

SCOPE AND METHODS OF POLITICAL SCIENCE POLS 210

Tulane University
Department of Political Science
Fall 2026
TR 11am-12:15pm, GI 310

Instructor: Nicolás Taccone
Email: ntaccone@tulane.edu
Office: 7025 Freret St., 1st Floor
Office Hours: Th 3-5pm

Overview

Doing political science is not just about following current events in the news or learning gossip about politicians on social media. Instead, it requires learning a set of methods and techniques that allow us to systematically study political phenomena. This course has the challenging yet indispensable goal of introducing you to a methodological toolkit that will help you *think like a political scientist*. Together, we will unpack the underlying logic behind experimental methods, statistical methods, the comparative method, case studies, process tracing, surveys, interviews, ethnography and participant observation, etc., as tools for studying politics in a rigorous manner. We will not only review the theoretical foundations of each method, but also analyze examples of how political scientists use them in empirical research.

Syllabus Note

This syllabus is a “living document” and may be revised throughout the semester (it is not set in stone). I may adjust readings, topics, assignment dates, or the course schedule as I see what works best for the class and as the needs of the course evolve. Any changes will be communicated in class and via Canvas.

Learning Outcomes

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

- Think like a political scientist.
- Engage critically with multiple research designs and methodological tools to analyze political events.
- Build a strong foundation for future coursework in substantive political science courses.
- Strengthen reading, writing, research, communication, and teamwork skills through in-class and take-home assignments of varying stakes.

Assignments & Grading

Class Participation (10%): Participation in class is a vital component of this course and is essential for a productive learning environment. Students are expected to attend class regularly, arrive on time, and actively contribute to discussions and in-class activities. Doing the readings in advance is critical for informed participation. Participation will be graded in two equal parts: **5% for attendance** and **5% for engagement**. The attendance component requires students to attend *all* or *almost all* sessions, with *up to three* unexcused absences allowed during the semester without penalty (please refer to the section titled “Absences, Scheduling Conflicts & Late Submissions” on pp. 5-6 for more details). I will take attendance at the beginning of each class. The engagement component assesses students’ regular involvement in class through comments and questions that show preparation and curiosity about the material. To receive full marks on engagement, students should contribute to class conversations consistently throughout the semester, rather than only sporadically or occasionally.

Office Hours Attendance (5%): Students are expected to attend office hours *at least once* during the semester to discuss any aspect of the course (assignments, readings, ideas, or broader questions). This is not just a grade boost; it is also an opportunity to check in and build a relationship. I view office hours as a space to support your learning, professional development, and life beyond the classroom. Students are always welcome to come more than once. Office hours are by appointment, held on **Thursdays from 3-5pm at 7025 Freret St., first floor** (*when you enter, go to the left side of the building and continue until the end of the hallway*). You can sign up [here](#). If that time does not work for you, I am happy to schedule an *ad hoc* appointment, either in person or virtually. You can email me at ntaccone@tulane.edu or talk to me before/after class to meet at a different day or time.

Midterm Exam (25%): Students will take an in-class midterm exam, scheduled for **Tuesday, September 29**. The exam will include a mix of multiple-choice questions, short-answer responses, and long-answer essays designed to assess students’ understanding of the material, engagement with the readings, and ability to reflect on key methodological debates. Specific instructions will be provided in advance.

Research Proposal Project (60%): During the course, students will work collaboratively in small groups of approximately 3-5 students to develop an original political science research proposal. I will assign you to groups after the first few weeks of class. Rather than completing a single assignment at the end of the semester, groups will complete a series of scaffolded, cumulative assignments that gradually build toward the final research proposal. Detailed instructions and evaluation criteria for each component of the project will be provided later in the course.

The project consists of the following components:

- **Research Question and Puzzle (5%)**: Submit 2-3 potential research questions and explain why they are interesting, feasible, and worthy of political science research. Due via Canvas on **Thursday, September 17**.
- **Annotated Bibliography (5%)**: Compile a preliminary bibliography of scholarly sources relevant to your proposed research. For each source, provide a brief annotation explaining its main argument and how it relates to your project. Due via Canvas on **Thursday, October 8**.
- **Literature Review (10%)**: Expand your annotated bibliography into a coherent literature review that synthesizes the existing scholarship on your topic. Explain where your proposed research fits within the literature and the contribution it aims to make. Due via Canvas on **Thursday, October 22**.
- **Research Proposal Draft (10%)**: Submit a first complete draft of your research proposal, incorporating the research question, literature review, theoretical framework, and proposed research design, including methods of data collection and analysis. Due via Canvas on **Thursday, November 12**.
- **Peer Review (5%)**: Each group will provide constructive written feedback on another group's research proposal draft. Due via Canvas on **Thursday, November 19**.
- **Group Presentation (5%)**: During the final week of classes, each group will deliver a brief presentation summarizing its project to the class. Presentations should be concise, using only a couple of slides. Presented in class on **Thursday, December 3**.
- **Final Research Proposal (20%)**: Submit a polished version of your research proposal that incorporates feedback received from the instructor and your peers. This final submission should present a clear, coherent, and well-developed research proposal. Due via Canvas on **Thursday, December 10**.

