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POLISCI 373: Introduction to Survey Research

Fall 2025

Last Updated: September 03, 2025

(Cross-listed as: JOURN 373, URBRL 373)

Note: All times and dates in the syllabus or other course material correspond to Madison's Central Time Zone

Class information

Class Time: TR 2:30 PM - 3:45 PM

Class Location: 5208 Sewell Social Sciences

Course Canvas URL: <https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/473575> (<https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/473575>)

Number of Credits: 4

Course Designation & Attributes: Breadth – Social Science, Level – Intermediate, L & S Credit – Counts as Liberal Arts and Science credit in L & S, Grad 50% - Counts toward 50% graduate coursework requirement.

Instructional mode: In-Person

Requisites: Sophomore Standing

Instructor information

Instructor: Professor Matthew Pietryka

Preferred Name: *Professor Pietryka* or just *Prof. P*

Pronouns: he/him

Email: mpietryka@wisc.edu (<mailto:mpietryka@wisc.edu>)

Office: North Hall 302

Prof. Pietryka's Student Hours: I will be available to meet in person after most class meetings (for quick conversations) and in my office Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9-10AM (for longer conversations). Drop ins are welcome during these times, but you can also reduce waiting by reserving a student hour meeting time slot using this link: <https://calendly.com/pietryka/office-hours> (<https://calendly.com/pietryka/office-hours>)

Teaching Assistant (TA) information

Teaching Assistants: Andrew Fairley (fairley2@wisc.edu (<mailto:fairley2@wisc.edu>)) and Ilia Nadporozhskii (nadporozhski@wisc.edu (<mailto:nadporozhski@wisc.edu>))

TA Student Hours: see section syllabi.

1 Course Description

Theory and practice of survey research; planning, sampling, questionnaire construction, interviewing, content analysis, machine tabulation, analysis of data; two hours lecture; one hour discussion section.

Course Overview

We are all constantly being inundated with the results of polling (survey research) – especially those of us interested in politics. We see polls in the news, we read about them in research articles, and we may want to conduct polls ourselves. There's a lot of excellent survey research out there, but there's a lot of junk out there too. This class will help teach you the basic principles of how to be a savvy consumer of polls. We'll begin the course by addressing topics such as: 1) how to identify the crucial qualities of a high-quality poll, 2) explore the limits of what you can and can't learn from surveys, and 3) dig into the special challenges of election prediction polls.

After that we'll dive into the different elements of survey research. We'll cover questionnaire design, question wording, survey mode, sample size, nonresponse, survey experiments, standard error, and margin of error. But we're not just going to learn about these theoretical survey design principles in isolation, rather this is a learn-by-doing experiential course. So, as we're learning about these different elements of survey design, you'll be applying this knowledge to a survey research project of your own. You'll work as a group to choose a topic, develop hypotheses, draft a questionnaire, design a survey experiment, and pilot test your survey.

Finally, we'll turn to learning some basic statistical analysis and coding skills so that we can analyze the results of your survey research. The course will culminate in a final paper, in which you'll work independently to describe the results of your survey.

Course Learning Outcomes

After taking this course, you'll be able to:

- Ability to formulate and construct logical arguments about political phenomena and an ability to evaluate those arguments using survey research.
- Understanding of theoretical components of survey research.
- Ability to interpret survey results in general with a particular focus on political polling.
- Development of practical survey research skills including questionnaire design, question wording, survey mode, sample size, nonresponse, standard error, and margin of error.

- Develop an understanding of ethical issues in survey research.
- Development of programming skills in both R and Qualtrics.
- Practice with critical writing skills.

How Credit Hours are Met by the Course: This is a 4-credit course that meets each week for two 75-minute lectures and a 50-minute discussion section. A “credit hour” helps us both think about the work you’ll be doing both inside and outside of class to be engaged and ready each week. In a 4-credit course like this one, at a minimum, you will spend 8 hours each week preparing for our class outside of lecture and discussion time. These outside-of-class learning activities include reading, writing, problem sets, studying, group survey projects, pilot testing surveys, and writing your final paper. This workload translates to roughly 2 hours out of the classroom for every class period (a total of 8 hours per week). If you find yourself spending significantly more than 8 hours on out-of-class preparation each week, reach out to your TA or Prof. Pietryka during office hours. We’re happy to talk about different reading and writing strategies that might help.

