Carleton University

Political Management

Polling and Opinion Research (POLM5010)

Winter 2025

Course Description

Public opinion is one of those concepts which are well known but not known well. In 1965, Harwood Childs documented close to 50 different definitions for public opinion (1965). Three years later, W. Philips Davison wrote in the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences that public opinion lacked a generally accepted definition. (1968: 188) Today, if one "googles" public opinion, one would have to go through over 82,000,000 entries. One of the objectives of this course is to provide a better understanding of this elusive concept.

Polling is also a well known fixture in modern society. When Archibald Crossley, Elmo Roper and George Gallup established what was to become scientific polling, their goals were to provide a mechanism for the voices of the many to be heard by the elites. The impact has been undeniable. Donsbach and Traugott went as far as to suggest that "two technologies have changed our modern political systems more than anything else: television and public opinion research." (2008:3) But controversy has plagued polling from its inception. Prime Minister John Diefenbaker famously declared once that "polls were for dogs" and many leaders before and since have expressed similar sentiments. Despite such criticisms, polls continue to dominate much of the media narrative and each federal election brings hundreds of horserace polls. A second objective of this course is to take a critical look at public opinion research in general and polling in particular to improve the students' knowledge of the practice, analysis and reporting of opinion research findings.

To achieve the objectives, the course was designed to provide students with a strong theoretical foundation about polling and opinion research as well as an applied look at the practice of measuring public opinion through a workshop style based around a simulation.

Textbook: There is no textbook for this class. But readings are listed. Along with core readings to a given week's topic, I have also shared examples of polling content that has been used to drive a public affairs campaign. Please review all of these carefully and try to assess what the goal of the content was.

All other readings will be available through links on this outline, on Brightspace, or through the Library website.

Class Schedule

The schedule of classes may change and additional readings may be assigned during the semester.

Week 1-– [NO CLASS] **Introduction to the class + What is public opinion?**

Readings:

Turcotte, Andre. 2010. Polling as Modern Alchemy: Measuring Public Opinion in Canadian Elections, in Election, ed. MacIvor. pp. 199-217.

Chapter 2 - "The Meanings of Public Opinion" in Public Opinion 3rd Edition [Brightspace]

Do Canadians have opinions? http://www.macleans.ca/politics/do-canadians-have-opinions/

Weekly Podcast: *"What to expect from POLM 5010" with former students Oksana Kishchuk, Mitchel Pratt, and Daniel Perry.*

Week 2 - [IN-PERSON] **Topic: Where does opinion come from? Psychology, Social Norms, and Perception.**

This week we explore the sources of opinion. Why do people believe the things they believe? How does psychology, social norms, and perception shape what we think about the world?

Readings:

Chapter 5 - "Psychological Perspectives on Public Opinion" in Public Opinion 3rd Edition [Brightspace]
Chapter 6 - "Social Norms and Public Opinion" in Public Opinion 3rd Edition [Brightspace]
Chapter 7 - "Perception and Opinion Formation" in Public Opinion 3rd Edition [Brightspace]

I asked psychologists to analyze Donald Trump supporters, this is what I learned. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/10/15/i-asked-psychologists-to-analyze-trump-supporters-this-is-what-i-learned/

Weekly Podcast: *Prius or Pickup? How the answers to four simple questions explain America's great divide and so much more with American academics Dr. Marc Hetherington and Dr. Jonathan Weiler.*

LINK: https://infocus-with-david-coletto.castos.com/episodes/infocus-on-political-polarization-personality-and-political-behaviour

Week 3 – [IN-PERSON] **What Canadians Think? A quick, but thorough look at the contours of Canadian public opinion.**
This week we explore what Canadians think of issues, how Canadians compare to others, and how opinion has evolved over time. We will also look at a segmentation I've recently developed to understand how to group the public and think of Canadians as a whole group.

As you think about this class, ask yourself: Why has opinion and values changed? What are the key drivers for opinion change? Is public opinion shifting or are the priorities of the public shifting.

Weekly Podcast: *Political Pollster Panel: David Coletto & Kyla Ronellenfitsch*

The remarkable Trump comeback and election victory is only about a week and half in our rear-view mirror. I want to look at the factors driving that result. What does the data say? Do those same conditions exist in Canada? Some? All? What's different here?

