

POLISCI 290C– Capstone Project

Course Information

Spring Quarter 2026

5 Units

Monday-Wednesday 9:30-10:50am

Location: Encina West 208

Course Instructor

Simone Paci, Ph.D.

Email: simone.paci@stanford.edu

Office: Encina Hall 410

Meeting hours: [Sign-up Only](#) (email me if none of the posted times work)

Course Overview

How does political science research work in practice? This course will explore how applied research is employed in a diverse array of professional fields, from journalism to consulting, from nonprofit management to campaigning. Students will learn how to leverage the analytical and methodological tools of political science, reviewing how to employ them at different stages of applied research projects.

Throughout the course, students will develop an applied research project, focusing on a field and question of their choice. The final paper will serve as capstone for seniors graduating in political science, integrating and applying knowledge accumulated throughout their prior coursework. For their project, students will identify a real-world problem or puzzle, formulate a thesis, argument, or actionable strategy that draws on political science insights, and support their claims with empirical analysis.

The capstone seminar will run tightly packed schedule. Each week, we will focus on a different aspect of the research process, covering elements of applied research design, implementation, and communication. In parallel, class will integrate substantial workshopping opportunities for students to present their work, both formally and informally, and offer feedback to their peers' research.

The course will combine a variety of learning approaches. Class will include mini-lectures from the main instructor and from guest speakers, as well as class activities, such as project workshops, student presentations, and seminar-style discussion.

Course Timeline

Week 1

Session 1.a Theoretical & Applied Research

Session 1.b Developing Project Ideas

Week 2

Session 2 Drawing Insights from Scientific Literature

Week 3

Session 3 Developing a Data Plan

Week 4

Session 4 Implementing Empirical Analysis

Week 5

Session 5 Framing & Selling a Project

Week 6

Session 6 Strengthening Analytical Frameworks

Week 7

Session 7 Empirical Validity & Evidence Robustness

Week 8

Session 8 Formulating Conclusions & Recommendations

Week 9

Session 9 Presenting, Visualizing, and Communicating Results

Week 10

Class Research Conference

Course Learning Goals



Evaluate how political science research is employed across professional fields and informs stakeholders in diverse analytical and empirical ways.



Apply analytical insights from political science to applied problems, generating arguments and actionable strategies from theoretical models.



Leverage political science methodologies to produce data-driven insights, testing hypotheses and backing analytical claims with robust evidence.



Develop a final applied research project that engages a real-world problem, formulates an argument, and implements a data strategy.

Course Requirements

Enrollment in the capstone project seminar will be limited to juniors and seniors (with priority to seniors) majoring in political science.

Before enrolling, each student must submit, and the department must approve, a description of the intended capstone project.

For more information, please see:

<https://politicalscience.stanford.edu/undergraduate-program/capstone>

Student Expectations

- **Weekly Preparation** (due before class)
Each week, there will be brief material to review for the first session. This may include academic papers, news articles, reports, podcasts, or YouTube videos.
- **Class Participation**
Much of class time will be devoted to conversations around applications of political science across professional settings. Students will also be expected to engage actively in class discussions, activities, and comment each other’s presentations.
- **Office Hours**
Students are required to attend at least two office hours to discuss progress. One should be scheduled early in the quarter and one towards the end of the course.
- **Class Presentations** (3 per quarter):
Presentation #1 – Planned Progress Report
Presentation #2 – Random-Draw Progress Report
Presentation #3 – Final Project
- **Capstone Project** (minimum 20 pages / 5000 words)
Students will complete a research project on a topic related to one of the course sessions (see details below).

Grading

(ToC)

PARTICIPATION	15%
Class Discussion and Activities	15%

PRESENTATIONS	15%
Progress Reports	5%
Final Research Presentation	10%

CAPSTONE PROJECT	70%
Progress Milestones	5% each
Final Capstone Project	40%

Letter Grade Conversion Scale												
F	D-	D	D+	C-	C	C+	B-	B	B+	A-	A	A+
>60	60-62	63-66	67-69	70-72	73-76	77-79	80-82	83-86	87-89	90-92	93-96	97+

Presentation Guidelines

Progress Report:

This is an opportunity for students to discuss challenges or doubts and get feedback from the instructor and the class.