Regular and Substantive Student-Instructor Interaction: Three meetings per week with direct instruction (two lectures and one section meeting), facilitating discussion of course content, and providing feedback on student work.

Required Textbook, Software, and other Course materials

Fowler, Floyd J., Jr. 2013. Survey Research Methods, 5th Edition. Los Angeles: Sage.

Software: R, R Studio, Qualtrics. All freely available; UW has a subscription for Qualtrics. Access your UW Qualtrics subscription by going to survey.wisc.edu.

All other readings will be available on the Canvas course website.

2 Grades

Grading in this class is designed to reflect how well students have achieved the course learning outcomes. Specifically, this will be accomplished through the different components detailed in the table below. Final Grades are not curved. Attendance and participation in section is part of the grading.

Course assignments are graded using the following weights:

Assignment	Description	Weight (Percentage of Grade)
Survey Project #1	Topic & Method for Survey Project	10%
Survey Project #2	Questionnaire for Survey Project	10%
Survey Project #3	Final Questionnaire	10%
Pilot Testing for Peer Surveys	Complete all the surveys for your classmates. This will ensure everyone has survey data for their projects.	5%

Assignment	Description	Weight (Percentage of Grade)
Final Paper	Final paper discussing your pilot survey's design, methodology, results, and what changes you would make before fielding a full survey.	10%
Problem Set #1	Problem Set using R	5%
Problem Set #2	Problem Set using R	5%
Problem Set #3	Problem Set using R	5%
Class Participation I	Attendance & Participation in Section Meetings before the midterm exam	5%
Class Participation II	Survey Project Participation & Attendance & Participation in Section Meetings after the midterm exam	5%
Midterm Exam	In class exam on the material covered so far (multiple choice, short answer, and short essays)	15%
Final Exam	In class exam on the material covered throughout the semester (multiple choice, short answer, and short essays)	15%
Total		100%

Grading Deadlines

To accommodate the unpredictability of life events, you will have a 48-hour grace period to submit assignments late without a penalty. If circumstances dictate that more time is needed, contact Prof. Pietryka as soon as possible (ideally prior to the deadline) to discuss individual circumstances. If we don't hear from you, work more than 48 hours late will be penalized one letter grade per day.

Grading Components

As the table above shows, you will have a variety of assignments for this course. In this section, I elaborate on several of these assignments.

The Survey Project

One of the focal points of this course will be designing and analyzing an original survey. You will be randomly assigned into a survey project group of four students within your section. Your group will pick a topic, design a field plan, write a questionnaire, program the questionnaire in Qualtrics, and field a pilot version of the survey. If you are working in a group for the survey, those three assignments (survey topic, field plan and questionnaire) will be graded collectively. However, all students will individually (not working with their group) write a final paper for the class. Your final paper for the class will discuss your research question, your hypothesis(es), your survey's design, results, and how you would improve your survey in the future.

Why is the survey project a group project?

My reasoning here is both pedagogical and practical. Pedagogically, I think learning to work as a group teaches important life skills that are essential in almost every career path. Learning to navigate group dynamics, listen to your peers, and collaborate with others are vital skills for the future. I think group work is especially valuable in the context of survey projects, because so much of good survey design is about trying to understand and anticipate responses from a wide population with differing life experiences. So, working with collaborators with different views from different backgrounds often leads to better survey design.

From a practical perspective, working in groups means a smaller number of total surveys the class will produce. All these survey projects need respondents, so will all take each other's surveys. If there are 100 students in the course, and everyone works independently then you would need to take 99 surveys! That's a lot of surveys and would take a lot of your time! If instead, the class works in groups of 4, that's only ~25 surveys. Much, much more reasonable.

The special responsibility of group work: you owe your fellow group members prompt communication and doing your fair share of the work.

