

COURSE OUTLINE
POLM 5905: The Future of Conservatism in Canada
Winter 2025

Course description

The purpose of this course is to understand the history, ideas, and personalities of modern Canadian Conservative politics. We will aim to situate the present state of Conservative politics in a broader context, understanding its ideological and political evolution, its interactions and influence within Anglo-American conservatism, and its own eccentricities and particularities.

It is not merely a course for self-identified Conservatives. The goal is to arm those interested in the world of ideas, politics and public policy with a better understanding of a key part of Canada's political tradition. One certainly does not have to agree with it to grapple with the core thinking, tradeoffs and trends within Conservative politics. As we find ourselves on the cusp of a possible new Conservative government, it is useful to understand the figures, ideas, and impulses that will shape such a government.

Instructor's note

The course will be delivered remotely via Zoom. There may be instances over the term when I am in Ottawa. If so, I will work with administration to offer in-person sessions—though they would only be voluntarily.

Because the course is remote, there will not be any set office hours. But I am happy to make appointments whenever it is convenient for students.

Reading materials

There is no textbook or reading pack that you will need to purchase for this course. Here are some readings to help situate the course:

Sean Speer, "What is Canadian conservatism?," The Hub, May 7, 2024.
<https://thehub.ca/2024/05/07/sean-speer-what-canadian-conservatism/>.

Sean Speer, "The conservative consensus is over. The consequences for the Canadian Right could be profound," The Hub, July 29, 2023. <https://thehub.ca/2023/07/29/sean-speer-the-conservative-consensus-is-over-the-consequences-for-the-canadian-right-will-be-profound/>.

Sean Speer, "Canadian conservatism is powered by fusionism," The Hub, August 12, 2022.
<https://thehub.ca/2022/08/12/sean-speer-canadian-conservatism-is-powered-by-fusion/>.

Sean Speer, "The hundred-year reinvention of Canadian conservatism," The Hub, April 22, 2022. <https://thehub.ca/2022/04/22/the-hundred-year-reinvention-of-canadian-conservatism/>.

Sean Speer, "All in the right family," C2C Journal, April 6, 2018. <https://c2cjournal.ca/2018/04/all-in-the-right-family/>.

Weekly routine

1 h Seminar discussion on the Conservative story of the day
1 h Presentation (including guest lecturers)
40 m Seminar discussion

Assignments

Students will be evaluated according to four key assignments or deliverables.

(1) Participation – 10 percent

Students are encouraged to attend each session and participate. It makes the course more interesting for individual students and the group as a whole.

(2) Course reflections – 30 percent

Students will be required to submit three (3) 500-word reflections over the course of the term. The purpose of these reflections is to engage with the content of different classes. Students can choose which classes they want to use as a reference point for their three reflections. The reflections can be submitted at any time during the term.

(3) Policy story of the week – 10 percent

During weeks 3 through 13, students will work in pairs to lead a brief discussion about a policy story for the week. In the assigned week, your team will lead the group in a discussion about a figure or topic in Conservative politics.

It may be about a policy position taken by a Conservative politician or government or something that you are seeing in Conservative politics elsewhere in the Anglo-American world.

These presentations should not involve a lot of primary research. Their purpose is to give students a chance to learn from one another rather than merely responding to lectures or presentations.

I will share a list of the pairings and schedule early in the term.

(4) Policy memo – 50 percent

The final assignment is a policy memo to a Conservative leader across the country. The goal is to engage with (or empathize with) conservative first principles or political thinking. The policy topic can be whatever one a student selects and the memo can similarly be drafted for any Conservative politician they want.

The memo should be about 5,000 words and include proper references and footnotes to academic scholarship, think-tank reports, polling, popular commentaries and so on.

It should demonstrate research and knowledge of the particular policy issue and engage with some of the following considerations:

- Role of government
- Fiscal cost
- Federalism
- Libertarian thinking about maximizing personal liberty versus a conservative impulse for order and stability

The memo is similarly due at the end of term. I am happy to speak with students as they conceptualize and refine their topics over the course.

