

The Politics of Buildout: Data Centers and the Conflict Over Grid Infrastructure

PSCI 4952 — Political Science Capstone I Fall 2026 | MW 12:45–14:05, Art 219

Les Staland, PhD — Department of Political Science, University of North Texas

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Course description

Under what conditions do data centers and electric grid infrastructure get built (or not built)? How can the building (or refusal to build) such infrastructure be explained by existing political science sub-fields? The AI boom has turned an already contentious process into one even more fraught: politicians (at different levels), policymakers, constituents, corporations, regulatory agencies, and interest groups all vie for their preferred outcome on a critical, load-bearing (no pun intended) issue.

But why is this *particular* issue so difficult to navigate? First, it is one of a handful of issues where the core theoretical approaches to political science – federalism, elitism, collective action and community resistance, comparative political economy and state capacity, distributive politics, regulation, and great-power competition over technology – currently collide and yield different predictions about who prevails, who pays, and what gets built where. Second, these theoretical approaches emerge in reality: data centers demand gigawatts of electricity and hundreds of thousands of square feet of land, while regulated monopolies build transmission lines that cross county and state jurisdictional lines. Communities weigh economic impact against their water table and air quality levels while different levels of government vie for the power to approve or deny the build. States are now competing for (or eschewing) the largest private infrastructure build-out in generations. *Someone* has to decide these issues, and the number of interested parties in this arena sometimes makes build-out difficult, sometimes impossible, and sometimes relatively easy.

This capstone uses this emerging issue as an arena for the discipline you have spent these past few years learning. In the first half of the course, each week will pose one broad question and arm you with competing theoretical answers drawn from across the discipline’s sub-field. In the second half of the course, students will generate an original analytical paper on a related research question of their choosing. No background knowledge of energy systems is required.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this course you will be able to:

- Apply theoretical frameworks from at least two sub-fields of political science to a contemporary infrastructure conflict.
- Evaluate competing explanations for political outcomes and identify the evidence that would adjudicate between them.
- Design and generate an original analytical research paper anchored in an established political science literature.
- Present and defend analytical work orally before an audience.
- Collaborate productively in a standing team, including structured peer review of written work.

How this course proceeds

The semester runs in two phases.

Phase I (Weeks 1–8): Content, in teams. You will be assigned to a permanent team of four to five in Week 2. Each content week follows a Team-Based Learning cycle: an individual readiness quiz on the week’s readings and the same quiz retaken as a team, followed by clarification. Next, a team application activity is assigned in which your team must generate a specific answer to a hard question and defend it against other teams. These questions do not have a single correct answer, only better or worse answers. The difference is the quality of your reasoning from evidence and theory.

Phase II (Weeks 9–17): Research, in the workshop. After the midterm, the course converts into a working research group. Each student will write an individual analytical paper (12–15 pages) on a question drawn from the course’s terrain but based in the student’s own sub-field. The paper will develop through staged milestones — several of which begin during Phase I, so that no one starts a paper cold in Week 9. Your Phase I team becomes your peer-review pod. Finally, the course ends with a public research presentation akin to political science conferences.

Why the course is built this way. As capstone students, you are nearing the end of your undergraduate studies. Perhaps you want to proceed to grad school; perhaps you seek an industry position or a role at an NGO. In any case, conducting, writing, and presenting research is a skill that will serve you well. This course offers a way to “build-out” a good research product that students can be proud of. Specifically, the milestone structure is purposely used to help students to prevent the common pitfalls of rushed and/or AI-generated work.

Materials

No textbook is required; all materials will be posted in Canvas, linked via the UNT Library.

Weekly schedule

PHASE I — THEORETICAL TOOLS AND TRANSITION (Weeks 1–8)			
Session pattern. Mondays are content days; individual and quiz, and a clarification session driven by what the team quiz reveals. Wednesdays are application days: the week’s team activity and debrief.			

Week 1 — Orientation (Aug 17 / 19)

Day	Session	Prepare
Mon	Course launch. Expectations, how TBL works, why the course is built this way. Practice RAT (ungraded) using the syllabus itself as the “reading” — demonstrates the mechanics of TBL. Intake survey assigned.	Nothing.
Wed	What’s being built, and why now? Framing lecture and discussion: load growth, the interconnection queue, who the actors are. Practice 4S in ad hoc groups: <i>which historical infrastructure boom is the right analogy — 1880s railroads, 1990s fiber, postwar interstate, or Chinese overbuild?</i>	Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, <i>United States Data Center Energy Usage Report</i> (exec. summary + load projections); ERCOT capacity/demand report summary; EIA short-term outlook, electricity section.

Intake survey due Sunday, 11:59 pm (required, ungraded). Subfield concentration, methods coursework completed, topic interests, prior group-work experience. Teams announced Monday of Week 2.