When:

- Twice during the quarter:
 - One will be scheduled via a signup survey at the beginning of the quarter.
 - One will be assigned via random draw at the beginning of each session.

Content:

- Focus on the weekly milestone or one specific aspect of the capstone project.
- Discuss one analytical or empirical choice and elicit feedback from the class.

Length:

- 5-10 minutes with Q&A
 - 1-2 slides for the scheduled presentation, no slides for the random draw.
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Final Research Presentation:

Pitch and describe your final project to the class!

When:

- All final research presentations will take place in the last week of class.

Content:

- Pitch your project: what is the motivating problem? Why is it interesting?
- Briefly illustrate your argument, thesis, or solution.
- Illustrate your empirical strategy, data sources, and analysis plan.
- Discuss and visualize your key results.

Length:

- 30 minutes with Q&A
- 5-10 slides

Capstone Project Guidelines

Each student will write an ***applied research paper***. The capstone project will integrate and apply what they have learned during their course of study. The final paper should identify a real-world problem or question, apply theoretical and analytical insights from political science, and employ an empirical methodology to support any claims with data-driven evidence.

Students will choose a specific field and capstone format, depending on their interests. The table below reports the main options available. The key idea is to replicate how political science is applied in professional settings across industries. If students have a field or format in mind that is not listed below, they should consult the instructor at the beginning of the quarter.

Fields	Potential Capstone Format
Research	Research paper / report
Journalism	Long-form article
Campaigning / Polling	Strategy memo for a campaign
Lobbying	Strategy memo for a campaign
Public Policy	Green paper (policy proposal report)
Diplomacy	Green paper (policy proposal report)
Management consulting	White paper (firm policy report)
Nonprofit management	White paper (firm policy report)
Political risk	Risk analysis report

Students may work on group capstone projects, with a maximum of three co-authors. In this case, the expectations for the final products will be multiplied by the number of students in the group, both in terms of length and complexity. Group projects will require a statement at the beginning of the quarter on the division of labor throughout the course.

Expectations and Formatting

- minimum 5000 words, about 20 pages (excluding bibliography, title page, and figures)
- times new roman, 12pt
- double-spaced
- any citation style is fine (MLA, Chicago, etc.) as long as it is consistent

In order to facilitate the research and writing process, students will follow a ***research timeline*** with ***weekly milestones***. The initial milestones are meant to summarize a section of the final paper. The later milestones include expanding, editing, and polishing the final draft.

Capstone Project Milestones

Milestones	Due Date	Expectations	Min. Requirements
Project Question	Week 1 (Sunday)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Motivate the project - Identify a question, puzzle, or problem - Employ clear theoretical variables 	250 words
Working Thesis	Week 2 (Sunday)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Propose an answer, strategy, or solution - Draws insights from political science literature - Describes mechanisms underlying the thesis 	350 words 5 citations
Data Plan	Week 3 (Sunday)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Propose a concrete measurement strategy - Identifies and describe accessible data sources - Discusses the mode of analysis 	350 words
Preliminary Results	Week 4 (Sunday)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Implement the proposed data analysis - Present and discuss preliminary results 	350 words
Rough Draft	Week 5 (Sunday)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Combine all previous milestones - Structure the final project paper - Integrate and expand each section 	10 pages
Edit	Week 6 (Sunday)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focus on theoretical/analytical sections - Refine thesis - Complete literature review 	12 pages
Edit	Week 7 (Sunday)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focus on empirical sections - Conclude data analysis - Discuss robustness and limitations 	15 pages
Edit	Week 8 (Sunday)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focus on introduction and conclusion - Finalize framing of the project 	20 pages
Edit	Week 9 (Sunday)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Polish final draft 	20 pages

Only the best 6 milestone grades will count towards the final grade. However, 3 points will be deducted from the total milestone points for each milestone that students fail to submit.

Course Policies

Absences

The course is highly interactive, and participation is key to its pedagogy and learning objectives. However, life happens to all of us and sporadic absences can be excused. Students can make up through a short ad-hoc assignment.