With me to examine those questions and the follow ups that cascade from there, two of the best in the business: David Coletto and Kyla Ronellenfitsch, both appearing on the podcast for a 2nd time!

VIDEO LINK: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-OZsH7yhMk

AUDIO LINK: https://www.airquotesmedia.com/thb/political-pollster-panel-coletto-ronellenfitsch-15nov2024

Week 4 – [VIRTUAL] Topic: Political Research – Conducting political polls

This week we will explore how to use polling for political purposes including segmentation, message and positioning development, and framing. In campaign research we care about motivating the electorate to vote for our candidate/party and show up to do so on election day. It is finding this "reason to vote" that should be at the heart of every research endeavor in the campaign.

In this class, we will use the 2022 Ottawa Municipal Election as a case study. I was a senior advisor and pollster to Mayor Mark Sutcliffe during his successful campaign in 2022. We will explore the role that research played in the campaign strategy. I'll walk the class through one of the questionnaires – explaining why certain questions were asked. Then we will review some of the results and discuss how they were used to inform campaign strategy and tactics.

Readings:

Smith, Gareth and Andy Hirst. 2000. Strategic Political Segmentation. European Journal of Marketing. [online]

Coletto, David. 2020. Go Knock Doors. "New" Dimensions in *Market Intelligence in Political Marketing in the 2019 Canadian Election [online]*

Lees-Marshment, Jennifer. 2015. "The Democratic Contribution of Political Market Researchers" *Journal of Public Affairs. [online]*

Duffy, Andrew and Jacquie Miller. "How Mark Sutcliffe rode the bike lanes issue to his "stunning election victory" *Ottawa Citizen -* [*https://ottawacitizen.com/news/local-news/how-mark-sutcliffe-rode-a-bike-to-his-stunning-election-victory*](https://ottawacitizen.com/news/local-news/how-mark-sutcliffe-rode-a-bike-to-his-stunning-election-victory)

Weekly Podcasts – THERE ARE TWO THIS WEEK:

Winning elections by running on popular issues with American data scientist David Shor

LINK: https://infocus-with-david-coletto.castos.com/episodes/infocus-on-winning-elections-by-running-on-popular-issues-with-david-shor

Inside the 2019 Conservative Campaign: Conservative Party campaign manager Hamish Marshall joins the podcast to talk about the role of polling and research inside the 2019 Conservative federal election campaign and what the future of market and public opinion research will look like.

LINK: https://infocus-with-david-coletto.castos.com/episodes/infocus-on-the-2019-conservative-campaign-and-how-polling-shaped-decisions

Week 5– [IN-PERSON] Topic: Questionnaire writing workshop for final project

This week, we will work together to develop the questionnaire that will be used by groups for Assignments 3 and 4. After the questionnaire is finalized, I will field it with an actual sample of 1,500 Canadian adults.

Reading:

The Psychology of Asking Questions [Brightspace]

Weekly Podcast: People Aren't Robots: A practical guide to the psychology and technique of questionnaire design with marketing research expert Dr. Annie Pettit.

LINK: https://infocus-with-david-coletto.castos.com/episodes/infocus-on-writing-survey-questions-for-human-beings-not-robots

Week 6 – [IN-PERSON] Topic: Public Affairs Research – Conducting Research for Associations, Corporations, and Non-Profits

This week we will explore how polling can be used for advocacy and lobbying. We will look at how to conduct research to inform and support public affairs efforts, strategy and content.

Week 7 – WINTER BREAK NO CLASS

Week 8 – NO CLASS THIS WEEK – ASSIGNMENT #2 DUE BY END OF THE DAY

Week 9 - [IN-PERSON] WORKSHOP: Data analysis, data visualization, and report writing workshop

In this class, we will spend some time working through the data set from the survey for the course simulation. We will spend time working on how to analyze data, visualize data and present it to clients.

Week 10 – IN-PERSON] Topic: How do we measure public opinion? Sampling and Survey Modes

This week we will explore the theory and practical side of sampling and survey methodology. We will look how polls are conducted, the sources of bias in survey research, and the costs associated with doing research.