Weeks 2–7 — Six questions on buildout

Week	Question	Readings	Sessions
2 (Aug 24/26)	Who has the authority to say no?	Schrager, Richard C. 2018. “The Attack on American Cities.” <i>Tex. L. Rev.</i> 96 (6): 1163–1233. Aldrich, Daniel P. 2005. “Controversial Project Siting: State Policy Instruments and Flexibility.” <i>Comparative Politics</i> 38 (1): 103–123.	Mon: teams announced; RAT 1; clarification. Wed: 4S — <i>which level of government should, and which will, win?</i>
3 (Aug 31 / Sep 2)	Why do communities resist?	Einstein, Katherine L., Maxwell Palmer, and David Glick. 2019. “Who Participates in Local Government? Evidence from Meeting Minutes.” <i>Perspectives on Politics</i> 17 (1): 28–46. Stokes, Leah C. 2016. “Electoral Backlash against Climate Policy.” <i>AJPS</i> 60 (4): 958–974. Devine-Wright, Patrick. 2009. “Rethinking NIMBYism.” <i>J. Community & Applied Social Psych.</i> 19 (6): 426–441.	Mon: RAT 2; clarification. Wed: 4S — <i>which mechanism explains the opposition, and what evidence would prove you wrong?</i>
4 (Sep 7/9) — <i>Labor Day, no class Mon</i>	Why can some states build and others can’t?	Grubler, Arnulf. 2010. “The Costs of the French Nuclear Scale-up: A Case of Negative Learning by Doing.” <i>Energy Policy</i> 38 (9): 5174–5188. Doner, Richard F., Bryan K. Ritchie, and Dan Slater. 2005. “Systemic Vulnerability and the Origins of Developmental States.” <i>IO</i> 59 (2): 327–361.	Mon: no class (Labor Day). iRAT 3 opens online, due Wed 12:45 pm. Wed (compressed): iRAT (20) → clarification (20) → 4S (35) — <i>which governance model wins the next twenty years, and what does it sacrifice?</i>
5 (Sep 14/16)	Subsidies: Who profits and why do they persist?	Jensen, Nathan M. 2018. “Bargaining and the Effectiveness of Economic Development Incentives: An Evaluation of the Texas Chapter 313 Program.” <i>Public Choice</i> 177 (1–2): 29–51. Tørstad, Vegard, Jon Hovi, and Håkon Selen. 2025. “Does Distributive Conflict Explain Variation in Green Stimulus Spending? Evidence from 40 Major Economies during the Global Financial Crisis and the Covid-19 Recession.” <i>Regulation & Governance</i> (forthcoming).	Mon: RAT 4; clarification (walk through Table 2). Wed: 4S — <i>why are subsidies such a commonly used tool of governments?</i>
6 (Sep 21/23)	What does the grid have to do with power politics?	Farrell, Henry, and Abraham L. Newman. 2019. “Weaponized Interdependence.” <i>International Security</i> 44 (1): 42–79. Congressional Research Service. <i>U.S. Export Controls and China: Advanced Semiconductors</i> . Benaim, “Compute Is the New Oil.” <i>Foreign Affairs</i> , 9 Dec 2025.	Mon: RAT 5; clarification. Wed: 4S — <i>chokepoint state: weaponize, monetize, or neutralize?</i>
7 (Sep 28/30)	Can institutions keep up?	Bagley, Nicholas. 2019. “The Procedure Fetish.” <i>Mich. L. Rev.</i> 118 (3): 345–401. Brooks, Leah, and Zachary Liscow. 2023. “Infrastructure Costs.” <i>AEL: Applied Economics</i> 15 (2): 1–30.	Mon: RAT 6; clarification. Wed: 4S — <i>repeat exactly one procedural constraint: which one goes?</i>

Milestone 1 — Paper Topic & Research Question — due Sunday of Week 5 (Canvas). Soft lock: changes permitted with approval through Milestone 2.

Milestone 2 — Competing explanations, sourced — due Sunday of Week 7.

Week 8 — Transition (Oct 5/7)

Day	Session
Mon	Midterm exam. Exact construction TBD.
Wed	Research design workshop. Skill module launching Phase II: turning a question and its competing explanations into a plan.

PHASE II — RESEARCH AND WRITING WORKSHOP (Weeks 9–17)			
Session rhythm. In Phase II, Monday sessions carry skill modules and pod work; Wednesdays are workshop and conference time.			