Extensions

The course follows a steady pace and is structured to even out student work. Therefore, I highly encourage students not to delay any assignments. I will consider students' personal circumstances in granting extensions.

Re-Grading

Each graded assessment has clearly stated expectations and grading rubrics. As such, the margin for re-grading will be slim. However, students who believe that their work deserves a major grade change (letter-grade), can bring this up either through office hours or email.

Instructor Communication

Reach out for questions, doubts, or problems. I welcome feedback and strive to incorporate student thoughts into my teaching practice. Email works best. I respond promptly during weekdays but may not always be available on weekends.

Creating a respectful environment

This course encourages lively and earnest discussion on political topics. As such, it is inevitable that people may disagree and hold starkly different opinions. However, without mutual respect, there is not hope for meaningful intellectual exchanges and conversations. We will briefly discuss classroom norms on our first session, but here are a couple of general guidelines I would like to adhere to: listen attentively to others, signal your wish to enter the conversation, critique ideas and not persons.

Inclusivity

As an instructor, I wish to recognize, celebrate and leverage a multitude of views and identities, coming together both in the syllabus and in the classroom. My course strives to include a diverse array of authors, opinions, cultural and intellectual backgrounds. Similarly, my assessment strategy offers a diverse structure of graded activities, recognizing that students may hold different strengths, due to individual and/or cultural differences.

Using Technology in the Classroom

During most of class time, including lectures, presentations, and class discussion, the use of laptops and electronics is not allowed. During specific activities, devices may be allowed to consult reading material, notes, and perform brief online research.

Generative AI

Depending on the context, artificial intelligence (AI) can either enhance and impede learning. There are times when these tools might provide us with new ideas and understandings (e.g., brainstorming or getting feedback). At other points, practicing skills and synthesizing ideas on our own will be crucial for the learning process. Thus, being mindful of when to use these tools will help us navigate the complexity of interacting with AI technologies in the classroom and beyond.

In this class, we will use AI tools, including ChatGPT, that harness large language models as pedagogical opportunities for learning and teaching in the course. Doing so will align with one of our course goals, which pertains to the evaluation of arguments and justification with evidence.

For this class, all assignments should be written in your own words. Just as you cannot take credit for others' writing in your assignments, you cannot use paraphrasing software ("spinbots") or AI writing software (like ChatGPT) and submit the output as your own. Doing so in this is a violation of the [Stanford Honor Code](#). At the beginning of the quarter, we will identify examples of AI tools and discuss what constitutes plagiarism, cheating, and academic dishonesty. This will help to ensure that we are all on the same page about the policies for this course and how they connect to our learning outcomes.

Academic Integrity

This class aims at creating a supportive and engaging learning environment. Academic integrity is vital to this goal, both in spirit and in practice.

Please review [Stanford's Honor Code](#), and [documentation and citation resources](#) from the Hume Center for Writing and Speaking. When in doubt, contact your section leader.

Academic Accommodations

If you find yourself struggling with any components of the course (readings, assignments, participation, etc.), please reach out to me or consult the list of campus resources below.

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Student Disability Resource Center (SDRC) located within the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). SDRC staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the SDRC as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations.

The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (723-1066). For more information, refer to: <http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oae>

Title IX

Title IX is a federal law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex and gender, including sexual harassment and sexual violence, in educational programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance. Stanford is committed to providing a campus environment that is free of such discrimination. If you are experiencing a Title IX-related concern, please be aware of the following confidential and non-confidential resources available to Stanford students.

Please note that many employees of Stanford, including course instructors and teaching assistants, are required to report Title IX-related concerns to the Title IX Office.

Confidential Resource:

The Confidential Support Team (CST) is reachable via a 24-7 hotline at 650-725-9955 for urgent support for at 650-736-6933 for non-urgent questions and appointments.

Non-Confidential Resource:

The Title IX Office is reachable at 650-397-4955 or via email at titleix@stanford.edu. The Office of Sexual Assault and Relationship Abuse Education and Response (SARA) is reachable at 650-725-1056 and saraoffice@stanford.edu.