Group projects can be a fun opportunity for collaboration and interaction, but they include a commitment to your fellow group members. The two most important aspects of group work: prompt communication and doing your fair share of the work. Out of fairness to your group members, if you fail to communicate with your group members, fail to contribute equally to all group assignments, and/or fail to communicate with us about your survey project you will be subject to the following possible penalties:

- Losing points (potentially all points) for the relevant assignment
- Losing points from your class participation grade
- Being removed from your survey group and needing to complete the survey project on your own.

If you are working in a group on your survey project and having difficulty communicating with a fellow group member, or have a group member who isn't contributing, please contact your TA and/or Prof. Pietryka ASAP, so that we can try to help resolve the problem.

Group Project Experience Survey

After your survey projects have been pilot tested, I will send a Group Project Experience Survey to the class. In that survey we'll ask how the group aspect of your survey project went, and about the contributions of each member of the survey project. The results from that survey will help inform us as we grade class participation.

Final Grades

At the end of the semester, the final letter grade will be assigned according to the standard table:

Grade	Grading Cutoff (%)
A (Excellent)	93
AB (Intermediate Grade)	88
B (Good)	83
BC (Intermediate Grade)	77
C (Fair)	70
D (Poor)	65

Grade	Grading Cutoff (%)
F (Failure)	NA

3 Schedule

Note: The schedule is tentative and is likely to change as the semester progresses.

Day	Date	Topic	Prepare
Thur	09/04	Course Intro: Why Survey Research?	Read the syllabus. Bring questions about the course. Purchase/rent/obtain the book for the course.
Tue	09/09	How to Be a Savvy Consumer of Polls: Part I	Read AAPOR's Journalist Cheat Sheet to Understanding Polls
Thur	09/11	How to Be a Savvy Consumer of Polls: Part II	Read Berinsky (2017)
Tue	09/16	Components of Surveys	Read Ch 1 Fowler
Thur	09/18	Types of Error in Surveys	Read Ch 2 Fowler
Tue	09/23	Sampling	Read Ch 3 Fowler
Thur	09/25	Nonresponse	Read Ch 4 Fowler
Tue	09/30	Designing Questions to be Good Measures	Read Ch 6 Fowler Read AAPOR's Guidance on Question Wording
Thur	10/02	Designing Survey Experiments	Read EGAP's 10 Things to Know About Survey Experiments Hughes & Jones (2019) Optional/Advanced Reading: Sniderman (2018)
Tue	10/07	Methods of Data Collection	Read Ch 5 Fowler Read Berinsky, Huber & Lenz (2012)
Thur	10/09	Evaluating Survey Questions	Read Ch 7 Fowler
Tue	10/14	Putting the Pieces Together: Problem Solving in Survey Design	Review your notes on the different elements of survey design up to this point.
Thur	10/16	Review	
Tue	10/21	Midterm Exam	
Thur	10/23	Analyzing Survey Experiments	
Tue	10/28	Preparing Survey Data for Analysis	Read Ch 9 Fowler
Thur	10/30	Inferring Population Characteristics via Survey Part I	
Tue	11/04	How to Make Graphs in R	Optional Advanced Reading: Kabakoff (2020)

Day	Date	Topic	Prepare
Thur	11/06	Principles of Data Visualization	Read Tufte (2001). (Note only need to read short excerpt posted on canvas)
Tue	11/11	Inferring Population Characteristics via Survey Part II	
Thur	11/13	Predicting Outcomes Using Linear Regression	
Tue	11/18	Estimating Causal Effects with Observational Data	
Thur	11/20	Probability	
Tue	11/25	Using Probability to Quantify Uncertainty: Part I	
Thur	11/27	Thanksgiving break (No class)	
Tue	12/02	Using Probability to Quantify Uncertainty: Part II	
Thur	12/04	Final Paper Guidance. Survey Project Consultation Day	Come prepared to work on your survey project bring coding/analysis questions!
Tue	12/09	Course Recap & Review	
Tue	12/16	Final Exam, 12:25PM-2:25PM	

KEY:

Fowler = Floyd J. Fowler, Jr. *Survey Research Methods (Fifth Edition)*

4 Course Policies

How to ask questions and get help

We encourage you to reach out if you have questions, ideas, or suggestions you'd like to share about the course. The TAs and I will strive to respond to all inquiries within 24 business hours as long as you follow these instructions:

- **Most questions** about the syllabus, assignments, and course material **should be posted to the course Q&A discussion thread** (https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/473575/discussion_topics/2224105) (Canvas -> Course Information -> Course Questions and Answers (Q&A)).
 - Before posting a question, please double-check that the question is not fully answered in a previous discussion thread or on the syllabus.
- **For short questions of a personal nature** (e.g., specifics about your own grade), please email your TA or Prof. P using your UW email account. When emailing Prof. P, please include your section time

and TA's name (this info makes it easier to find relevant resources in a big class).

