week 8: Political participation and knowledge Oct. 21

Required:

- Elisabeth Gidengil et al. 2004. *Citizens.* Vancouver, Canada: UBC Press (Chapter 3)

- Daniel Rubenson et al. 2007. Does low turnout matter? Evidence from the 2000 Canadian federal election. *Electoral Studies* 26 (3): 589–597

- Alan S. Gerber, Donald P. Green, and Christopher W. Larimer. 2008. Social Pressure and Voter Turnout: Evidence from a Large-Scale Field Experiment. *American Political Science Review* 102, no. 1 (February): 33–48

Recommended:

- Henry Milner and J. P. Lewis. 2011. It's what happens on the front lines of civic education policy that matters: Reflections on a natural experiment on youth turnout in Ontario. *Canadian Political Science Review* 5 (2): 136–146

- André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, and Neil Nevitte. 2004. Where does turnout decline come from? *European Journal of Political Research* 43, no. 2 (March): 221–236

- Kiera L. Ladner and Michael McCrossan. 2007. *The electoral participation of Aboriginal people.* Technical report. Ottawa, Canada: Elections Canada

- Patrick Fournier. 2002. The uninformed Canadian voter. In *Citizen politics: Research and theory in Canadian political behaviour,* edited by Joanna Everitt and Brenda O'Neill, 92–109. Oxford University Press

- Arthur Lupia. 2016. *Uninformed: Why people know so little about politics and what we can do about it.* Oxford University Press

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Final Project Outline Due: Oct. 24

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Week 9: Groups and identities   Oct. 28

Required:

- Quinn M. Albaugh et al. 2025. From gender gap to gender gaps: Bringing nonbinary people into political behavior research. *Perspectives on Politics* 23 (1): 286–304

- Elisabeth Gidengil. 2007. Beyond the gender gap: presidential address to the Canadian Political Science Association, Saskatoon, 2007. *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique* 40 (4): 815–831

- Randy Besco. 2019. *Identities and Interests: Race, Ethnicity, and Affinity Voting.* UBC Press (Chapter 3)

- Matthew Polacko and Allison Harell. 2023. Racial discrimination at the polls? The Canadian case of Jagmeet Singh. *Politics, Groups, and Identities,* 1–20

Recommended:

- Simon Dabin, Jean François Daoust, and Martin Papillon. 2019. Indigenous peoples and affinity voting in Canada. Publisher: Cambridge University Press, *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique* 52 (1): 39–53

- Amanda Bittner and Elizabeth Goodyear-Grant. 2017. Digging deeper into the gender gap: Gender salience as a moderating factor in political attitudes. *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique* 50 (2): 559–578

- Erin Tolley, Randy Besco, and Semra Sevi. 2022. Who Controls the Purse Strings? A Longitudinal Study of Gender and Donations in Canadian Politics. *Politics & Gender* 18, no. 1 (March): 244–272

Week 10: Project Feedback Workshop   Nov. 4

Required:

- Other students' final project outlines

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Readings and lesson plans due one week before student-led discussions.

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Week 11: Student-led discussions   Nov. 11

Required:

- TBD

Week 12: Student-led discussions   Nov. 18

Required:

- TBD

Week 13: Media effects   Nov. 25

Required:

- Erin Tolley. 2015. *Framed: Media and the coverage of race in Canadian politics.* UBC Press (Chapter 2)

- Aengus Bridgman, Eric Merkley, et al. 2020. The causes and consequences of COVID-19 misperceptions: Understanding the role of news and social media. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 1 (3)

- Eric Merkley. 2025. Evaluating the Partisan Media Echo Chamber Hypothesis in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique,* 1–17

- Aengus Bridgman, Costin Ciobanu, et al. 2020. Unveiling: The electoral consequences of an exogenous mid-campaign court ruling. *The Journal of Politics,* 1–62

Recommended:

- Rosalee A. Clawson and Zoe M. Oxley. 2020. *Public opinion: Democratic ideals, democratic practice.* CQ Press (Ch. 3)

Week 14: Accountability and policy feedback   Dec. 2

Required:

- Stefaan Walgrave et al. 2023. Inaccurate Politicians: Elected Representatives' Estimations of Public Opinion in Four Countries. *The Journal of Politics* 85, no. 1 (January): 209–222

- Martin Gilens. 2005. Inequality and democratic responsiveness. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 69 (5): 778–796

- Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels. 2016. *Democracy for realists: Why elections do not produce responsive government.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press (Chapter 11)

Recommended:

- Jack Lucas, Lior Sheffer, and Peter John Loewen. 2024. Pathways to Substantive Representation: Policy Congruence and Policy Knowledge Among Canadian Local Politicians. *Political Behavior* (October)

- Stuart N. Soroka and Christopher Wlezien. 2004. Opinion representation and policy feedback: Canada in comparative perspective. *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique* 37 (3): 531–559

- Susan Franceschet, Jack Lucas, and Erica Rayment. 2024. Do Women Politicians Know More about Women's Policy Preferences? Evidence from Canada. *Politics & Gender,* 1–19

- Daniel M. Butler and David W. Nickerson. 2011. Can learning constituency opinion affect how legislators vote? Results from a field experiment. *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 6 (1): 55–83

- Peter John Loewen, Daniel Rubenson, and John R. McAndrews. 2022. When Do Politicians Pursue More Policy Information? *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 9, no. 2 (July): 216–224

Final Project Due: Dec. 9