Note: Because this is a collaborative project, all group members are expected to contribute meaningfully throughout the semester. While it is my expectation that every member of a group will receive the same grade for each component of the project, I reserve the right to give distinct grades based on differential individual contributions to the group project.

Grading Scale

A: 100-94	B: 86-83	C: 76-73	D: 66-63
A-: 93-90	B-: 82-80	C-: 72-70	D-: 62-60
B+: 89-87	C+: 79-77	D+: 69-67	F: Below 60

Academic Integrity

This course adheres to Tulane's [Code of Academic Conduct](#). The guidelines outlined in this code will be used to identify and address academic dishonesty. Examples include, but are not limited to: verbatim repetition, without acknowledgement, of the writings of another author; borrowing or using information developed by another author without acknowledging the source; paraphrasing or translating the work or thought of another person without acknowledgment; allowing any other person or organization to prepare work that one then submits as their own; and borrowing language or ideas from another person without proper acknowledgement and citation. Violations of academic integrity are taken seriously and may result in severe consequences, including suspension or expulsion. If you have any doubts or questions, consult the [Academic Integrity](#) website, the [Writing Center](#) and/or [Tulane University Libraries](#) for more information.

Classroom Environment

This classroom is a space for adult learners. I encourage open, respectful dialogue not only between students and myself, but also among students. Communication should flow horizontally, fostering learning through peer-to-peer interaction, not just instructor-led lecture. Creating an inclusive and engaging environment is *essential* for this course to function well. I will not tolerate disrespect of any kind. Be kind to each other. I will be especially attentive to maintaining a classroom that is welcoming to all students, regardless of gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, or cultural background. If at any point you have concerns, comments, or suggestions about the class environment, please reach out to me via email, or speak to me before/after class or during office hours. This is a shared space we will build together, and my door is always open.

Technology Use in the Classroom

As a general norm, the use of laptops in class is forbidden. Occasionally, I will allow laptops for specific in-class activities. There is plenty of evidence that using laptops in class reduces attention and learning (e.g., you can check [this](#) article). I will ask you to put your laptops and phones away and to take old-school, handwritten notes. If you have accommodations and need to take notes on your computer, please let me know as soon as possible. After each class, I'll upload the slides to Canvas.

AI

Developing strong critical thinking, research, and writing skills is especially important in college. For this reason, the course includes a mix of in-class and take-home assignments designed to help you strengthen these skills over time. Some assignments (such as the midterm exam) are intentionally designed to be completed in class, without the use of AI tools. Others (such as the research proposal project) require independent research, analysis, and writing outside of class. For take-home assignments, AI tools should *never* substitute for your own thinking, research, or writing. That said, I cannot forbid the use of AI outside of class. You may use tools like ChatGPT for brainstorming, expanding on a topic, and helping you better understand a reading, among other things. But remember that these tools can make mistakes or produce inaccurate information (they “hallucinate”), so it is your responsibility to evaluate and corroborate anything they generate. I encourage you to reflect on the skills you may allow to atrophy or never fully develop if you rely too heavily on AI (for an interesting take on this issue, click [here](#)). In my view, learning to use these tools thoughtfully is part of your education, just like learning to use Google or Word. But I urge you to approach AI with intention, especially given its novelty. All written assignments are subject to review using AI-detection tools. Work may be flagged if these tools indicate that more than 10% of a submission is AI-generated or AI-paraphrased. Submissions that exceed this threshold may be reported as potential violations of academic integrity, in accordance with university policy.