Week	Session focus	Milestones
9 (Oct 12/14)	Skill module: the working annotated bibliography; pod session 1	Milestone 3 due: annotated bibliography (8–10 sources).
10 (Oct 19/21)	Skill module: writing the analytical core (argument before prose); pod session 2	–
11 (Oct 26/28)	Skill module: evidence and primary documents; individual conferences (sign-up)	Milestone 4 due: analytical core draft (5–6 pages).
12 (Nov 2/4)	Pod session 3: core drafts workshoped in pods	–
13 (Nov 9/11)	Skill module: revision and professional polish; individual conferences	Milestone 5 due: full draft (12–15 pages).
14 (Nov 16/18)	Structured peer review (rubric-based, within pods)	Peer reviews due in session.
15 (Nov 23–29)	Fall Break — no class	<i>Final paper + slides due Sun Nov 29, 11:59 pm.</i>
16 (Nov 30 / Dec 2)	Research showcase, panels 1–4 (guests invited)	–
17 (Dec 7, finals block)	Research showcase, panels 5–7 (guests invited)	–

Assessment

Component	Weight
Readiness Assurance Tests quizzes (6 total, individual and team weighed equally)	15%
Team application activities	15%
Class citizenship (peer evaluation, project progress during Phase II)	15%
Midterm exam	20%
Research Paper (all milestones, peer review, and presentation)	35%

Two milestones (proposal and full draft) receive full instructor feedback; the others are assessed on completion and quality-checked. Peer review is graded on the quality of the feedback you give, not the work you receive.

Grades will follow the traditional distribution:

Letter Grade	Numerical Score
A	89.51 - 100
B	79.51 - 89.5
C	69.51 - 79.5
D	59.51 - 69.5
F	59.5 or below

Course policies

Office hours

My goal in this course is to help you succeed. To that end, office hours (MTW 14:30 - 16:00) are a time when you can visit about your work. [Here is a link](#) for you to sign up to chat with me about your work.

Academic Integrity Standards and Consequences

According to UNT Policy 66.003, Student Academic Dishonesty, academic dishonesty occurs when students engage in behaviors including, but not limited to cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty, forgery, plagiarism, and sabotage. A finding of academic dishonesty may result in a range of academic penalties or sanctions ranging from admonition to expulsion from the University.

Cheating & Plagiarism

Students caught cheating on any given assignment will receive no credit for the assignment. Additionally, the incident will be reported to the Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities, which may impose a further penalty. According to the UNT catalog, the term “cheating” includes, but is not limited to: a. use of any unauthorized assistance in taking quizzes, tests, or examinations; b. dependence upon the aid of sources beyond those authorized by the instructor in writing papers, preparing reports, solving problems, or carrying out other assignments; c. the acquisition, without permission, of tests or other academic material belonging to a faculty or staff member of the university; d. dual submission of a paper or project, or resubmission of a paper or project to a different class without express permission from the instructor(s); or e. any other act designed to give a student an unfair advantage. The term “plagiarism” includes, but is not limited to: a. the knowing or negligent use by paraphrase or direct quotation of the published or unpublished work of another person without full and clear acknowledgment; and b. the knowing or negligent unacknowledged use of materials prepared by another person or agency engaged in the selling of term papers or other academic materials.

I want you to succeed, so you are highly encouraged to see me when questions and concerns arise. Another way to limit the probability of cheating is to start your coursework in plenty of time so you don’t end up cramming. To do this, consider [temporal discounting](#) and ensure you are adequately valuing the present and the future.

Accessibility

This course and all its materials are designed to WCAG 2.1 AA standards. If any material is not accessible to you, tell me and I will fix it. Students needing accommodations should register with the Office of Disability Access.

UNT makes reasonable academic accommodation for students with disabilities. Students seeking accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Accommodation (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide a student with an accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding one’s specific course needs. Students may request accommodations at any time, however, ODA notices of accommodation should be provided as early as possible in the semester to avoid any delay in implementation. Note that students must obtain a new letter of accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class. For additional information see the [ODA Website](#).

Emergency Notification & Procedures

UNT uses a system called Eagle Alert to quickly notify students with critical information in the event of an emergency (i.e., severe weather, campus closing, and health and public safety emergencies like chemical spills, fires, or violence). In the event of a university closure, please refer to Canvas for contingency plans for covering course materials.

Attendance

Class attendance is required. For Phase I of the course, the Team-Based Learning methodology presupposes student attendance since readiness assurance tests and lesson applications cannot be made up individually. For Phase II of the course, workshops will give students valuable time to work on their papers and receive both formal and informal feedback from their peers and their instructor. Also, peer review is an essential component of scholarly research and writing, and your feedback will help a fellow student improve their work.

On the other hand, life happens - if something else takes you away from class, *that is fine*. Please handle any business you may have; just know any missing assignments cannot be made up. So long as absences are infrequent, you will have enough opportunity to demonstrate your mastery of the course contents. There is no need to inform me of any scheduled or unscheduled absence nor to ask if work can be made up.

Student Expectations

I expect each student to:

- Fully read and understand the syllabus.
- Understand that due dates are just that, dates on which any given item is due.
- Have familiarity with and proficiency in common word processing, data organization, and presentation creation software.
- Have familiarity with Canvas.
- Check their UNT email at least every 48 hours.
- Come to class prepared for all activities and events happening in that class time.
- Let me know when difficulties arise.