Much more information, including full lists of both confidential and non-confidential resources, is available online at: sexualviolencesupport.stanford.edu, relationshipviolencesupport.stanford.edu, transgendersupport.stanford.edu

Learning Resources

- [Writing tutors](#) from the Hume Center for Writing and Speaking
- [Academic coaches](#) from the Center for Teaching and Learning
- [Study halls](#), organized by the Center for Teaching and Learning
- [Study Tips and Tools](#), from the Center for Teaching and Learning
- [Undergraduate Advising Directors](#), Academic Advising
- [Well-Being services](#), including [well-being coaches](#), Vaden Health Center
- [Subject Matter Tutoring](#), Center for Teaching and Learning
- [Language Conversation Partner Program](#), Center for Teaching and Learning
- [Tutoring for Student Athletes](#), AARC
- [English as a Second Language \(ESL\) courses](#) for international graduate students
- [Student Tech Resources & Support](#), includes support for personal devices and Stanford services

Academic Disruptions

Stanford as an institution is committed to the highest quality education, and as your teaching team, our priority is to uphold your educational experience. To that end we are committed to following the syllabus as written here, including through short or long-term disruptions, such as public health emergencies, natural disasters, or protests and demonstrations. However, there may be extenuating circumstances that necessitate some changes. Should adjustments be necessary we will communicate clearly and promptly to ensure you understand the expectations and are positioned for successful learning.

Course Schedule

Session 1.A – Political Science Research: Theory & Applications

Class Topics

- What is political science?
- Applying political science analytical & methodological tools
- Identifying & developing research questions, puzzles, problems

Suggested Readings

Goodin, Robert E. "The State of the Discipline, the Discipline of the State." *Oxford Handbooks Online* (2011). Pages 2-7

Putnam, Robert D. "APSA presidential address: The public role of political science." *Perspectives on Politics* 1.2 (2003): 249-255.

Assignment (due next class)

Prepare a 3-minute pitch presentation for your capstone project idea

Session 1.B – Developing Project Ideas

Class Topics

- Understanding the theoretical framework of your project
- Variable conceptualization & operationalization

Capstone Workshop

- Student capstone project idea pitch competition

Suggested Readings

Adcock, Robert, and David Collier. "Measurement validity: A shared standard for qualitative and quantitative research." *American political science review* 95.3 (2001): 529-546.

Wedeen, Lisa. "Conceptualizing culture: Possibilities for political science." *American political science review* 96.4 (2002): 713-728.

Wuttke, Alexander, Christian Schimpf, and Harald Schoen. "When the whole is greater than the sum of its parts: On the conceptualization and measurement of populist attitudes and other multidimensional constructs." *American Political Science Review* 114.2 (2020): 356-374.

Milestone Assignment (due on Sunday)

- Research Question / Problem statement

Session 2 – Developing Project Ideas

Class Topics

- Developing a theory: inductive and deductive approaches
- Leveraging the scientific literature: drawing theoretical & applied insights

Capstone Workshop

- Paired exercise: using LLMs as a brainstorming tool

Suggested Readings

Humphreys, Macartan, and Alan M. Jacobs. *Integrating Inferences: Causal Models for Qualitative and Mixed-Method Research*. Cambridge University Press, 2023.

https://macartan.github.io/integrated_inferences/HJC2.html

Yom, Sean. "From methodology to practice: Inductive iteration in comparative research." *Comparative Political Studies* 48.5 (2015): 616-644.

Milestone Assignment (due on Sunday)

- Working thesis

Session 3 – Developing a Data Plan

Class Topics

- Qualitative & quantitative political science research
- Understanding the data generating process
- Developing a data plan: operationalization, source selection, expectations

Capstone Workshop

- Student walk & talk exercise: measuring the key variable

Suggested Readings

Grimmer, Justin, Margaret E. Roberts, and Brandon M. Stewart. "Machine learning for social science: An agnostic approach." *Annual Review of Political Science* 24.1 (2021): 395-419.

Seawright, Jason, and John Gerring. "Case selection techniques in case study research: A menu of qualitative and quantitative options." *Political research quarterly* 61.2 (2008): 294-308.

