

Voting and Elections
Political Science 9535B
University of Western Ontario
Winter 2023

Class Information:

Thursday, 9:30am-12:30pm
SSC 7200

Note: There is an OWL site for this course.

Instructor Information:

Dr. Laura Stephenson

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Office: SSC 7243

Office Hours: Tuesday, 1-2:30 or by appointment

Course Description:

Elections and voting, because of their intrinsic importance to government, policy, and the representation of citizens, are fascinating topics. Even more fascinating is attempting to understand how individuals come to make their vote choice: what role do parties, interest groups, campaigns, issues, information and institutions have on the entire process? This course is intended to introduce students to the academic study of elections and political behaviour at different levels of government. This course will survey some of the vast number of issues surrounding elections and voting that are significant for the study of politics in any country, such as electoral systems, political participation, theories of vote choice, party organization, partisan identification, and interest groups. Special emphasis will be placed on understanding how these topics are studied empirically using individual-level data.

Learning Objectives:

The objectives of this course are twofold, and each class will be divided into two parts.

First, students will learn about the academic study of voting and elections. This will entail a review of some of the major topics that have been studied around the world and at different levels of government. We will focus on analysis at the individual level, but not exclusively. By the end of the course students will understand the evolution of this subfield, be able to describe the main models of voting behaviour, and understand the regularities (and irregularities) that have been demonstrated in the literature. They will have a basic understanding of what motivates voters when faced with having to decide how to vote.

The second objective is to gain an understanding of the data that is used to study voting and elections at the individual level. For the most part, this means election surveys. A significant part of the course will include hands-on examination of survey data in order to look at how some of the theories play out in particular elections and at different levels of government. By the end of the course students will have conducted their own analyses for a research project and will be familiar with the types of data that are commonly included in election studies.

Course Format:

This course is designed to occur in person, but if that becomes impossible we will move the discussions online. If you are feeling ill or do not pass the UWO campus screening, please do not come to class. We can arrange for a hybrid option that week.

Required Readings:

There is no textbook for the course. All readings will be available through OWL and/or the library electronically.

Assignments:

Overview

Participating in Class Discussion – 15%

Reflection – 5%

Data Analysis Assignment – 20%

Comparative Election Report – 20%

Research Paper – 40%

Participating in Class Discussion – 15%

Participation will be awarded for participating in class and submitting weekly discussion questions.

Every week students are required to submit 2 discussion questions about the week's readings. These questions are meant to show that the students read the material and should indicate any commentary or questions that the student has about the material for the week. The questions must be submitted through OWL by **9am on the day of class**. Late submissions will not be accepted. There are 11 weeks when discussion questions due but only 10 will count for your grade; therefore, you can miss a week's submission without penalty. If a student is unable to complete these assignments for an extended period, they should seek Academic Accommodation (see below).

Chapter Reflection Assignment – 5%

Students should read the chapter Voters and Elections (Merolla, Stephenson and Zechmeister) and prepare a 1-2 page reflection that answers the following topics:

- What information did you find most interesting
- What information did you find most surprising
- One research question you might want to study for your research paper

Due: January 17

Data Analysis Assignment – 20%

This assignment is designed to illuminate some aspects of survey design through a hands-on examination of data. A list of specific topics that can be studied with the 2019 or 2021 Canadian Election Study will be provided for students to choose from. Students must produce a data analysis report (drawing upon skills developed in PS9590 or elsewhere) of approximately 3-6 pages that includes an explanation of the issue, an empirical data analysis, and an interpretation

of the results. Students can work in groups of 2 if they wish.

Due: February 2

Comparative Elections Assignment – 20%

The purpose of this assignment is to go beyond the class materials to learn more about how specific concepts in the study of elections and voting are realized in different elections. The goal here is to also think about how voters can be influenced by differences across countries or levels of government. The expectation is that students will consider a narrow research question in the context of at least two elections that have unique contextual features (institutions, society, economy, etc.). The assignment is to take the form of a 5-10 page report that compares empirical analyses conducted in both contexts. The report must include an explanation of the research question, a short literature review that explains the hypotheses/expectations, an original empirical data analysis OR an interpretation of existing empirical analyses, and an interpretation of the results.

Due: March 2

Research Paper - 40%

Students will write a research paper on a question of their choice. Papers are expected to include original data analysis. This paper (15-25 pages) is expected to be written as an academic article. Students are encouraged to look to course readings and browse journals for examples of how researchers usually structure such papers. Students must submit their topic with a brief outline (1-2 pages) on March 10. The outline should contain the research question, an explanation of the hypotheses that will be investigated, the data source(s) to be used, and a data analysis plan.

Due: April 13

Resources:

The Writing Support Centre at UWO is available to help students with their assignments (<http://www.sdc.uwo.ca/writing/index.html?main>).

Various support services are also available through UWO. You can access information about the Registrar's Office at <http://www4.registrar.uwo.ca> and Student Development Services at <http://www.sdc.uwo.ca>.

Topics and Readings:

January 12: Introduction

January 19: Studying Elections

January 26: Electoral Process: Ballots and Institutions

February 2: Parties

February 9: Turnout

February 16: Models of Vote Choice

February 23: Reading Week. Enjoy some time off!

March 2: "Throw the Rascals Out" (Guest: Dr. Matt Lebo)

March 9: Partisanship

March 16: Candidates and Leaders

March 23: Campaigns and Campaign Effects

March 30: Multi-level Governance: Second-Order Elections, Voting Cues and Accountability

April 6: Low-Information Elections