Reading:

The Cornerstones of Survey Research [Brightspace]

Parshall, Allison. "Why Election Polling Has Become Less Reliable" *Scientific American*, October 31, 2024. *https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-election-polling-has-become-less-reliable/*

Week 11 - [IN-PERSON] Topic: The Future of Public Opinion Research

This week we will explore the future of public opinion research with a focus on artificial intelligence.

Reading:

Sanders, Nathan, Alex Ulinich, and Bruce Schneier. "Using AI for Political Polling" June 24, 2024 *https://ash.harvard.edu/articles/using-ai-for-political-polling/*

Weekly Podcast: Technological Advances and Public Opinion Research Challenges
From landline phones in the latter part of the 20th century to online-based methods of today, industry experts discuss the opportunities and challenges fast-changing technology poses.

LINK: https://sites.libsyn.com/469761/technological-advances-and-public-opinion-research-challenges-with-courtney-kennedy-jennifer-agiesta-and-natalie-jackson

Week 12 – Pollster Roundtable

This week we will hear from several pollsters who have been active in political and public affairs polling.

Readings:

Coletto, David. 2016. "Polling and the 2015 Canadian General Election" The 2015 Canadian General Election eds. Pammett and Dornan [forthcoming] [Brightspace]

Coletto, David. 2016. "In Defence of My Craft: Polling in the 2016 US election" http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/david-coletto/election-polls-did-not-fail_b_12943996.html

Investigating the Great British Polling Miss [Brightspace]

Weekly Podcast: The Good, Bad, and Ugly of Public Election Polling with CBC's poll analyst Eric Grenier.

LINK: https://infocus-with-david-coletto.castos.com/episodes/infocus-on-seat-projection-models-polling-aggregation-and-canada39s-nate-silver

Week 13 – [IN-PERSON] Final Project Presentations

This class is all about you! During the class groups will brief the "clients" on the findings of their research.

Course Requirements

Experiential Group Project

Most of the course assignments will revolve around the upcoming federal election. Students will be divided into four teams. Each team will represent the polling team for one of Canada's leading political parties. The team will be responsible for providing strategic advice to the campaign team and party leader in the run up to the next federal election.

For the purposes of this exercise, we will assume the next federal election will be held in Spring 2025 as it is scheduled to take place, so the analysis and polling will use that date in mind.

Each group will be the consultants working for a polling firm hired by the political party to conduct survey research in early 2025.

In the first week of class, teams will be randomly created with two teams each representing:

Liberal Party of Canada
Conservative Party of Canada
New Democratic Party of Canada
Green Party of Canada

Assignment 1 (15%) – Background Research Memo [GROUP]

Each group will submit an 8 to 10-page (single spaced) memo that describes and analyzes the political environment in Canada, the political, social, economic and international factors that will shape the **2025 federal election** and assess current position for each of the main political parties. The memo will also identify several research questions that the group will choose from for the next two group assignments and will be the focus of the research.

Each memo should:

1. Assess the political environment in Canada and heading into the 2025 federal election.
2. Identify and analyze the top issues that might come to dominate the election from the voters' perspective.
3. Identify any potential WEDGE ISSUES – issues where your party is likely to have an advantage and you WANT the election to focus on.
4. Conduct a SWOT analysis for each of the four main political parties.

5. Make some initial observations about the prospects for your client vis-à-vis its opponents. I am looking for some good strategic ideas here.
6. Identify the OBJECTIVE you think is both achievable and aspirational for your client. For example, is it to win a majority of seats, hold the seats they currently have, form the official opposition?
7. Identify 5 KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS. These will guide your research design and should come from your assessment of the environment. You will answer ONE of these questions in your final assignment and presentation and the survey questions you add to the class survey will be designed to help you answer it.

   For example:

   Will 2025 be a change election?
   What is Pierre Poilievre's greatest liability?
   What issue do we want to be most salient that best positions us to win?
   What is a wedge issue that would benefit and hurt us?
   Does the NDP need to be more moderate or should it advance a more ambitious progressive agenda?
   What aspects of public opinion need to change in order us to gain support?

The memo should be written to the client in a voice and format that is easy to read and understand. Where possible include charts, tables, and other visuals. Citations should be used whenever information/data is presented. Footnotes are preferred.