Koivu, Kendra L., and Annika Marlen Hinze. "Cases of convenience? The divergence of theory from practice in case selection in qualitative and mixed-methods research." *PS: Political science & politics* 50.4 (2017): 1023-1027.

Milestone Assignment (due on Sunday)

- Data analysis plan

Session 4 – Implementing Empirical Analysis

Class Topics

- Differentiating between types of evidence: suggestive, descriptive, predictive, causal
- Interpreting and using empirical results

Capstone Workshop

- Student exercise: Pass, pair, and critique key empirical result

Suggested Readings

Humphreys, Macartan, and Alan M. Jacobs. "Mixing methods: A Bayesian approach." *American Political Science Review* 109.4 (2015): 653-673.

Grimmer, Justin. "We are all social scientists now: How big data, machine learning, and causal inference work together." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 48.1 (2015): 80-83.

Milestone Assignment (due on Sunday)

- Preliminary data analysis

Session 5 – Framing & Selling a Project

Class Topics

- How to frame a project in different ways
- Assessing the comparative advantage / value proposition of a study
- Targeting your audiences

Capstone Workshop

- Individual work on annotated paper structure

Suggested Readings

Falchetti, Denise, Gino Cattani, and Simone Ferriani. "Start with “Why,” but only if you have to: The strategic framing of novel ideas across different audiences." *Strategic Management Journal* 43.1 (2022): 130-159.

Stanford Business School. “Value Proposition”. *The Impact BMC*. Chapter 4.

https://stanford.edu/dept/gsb-ds/Inkling/The_Impact_BMC/

Milestone Assignment (due on Sunday)

- First rough draft

Session 6 – Strengthening Analytical Frameworks

Class Topics

- Evaluating counterarguments

POLISCI 290C – Spring 2026 – Capstone Project Syllabus

- Identifying theoretical conditions & conceptual boundaries of an argument

Capstone Workshop

- Paired exercise: find a foil for your argument

Suggested Readings

Fearon, James D. "Counterfactuals and hypothesis testing in political science." *World politics* 43.2 (1991): 169-195.

Milestone Assignment (due on Sunday)

- Editing the draft: first (theoretical) section

Session 7 – Empirical Validity & Evidence Robustness

Class Topics

- Recognizing threats to internal & external validity
- Increasing robustness of empirical results

Capstone Workshop

- Group brainstorm quick session: develop a secondary empirical design

Suggested Readings

Egami, Naoki, and Erin Hartman. "Elements of external validity: Framework, design, and analysis." *American Political Science Review* 117.3 (2023): 1070-1088.

<https://statmodeling.stat.columbia.edu/2017/11/29/whats-point-robustness-check/>

Milestone Assignment (due on Sunday)

- Editing the draft: second (empirical) section

Session 8 – Formulating Conclusions & Recommendations

Class Topics

- Turning empirical results into policy/strategy recommendations
- Looking ahead to the next study: developing an applied research agenda

Class prep:

<https://freakonomics.com/podcast/why-do-most-ideas-fail-to-scale/>

Capstone Workshop

- Individual work and round of executive-summary reports

Suggested Readings

POLISCI 290C – Spring 2026 – Capstone Project Syllabus

Bogenschneider, Karen, and Thomas J. Corbett. "Why There Is a Disconnect Between Research and Policy, and What We Can Do." *Evidence-Based Policymaking*. Routledge, 2021. 3-23. <https://searchworks.stanford.edu/view/8631645>

Milestone Assignment (due on Sunday)

- Full final draft

Session 9 – Presenting, Visualizing, and Communicating Results

Class Topics

- Communicating with diverse audiences
- Visualizing and presenting results

Capstone Workshop

- Applied research presentation demonstration

Suggested Readings

Stanford Hume Center. *Effective Speaking Guide*.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1pS_QRRFisF7lREbpeAjAwUcmMP4HGWYz/view

Rojas-Padilla, Eduardo, Tamara Metzke, and Katrien Termeer. "Seeing the visual: A literature review on why and how policy scholars would do well to study influential visualizations." *Policy Studies Yearbook* 12.1 (2022): 103-136.

Week 10 – Final Research Conference