Absences, Scheduling Conflicts & Late Submissions

Some assignments in this course—midterm exam, class participation, office hours attendance, and the group presentation of the final research proposal—require your presence. Students should review the Assignments & Grading section carefully and ensure they can attend on those days. If you anticipate a conflict, notify me as early as possible (*at least one week in advance*) so that we can arrange an alternate day and time to complete the assignment. You may notify me in person, but please follow up by email so there is a written record and it is easier for me to keep track. If you email me a photo of the best men’s soccer player of all time, you’ll automatically receive two extra-credit points in the course. There is only one right answer (well, maybe two), but in any case, they are both Argentine. Students may miss *up to three* class sessions during the semester without penalty or documentation (no questions asked). Additional unexcused absences will reduce the attendance portion of your class participation grade. Additional absences may be excused in cases such as illness, family emergencies, religious observances, or college-sanctioned events, but *they require advance notice and appropriate documentation*. If you are sick, documentation may come from [Campus Health Services](#). If you are a student-athlete, please let me know in advance if you’ll miss class due to athletic commitments. If you miss an in-class assignment for an excused absence, we will arrange a make-up session; otherwise, you will receive no credit for that assignment. If you anticipate needing additional time for submitting a written assignment (e.g. the literature review or another component of the research proposal

project), please notify me *at least one week in advance* and I can offer a 48-hour extension—no questions asked. Otherwise, late submissions will lose the equivalent of one-third of a letter grade for each subsequent day they are late. Keep in mind that the research proposal project is a cumulative, semester-long assignment. Falling behind on one component will make it significantly more difficult to complete subsequent components on time. For this reason, I will be particularly strict about late submissions for any component of the project. If you are facing ongoing challenges that may affect your ability to attend class or complete your work, please reach out as soon as possible so we can work together on a plan.

Accessibility

Tulane University is committed to full inclusion of all students. If you have already established disability accommodations with Accessibility Services, please communicate your approved accommodations to me as soon as possible so we can discuss your needs in this course. If you have not yet established services through Accessibility Services but have a temporary health condition or permanent disability that requires accommodations, please contact the [Goldman Center for Student Accessibility](#) at goldman@tulane.edu or 504-862-8433.

Mental Health

College can bring challenges that interfere with learning and well-being, including strained relationships, increased anxiety, substance use, feeling down, difficulty concentrating, or lack of motivation. These mental health concerns may affect your ability to attend class, focus, complete assignments, or participate in daily activities. If you are experiencing distress, please reach out to me and/or seek support through campus resources. Tulane's Campus Health Services offers a variety of [Resources for Undergraduate Students](#), including [Counseling and Psychiatric Services \(CAPS\)](#) and other resources that you may find useful. You can call CAPS at 504-314-227 or schedule a virtual appointment [here](#). For emergencies, contact The Line - Crisis Support (available 24/7) at 504-264-6074.

Asking for help is a sign of courage and strength.

Required Texts

Brancati, Dawn. *Social Scientific Research*. SAGE Publications Ltd, 2018 (abbreviated as “SSR” in the Schedule).

I *cannot* upload this textbook to Canvas due to copyright restrictions. Students must obtain their own copy. The book is available for purchase on Amazon in paperback (approximately \$24-\$39, with used copies starting around \$20) or as a Kindle e-book (approximately \$35). Prices may vary. A copy is also available on course reserve at Tulane University's Howard-Tilton Memorial

Library for building use only (up to 4 hours at a time). Please ensure you obtain access to the text by the first week of class, and let me know if you encounter any difficulties. All other required readings are available on Canvas.

Schedule

Date	Topic/Assignment	Readings
Part I: Introduction to Political Inquiry		
T 8/18	Welcome	
Th 8/20	The Science of Political Science	SSR, Ch. 1; Drutman 2016
T 8/25	The Research Process	SSR, Ch. 3
Th 8/27	The Research Process (cont.)	SSR, Ch. 6
T 9/1	Concepts and Measurement	Sartori 1970
Th 9/3	Concepts and Measurement (cont.)	Levitsky 1998
T 9/8	Descriptive Inference	Gervasoni 2010
Th 9/10	Causal Inference	Humphreys n.d.
Part II: Research Designs		
T 9/15	Experiments	SSR, Ch. 19; Ansolabehere et al. 1994
Th 9/17	Natural Experiments	Dunning 2012, Ch. 1
Research Question and Puzzle Due		
T 9/22	Natural Experiments (cont.)	Posner 2004
Th 9/24	<i>Midterm Review Session</i>	

T 9/29	Midterm Exam	
Th 10/1	<i>Fall Break, No Class</i>	
T 10/6	<i>Library Session</i>	
Th 10/8	Statistical Methods	SSR, Ch. 20; Long n.d.
	Annotated Bibliography Due	
T 10/13	Statistical Methods (cont.)	Maoz & Russett 1993
Th 10/15	The Comparative Method	Lijphart 1971; Snyder 2001
T 10/20	Case Studies	Levy 2008
Th 10/22	Process Tracing	Collier 2011; Doyle 2011
	Literature Review Due	