- **For questions that require a response of more than a few sentences** (e.g., help working through a problem set), seek help in your TA's student hours or Prof. P's student hours.
- **Follow up if we missed your question:** We strive to respond to all questions within 24 business hours. We're also imperfect humans, and occasionally things get lost in the shuffle. If you have not received a response within 24 business hours, we encourage you to follow up to ensure we did not miss it.

How we will communicate with you

- When contacting individual students, we will reach out via Canvas Inbox or their UW email.
- When contacting all students, we will use the Announcements feature of the course Canvas.
- To ensure you do not miss an announcement, you can receive email alerts or push notifications each time announcements are posted. To do so, you must configure your Canvas notification settings (<https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Student-Guide/How-do-I-manage-notifications-for-a-single-course-as-a-student/ta-p/430>).

Student Responsibilities

- You are expected to keep up with the class, engage with the course material, and submit assignments by the due dates.
- Please log on to Canvas at least every other day to check for course updates.
- All work that you submit must be your own, per the UW Academic Misconduct Policy (<https://conduct.students.wisc.edu/academic-misconduct/>).
- To receive credit on submitted work, you must follow the instructions carefully, follow word limits as instructed, and use correct spelling and grammar.
- Please respond to my email or Canvas messages within 24 hours, not counting holidays or weekends.
- Please use your UW email address for all course-related emails.
- When communicating with your fellow classmates, the TAs, or Prof. P, please be respectful and use professional email etiquette (<https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/assignments/advice-for-students-writing-a-professional-email/>)

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policy

We may use artificial intelligence (AI) tools and applications (e.g., Gemini, Copilot, Grammarly) in some circumstances in this course as they *can* support the course learning objectives. The specifics of when, where, and how these tools are permitted will be included with each assignment, along with guidance for attribution. Any use of these tools other than where indicated is a violation of this course's expectations and will be addressed through UW–Madison's academic misconduct policy (<https://conduct.students.wisc.edu/academic-misconduct/#process>), specifically UWS 14.03(1)(b) *Uses unauthorized materials or fabricated data in any academic exercise.*

If you are uncertain about appropriate use of AI, please reach out to your TA or Prof. Pietryka **prior to submitting any relevant work.**

5 University Policies

Academic Calendar & Religious Observances

View the full academic calendar (<https://secfac.wisc.edu/academic-calendar>) in addition to information about religious and election day observances. Students are responsible for notifying instructors within the first two weeks of classes about any need for flexibility due to religious observances (<https://policy.wisc.edu/library/UW-880>).

Establishment of the academic calendar for the University of Wisconsin–Madison falls within the authority of the faculty as set forth in Faculty Policies and Procedures (https://policy.wisc.edu/library/UW-801#Pol801_1_20). Construction of the academic calendar is subject to various rules and laws prescribed by the Board of Regents, the Faculty Senate, State of Wisconsin and the federal government. Find additional dates and deadlines for students (<https://registrar.wisc.edu/dates/>) on the Office of the Registrar website.