The best memos will demonstrate a deep and clear understanding of the political and issue environment in Canada and offer rich analysis and insight with each party's potential opportunities, risks, and threats in mind. I'm looking for the best strategic thought about what the client NEEDS to know before conducting polling and to identify the research questions that will help frame the strategic choices ahead. The memo should also be the foundation for our questionnaire development workshop later in the class.

Assignment 2 (20%) – Polling Memo [INDIVIDUAL]

You are a public opinion advisor in a federal government department. You have been asked by your Minister to prepare a 3-page, single-spaced memo to describe the public opinion environment around a specific issue. The objective of this memo is to describe the environment, how opinions might have changed, and to anticipate how opinions might change in the future.

You will rely on any publicly available polling data, and your instincts and best estimates to what public opinion will be and answer one of the questions below.

The memo should not simply describe available poll results, but provide strategic insights that help the Minister understand the dynamics of the issue, what are some of the potential drivers of public opinion, and why it matters for the Minister and the government more broadly.

In two paragraphs, you should also propose what public opinion research you'd recommend the Minister's office or the department conduct. The proposal shouldn't describe the methodology and instead focus on the research questions that should be explored.

This assignment is an individual assignment and each student will be required to submit the memo through Brightspace.

Please answer one of these questions:

1. *For the Minister of the Environment and Climate Change:* What are the public opinion opportunities and threats to the Zero-Emission Vehicle mandate?
2. *For the Minister of Health:* Are Canadians open to substantial reforms of the healthcare system including introducing some form of privatization?
3. *For the Minister of National Defence:* Would the public support or accept a substantial increase in the country's national defence budget? If so, what is the best way to frame the decision and maintain public support?
4. *For the Minister of Finance:* Is there sufficient public support for the introduction of a wealth tax and what could change public opinion if a wealth tax was introduced?
5. *For the Minister of Canadian Heritage:* What is public opinion about the future of CBC-Radio Canada and what advice would you give to the minister about defunding it?

Assignment 3 (30%) – Strategic Memo and PowerPoint Deck [GROUP]

This is the major assignment for the course. Each group is required to prepare a report and corresponding memo that uses the survey data collected in class to answer ONE of the research questions you identified in your background memo.

Using the data collected from the survey, each group will create two documents.

1. A PowerPoint deck that reports the key findings from the survey. This deck **should not** be designed as a presentation deck. This is the core document that presents the results of the survey. It should include:
   a. An executive summary (no more than 2 slides)
   b. Include a methodology slide
   c. Two slides that summarize the political opinion environment based on the survey results.
   d. Present the evidence that answers your research question in no more than 10 slides presenting the results of the relevant survey questions in a coherent, clear, and logical way.
   e. Act as the anchor document to the strategic memo.
2. A strategic memo (6 to 7 pages maximum, single spaced) that analyzes and describes the key findings from the survey and lays out a strategy for the party in the 2025 federal election.

The memo should:
1. Restate, refine, and improve the conclusions of your background memo.
2. Clearly state the research question you are answering in the memo.
3. Explain in detail what you expect the "answer" to be and how you plan answer the research question – describe the survey question design and methodology.
4. Use the data available from the survey to answer the research question.
5. Explain the strategic implications in terms of campaign strategy and tactics.

Assignment 4 (10%) – Client Briefing [GROUP]

Each group will make a 12-minute (maximum) presentation to me, but I will be acting as the campaign manager for the political party. Deliver a briefing on the political landscape and the research question you explored in your memo.

A presentation deck should be developed that is easy to follow and helps tell the story. It should not be the same deck as submitted for Assignment #3.

Excellent presentations will be well rehearsed, focused, make use of beautiful, clear, and simple graphics, and **tell the story** of the data.

All group members are NOT required to deliver the presentation

Class Participation (15%) [INDIVIDUAL]

Students are expected to attend every class and participate fully in class discussion. This means that readings should be read each week and additional information, like publicly released polls sent around the week before, should be examined and thought about. From time to time, the instructor may distribute an interesting publicly released poll for discussion in class. The objective of these discussions is to help students get used to quickly analyzing poll data and drawing insights that would be of use to clients or employers.

Team Evaluation (10%) [INDIVIDUAL]

Each team member will evaluate the performance of each of the members of their team. This will be conducted after the final class using an online form.