Part III: Research Techniques and Data Collection

T 10/26	Surveys	SSR, Ch. 18
Th 10/29	Surveys (cont.)	Oster 2020; Holden 2009
T 11/3	Interviews	Kapiszewski et al. 2015, Ch. 6
Th 11/5	Interviews (cont.)	
T 11/10	Archival Research	Auerbach 2018
Th 11/12	Ethnography and Participant Observation	Kapiszewski et al. 2015, Ch. 7
	Research Proposal Draft Due	
T 11/17	Ethnography and Participant Observation (cont.)	Fenno 1978

Th 11/19 Ethics of Social Science SSR, Ch. 2; Fujii 2012

Peer Review Due

T 11/24 *Thanksgiving, No Class*

Th 11/26 *Thanksgiving, No Class*

T 12/1 Ethics of Social Science (cont.) Listen: [Tuskegee \(NPR\)](#)

Th 12/3 **Group Presentations**

Th 12/10 **Final Research Proposal Due**

List of Readings

Assigned readings for the course are listed below with full citations:

- Ansolabehere, Stephen, Iyengar, Shanto, Simon, Adam, and Valentino, Nicholas. 1994. "Does Attack Advertising Demobilize the Electorate?" *American Political Science Review*, 88(4), 829-838.
- Auerbach, Adam M. 2018. "Informal Archives: Historical Narratives and the Preservation of Paper in India's Urban Slums." *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 53(3), 343-364.
- Brancati, Dawn. 2018. *Social Scientific Research*. SAGE Publications Ltd. Chapters 1, 2, 3, 6, 18, 19 and 20.
- Collier, David. 2011. "Understanding Process Tracing." *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 44(4), 823-830.
- Doyle, Arthur Conan. 2011. "The Adventure of Sylver Blaze," *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, 1-11. First published in *The Strand Magazine*, December 1892.
- Drutman, Lee. 2016. "Clouds, Clocks, and the Unexpected Rise of Donald Trump." *Vox*, February 23.
- Dunning, Thad. 2012. *Natural Experiments in the Social Sciences: A Design-Based Approach*. Cambridge University Press. Chapter 1.

- Elliott, Debbie. 2021. "In Tuskegee, Painful History Shadows Efforts to Vaccinate African Americans." *NPR*, February 16. Link: <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/16/967011614/in-tuskegee-painful-history-shadows-efforts-to-vaccinate-african-americans>
- Fenno, Richard. 1978. *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company. Appendix - Notes on Method: Participant Observation.
- Fujii, Lee Ann. 2012. "Research Ethics 101: Dilemmas and Responsibilities." *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 45(4), 717-723.
- Gervasoni, Carlos. 2010. "Measuring Variance in Subnational Regimes: Results from an Expert-Based Operationalization of Democracy in the Argentine Provinces." *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, 2(2), 13-52.
- Holden, Constance. 2009. "America's Uncounted Millions." *Science*, 324(5930), 1008-1009.
- Humphreys, Macartan. n.d. "10 Things to Know About Causal Inference." Link: <https://egap.org/resource/10-things-to-know-about-causal-inference/>
- Kapiszewski, Dian, MacLean, Lauren M., & Read, Benjamin L. 2015. *Field Research in Political Science: Practices and Principles*. Cambridge University Press. Chapters 6 and 7.
- Levitsky, Steven. 1998. "Institutionalization and Peronism: The Concept, the Case and the Case for Unpacking the Concept." *Party Politics*, 4(1), 77-92.
- Levy, Jack S. 2008. "Case Studies: Types, Designs, and Logics of Inference." *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 25(1), 1-18.
- Lijphart, Arend. 1971. "Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method." *American Political Science Review*, 65(3), 682-692.
- Long, Abby. n.d. "10 Things to Know About Reading a Regression Table." Link: <https://egap.org/resource/10-things-to-know-about-reading-a-regression-table/>
- Maoz, Zeev, & Russett, Bruce. 1993. "Normative and Structural Causes of Democratic Peace, 1946–1986." *American Political Science Review*, 87(3), 624-638.
- Oster, Emily. 2020. "We Can't Get a Handle on the Coronavirus Pandemic Without Random Testing." *Slate*, April 17.

- Posner, Daniel N. 2004. "The Political Salience of Cultural Difference: Why Chewas and Tumbukas are Allies in Zambia and Adversaries in Malawi." *American Political Science Review*, 98(4), 529-545.
- Sartori, Giovanni. 1970. "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics." *American Political Science Review*, 64(4), 1033-1053.
- Snyder, Richard. 2001. "Scaling Down: The Subnational Comparative Method." *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 36(1), 93-110.