Evaluation

Evaluation rubric for written assignments

Item	Exceeded (A- to A+)	Standard (B- to B+)	Needs improvement (below B-)
Technical writing	Writing is free of errors and reflects clarity and organization of thought of experienced professionals	Writing is generally free of errors and reflects the clarity of thought and organization of early-career professionals.	Writing has errors and lacks clarity. The presentation of ideas requires reorganization for logic and coherence.
Performance of assigned task	The assigned follows all directions provided and demonstrates a high degree of understanding and facility with the task assigned.	The assignments follows directions provided and demonstrates understanding of task assigned.	The assignment does not follow all directions and demonstrates a misunderstanding of task assigned.
Application of key concepts and critical thinking	The assignment applies key concepts from the course materials, clearly demonstrates strong critical thinking, and expands on course materials through independent research and analysis.	The assignment applies key concepts from course materials and provides some evidence of critical thinking.	The assignment only weakly applies key concepts from course materials and provides limited evidence of critical thinking.

Evaluation rubric for in-class assignments

Item	Exceeded (A- to A+)	Standard (B- to B+)	Needs improvement (below B-)
Technical writing	The presentation demonstrates a high degree of planning and careful preparation. Presentation style is authentic but professional.	The presentation demonstrates some planning and preparation. Presentation style is authentic and shows some professionalism.	The presentation demonstrates gaps in planning and preparation. Presentation style shows gaps in professionalism.
Performance of assigned task	The assigned follows all directions provided and demonstrates a high degree of understanding and facility with the task assigned.	The assignments follows directions provided and demonstrates understanding of task assigned.	The assignment does not follow all directions and demonstrates a misunderstanding of task assigned.
Application of key concepts and critical thinking	The assignment applies key concepts from the course materials, clearly demonstrates strong critical thinking, and expands on course materials through independent research and analysis.	The assignment applies key concepts from course materials and provides some evidence of critical thinking.	The assignment only weakly applies key concepts from course materials and provides limited evidence of critical thinking.

Standing in a course is determined by the course instructor subject to the approval of the Faculty Dean. This means that grades submitted by the instructor may be subject to revision. No grades are final until they have been approved by the Dean.

Seminar sessions

Week number	Topic
1	<i>What is Canadian conservatism?</i> We will review the course outline and plan for the semester. Then we will turn our attention to trying to define Canadian conservatism.
2	<i>The history of modern Canadian conservatism</i> We will discuss the rise of the Reform Party of Canada versus the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada, their similarities and differences, and how the modern Conservative Party reflects these two legacy institutions.

3	<p><i>Libertarianism, populism and social conservatism</i></p> <p>What are the key ideas and impulses that influence Canadian Conservative politics? And to what extent are they in tension?</p>
4	<p><i>Federal and provincial Conservative politics</i></p> <p>We will discuss the similarities and differences between federal and provincial Conservative politics and the interrelationship between the two.</p>
5	<p><i>English Canadian conservatism and Quebec conservatism</i></p> <p>We will discuss the similarities and differences between Anglo-and Quebe conservatism, including what philosophical heritages the two are aiming to conservative.</p>
6	<p><i>Canadian conservatism and Anglo-American conservatism</i></p> <p>Is there such a thing as Anglo-American conservatism? Or is conservatism too much of a particularistic worldview?</p>
7	
8	<p><i>Conservative policy priorities</i></p> <p>How do Conservatives think about public policy? What lens do they apply? What are they priorities?</p>
10	<p><i>Harper government in office</i></p> <p>What was the Harper government's governing, what were its strengths and weaknesses, and what was its track record?</p>
11	<p><i>Poillievre-led government</i></p> <p>What would a Poillievre government be like? What would be its governing philosophy? What would be its opportunities and risks?</p>
12	<p><i>The future of Conservatism in Canada</i></p> <p>We will aim to pull together the various threads over the course of the term.</p>
13	<p>Drop-in session for final assignment.</p>