Students can expect from me:

- Course preparedness, professionalism, and collegiality.
- Confidentiality regarding anything you may say to me regarding yourself or another (with the exception of statements made in which I am bound by law to report)
- Efforts made to help you the best I possibly can.
- Please remember, I want you to succeed!

Acceptable Student Behavior

Student behavior that interferes with an instructor’s ability to conduct a class or other students’ opportunity to learn is unacceptable and disruptive and will not be tolerated in any instructional forum at UNT. Students engaging in unacceptable behavior will be directed to leave the classroom and the instructor may refer the student to the Dean of Students to consider whether the student’s conduct violated the Code of Student Conduct. The University’s expectations for student conduct apply to all instructional forums, including University and electronic classroom, labs, discussion groups, field trips, etc. The Code of Student Conduct can be found [here](#).

Also, video recording of the classroom environment is not permitted. Students must feel free to discuss important and timely topics without fear, and this key educational goal is defeated when a camera is on. Audio recording of the class environment is permitted only under the rules set forth by the [Office of Disability Access](#). Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns over this policy.

Communication

Assignments will be graded within one week. Emails will be answered within 48 hours during the work week; I do not answer emails over the weekend. When emailing me, please include “PSCI 4952” in the subject so that I can prioritize your message.

AI Policy

Staland’s Artificial Intelligence Use Policy (with help from ChatGPT!)

AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Claude, Copilot, Grammarly, etc.) are increasingly part of professional and academic work. In this course, AI is treated as a tool, not a substitute for your thinking, analysis, or learning. You are responsible for all submitted work, including anything produced with AI assistance. This course adopts a transparent and accountable use model rather than a total ban on the one hand or unrestricted use on the other.

Permitted Uses of AI (Low–Moderate Support)

Several aspects of the academic process can be effectively sped up to allow increased brainpower elsewhere. Students may use AI for the following purposes (unless otherwise specified) for a particular assignment:

- Brainstorming topics, research questions, and/or outlines
- Clarifying concepts from readings or lectures
- Generating examples or counterarguments
- Editing for grammar, clarity, or organization

Read [this website on prompt engineering](#) to help you get better results for these types of tasks.

Prohibited Uses of AI (High Support / Substitution)

Conversely, other aspects of the academic process cannot in good faith be short-circuited for the sake of efficiency or else the purpose of assessment will be undermined. Sometimes, students have to learn through trial-and-error. Students may not use AI to:

- Generate full responses, essays, problem set solutions, policy memos, discussion posts for submission, or any other summative assessment
- Paraphrase or rewrite text in order to conceal AI authorship (eg. “Humanizing AI”)
- Produce original analysis, interpretation, or conclusions on your behalf
- Complete take-home exams or individual assessments intended to measure your own mastery

Assignment-Specific AI Guidance

Some assignments may:

- Require AI use (e.g., critique an AI-generated output)
- Restrict AI use entirely
- Specify acceptable tools or prompts

Always follow the instructions for the specific assignment if they differ from this general policy.

Disclosure & Documentation Requirements

For all assignments in which AI is used, you are required to submit the full AI chat transcript (your prompts and its responses) so I may assess how much learning is your own and how much “credit” belongs to the AI. If you use AI in any capacity beyond basic proofreading, you must include a brief AI Use Disclosure Statement at the end of your assignment. This should include:

- The tool(s) used
- The purpose of use
- A brief description of how AI shaped (or did not shape) your final submission

Example: “AI Use Disclosure: I used ChatGPT to help brainstorm an outline and clarify the definition of democratization. All analysis and writing are my own. Attached is my chat transcript.”

AI Detection Tools

After several tests, I have been moderately impressed with the AI detection work done at [Pangram Labs](#). I reserve the right to use this program. If I do, it will be used sparingly and cautiously, consistent with best practices. Detection results:

- Are not treated as definitive proof
 - Will never be the sole basis for an academic integrity violation
 - Will be used in conjunction with the chat transcript to rebuild the learning session
 - May prompt a conversation, request for drafts, or explanation of processes. The emphasis is on due process and student learning, not punishment.
- Academic Integrity & Consequences*
- Undisclosed or impermissible AI use is treated as an academic integrity violation, similar to plagiarism or unauthorized collaboration. Possible responses include:
- Required revision or resubmission
 - Reduced or zero credit on the assignment
 - Referral under university academic integrity procedures
- When appropriate, the first response will emphasize education and correction, especially in cases of misunderstanding rather than intentional misconduct.
- Bottom Line*
- If you are unsure whether a particular use of AI is allowed, ask before submitting. Transparency will always be treated more favorably than concealment.
- Note: Syllabus is subject to change at the discretion of the professor.