Academic Integrity

By virtue of enrollment, each student agrees to uphold the high academic standards of the University of Wisconsin–Madison; academic misconduct is behavior that negatively impacts the integrity of the institution. Cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration and helping others commit these previously listed acts are examples of misconduct which may result in disciplinary action. Examples of disciplinary sanctions (<https://conduct.students.wisc.edu/academic-misconduct/>) include, but are not limited to, failure on the assignment/course, written reprimand, disciplinary probation, suspension or expulsion.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

The University of Wisconsin–Madison supports the right of all enrolled students to a full and equal educational opportunity. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Wisconsin State Statute (36.12) and UW–Madison policy (UW-855) (<https://policy.wisc.edu/library/UW-855>) require the university to provide reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities to access and participate in its academic programs and educational services. Faculty and students share responsibility in the accommodation process. Students are expected to inform faculty of their need for instructional accommodations during the beginning of the semester, or as soon as possible after being approved for accommodations. Faculty will work either directly with the student or in coordination with the McBurney Disability Resource Center (<https://mcburney.wisc.edu/>) to provide reasonable instructional and course-related accommodations. Disability information, including instructional accommodations as part of a student's educational record, is confidential and protected under FERPA.

Course Evaluations

Students at the University of Wisconsin–Madison have the opportunity to evaluate their learning experiences and the courses they are enrolled in through course evaluations. Many instructors use a digital course evaluation tool (<https://kb.wisc.edu/luwmad/81069>) to collect feedback from students. Students typically receive notifications two weeks prior to the end of the semester requesting that they complete course evaluations. Student participation is an integral component of course development, and confidential feedback is important. UW–Madison strongly encourages student participation in course evaluations.

Diversity & Inclusion

Diversity is a source of strength, creativity, and innovation for the University of Wisconsin–Madison. We value the contributions of each person and respect the profound ways their identity, culture, background, experience, status, abilities, and opinion enrich the university community. We commit ourselves to the pursuit of excellence in teaching, research, outreach, and diversity as inextricably linked goals. UW–Madison fulfills its public mission by creating a welcoming and inclusive community for people from every background – people who as students, faculty, and staff serve Wisconsin and the world. (Source: Institutional Statement on Diversity (<https://diversity.wisc.edu/institutional-statement-on-diversity/>))

Mental Health & Well-Being

Students often experience stressors that can impact both their academic experience and personal well-being. These may include mental health concerns, substance misuse, sexual or relationship violence, family circumstances, campus climate, financial matters, among others.

UW–Madison students are encouraged to learn about and utilize the university’s mental health services and/or other resources as needed. Student can visit [uhs.wisc.edu](https://www.uhs.wisc.edu/) (<https://www.uhs.wisc.edu/>) or call University Health Services at (608) 265-5600 to learn more.

Privacy of Student Records & Use of Audio Recorded Lectures

Lecture materials and recordings for this course are protected intellectual property at UW–Madison. Students enrolled in this course may use the materials and recordings for their personal use related to participation in the course. Students may also take notes solely for their personal use. If a lecture is not already recorded, students are not authorized to record lectures without permission unless they are considered by the university to be a qualified student with a disability who has an approved accommodation that includes recording. [Regent Policy Document 4-1] Students may not copy or have lecture materials and recordings outside of class, including posting on internet sites or selling to commercial entities, with the exception of sharing copies of personal notes as a notetaker through the McBurney Disability Resource Center. Students are otherwise prohibited from providing or selling their personal notes to anyone else or being paid for taking notes by any person or commercial firm without the instructor’s express written permission. Unauthorized use of these copyrighted lecture materials and recordings constitutes copyright infringement and may be addressed under the university’s policies, UWS Chapters 14 and 17, governing student academic and non-academic misconduct. View more information about FERPA (<https://registrar.wisc.edu/ferpa-facstaff/>).

Students’ Rules, Rights & Responsibilities

View more information about student rules, rights and responsibilities (<https://guide.wisc.edu/undergraduate/#rulesrightsandresponsibilitiestext>) such as student privacy rights, sharing of academic record information, academic integrity and grievances.

Teaching & Learning Data Transparency

The privacy and security of faculty, staff and students' personal information is a top priority for UW–Madison. The university carefully reviews and vets all campus-supported digital tools used for teaching and learning, including those that support data empowered educational practices (<https://teachlearn.wisc.edu/deep/>) and proctoring. View more information about teaching and learning data transparency (<https://teachlearn.provost.wisc.edu/teaching-and-learning-data-transparency-statement/>) at UW–Madison.

6 Syllabus Changes

(This section will include a running list of any revisions made to the the syllabus throughout the semester)

- 2025-09-03: Updated and clarified policies throughout the syllabus.

