

PSCI 5320: PRACTICAL RESEARCH METHODS

Fall 2026

Instructor:	Les Stanaland, PhD	Email:	leslie.stanaland@unt.edu
Class time:	R 14:25 – 17:15	Classroom:	Wooten Hall 111
Office:	Wooten Hall 158	Office Hours:	MTW 14:30 – 16:00

Course Description:

This is a graduate-level course on practical research methods in political science. Whether you are studying American, Comparative, IR, political economy, political theory, or public policy, various methods are used to answer research questions and adjudicate claims of truth. Why do some developing countries accept Chinese loans but others do not? Why does oil extraction cause lower economic growth in some countries, but higher growth in others? Under what conditions will people vote against their economic interest? Why do countries go to war? Do state governors change their view of federalism based on the party in the White House? How will a policy be evaluated? What is justice, and how do we know if we have it? These questions and numerous others are at the heart of the study of political science. What they all have in common is that these questions must be researched appropriately. Responsive government relies on available data, transparent processes, and accountable politicians and bureaucrats. Without a proper analysis of what decisions are being made and why, democracy loses a bit of its luster.

Instead of treating the material purely as an abstract mathematical exercise, this course will be approached as an applied problem-solving one: skills learned will include knowing which design to use and why, visualizing and reporting results, and ensuring information validity and reliability. To meet these standards, this course will include several active learning techniques so that students are prepared for "real-world" application of the course material. To that end, students will deliver a series of short papers that scaffold into a full research design or white paper on a topic of their choosing.

This is a tentative syllabus, subject to instructor revision.

Course Objectives:

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

1. Design a feasible research strategy.
2. Critically evaluate empirical research.
3. Apply both quantitative and qualitative analytic techniques.
4. Communicate research findings for multiple audiences.

Texts & Software: This is a list of useful resources that will be referenced during the course. You will need to consult them regularly to ensure understanding of central concepts; all references are hyperlinked below. I recommend bookmarking these sites.

Required

- [Franco, et al. 2025. Introduction to Political Science Research Methods, 2nd Ed.](#)
- [David Lane, et al. 2013. Online Statistics Education: An Interactive Multimedia Course of Study](#)
- [Michael Strausz. 2026. Are you ready for R? A Workbook for R for Political Science and Beyond](#)
- [R Studio](#)
- Any other readings, articles, etc will be placed in Canvas.

Course Requirements & Evaluation:

Learning with AI Microcredential	2%
In-class Activities/Problem Sets	20%
Final Exam	18%
Stage 1 — Research Question	8%
Stage 2 — Competing Explanations	8%
Stage 3 — Research Design	16%
Stage 4 — Preliminary Results	12%
Stage 5 — Final Product	16%

Learning with AI Microcredential - UNT has a dedicated group of people who stay current in the field of AI trends. They have developed a wonderful asynchronous, 6 hour course about learning in the AI world. This course will be a benefit for you as you progress in your studies and your career. Once completed, you will receive a certificate; it must be uploaded by Sunday, 6 September and will comprise 2% of your final grade.

In-class Activities and Problem Sets - To ensure learning of course concepts, frequent low-stakes assignments and more formal quizzes will be assigned. These will allow both student and professor to gauge understanding and where improvements, if needed, can be made. Because these assignments are formative, they cannot be made up under any circumstances and will comprise 20% of your final grade. These activities could include, but are not limited to: problem sets completed in R, peer reviews, reading quizzes, informal oral presentations about paper drafts, and applied scenarios/simulations.

Final Exam - The final exam consists of two parts administered during the Week 14 class session and will comprise 18% of your grade.

Part A — Students will receive an empirical political science article and be asked to identify and evaluate its research question, theoretical framework, competing hypotheses, research design, data sources, and key findings. This tests whether students can read research critically.

Part B — Students will receive a policy problem or research question and be asked to specify what evidence would be needed to address it, where that evidence could be found, and what research design would be appropriate - including the logic of that design choice and its limitations. This tests whether students can think independently about how to connect questions to evidence.

The exam is open note but must be completed individually during class time. No electronic devices are permitted.

Scaffolded Research Project - The primary deliverable for this course is a five-stage scaffolded project comprising 60% of the final grade, weighted progressively to reflect the increasing complexity and originality required at each stage. At the outset of the semester, students will choose one of two tracks for their final product:

- **Academic Research Design Paper** — A formal research design paper written for a scholarly audience, suitable for development into a thesis chapter or conference paper. Each stage follows academic conventions of argumentation, citation, and methodology.
- **Policy White Paper** — A professional policy document written for a non-technical audience, suitable for an internship, agency, or policy organization. Each stage is oriented toward clear recommendations, accessible prose, and actionable findings.

Both tracks complete the same five stages and are evaluated on the same underlying competencies — the difference lies in format, audience, and presentation, not rigor. Track selection must be confirmed with the instructor by the end of Week 2. The five stages are:

1. **Stage 1 — Research Question** (~1,000 words): Construct a clearly stated, researchable question. Justify why it matters and why it is answerable with existing evidence. *Due Week 3.*
2. **Stage 2 — Competing Explanations** (~1,000 words): Identify two existing explanations from the literature and develop a third original hypothesis or interpretation. Specify the observable implications of each. *Due Week 5.*
3. **Stage 3 — Research Design** (~1,000 words): Specify your design, data sources, unit of analysis, key variables or evidence, and analytic approach. Justify your methodological choices. *Due Week 11.*
4. **Stage 4 — Rough Draft** (~4,500 words): Present and interpret your preliminary evidence or analysis; add to this the first three stages and all feedback, thereby creating a rough draft of the whole paper. *Due before the start of Week 13 class to enable peer review.*

5. **Stage 5 — Final Product** (~5,000 words): A polished, fully integrated final paper or white paper incorporating feedback from peer review and instructor comments. *Due Week 17.*

Given the short timeframe, projects should use existing data sources only; no original data collection is permitted without instructor approval. Each stage is graded independently and returned with feedback before the next stage is due. Late submissions are not accepted for any stage. If you are struggling, come see me before the deadline, not after.

Each stage is evaluated against a set of numbered Accept criteria. A stage receives one of the following outcomes:

- **Accept** — All criteria for that stage are met. Full credit is awarded.
- **Revise and Resubmit (R&R)** — The core of the submission is viable but one or more Accept criteria are not met. Feedback will specify which criteria are unmet. The student receives a 70 immediately; a successful resubmission raises this to a 90. Resubmission is due within 7 days of receiving feedback. The instructor will return a final decision within 3 days of resubmission.
- **Reject and Resubmit** — A fundamental problem with the argument, question, or approach is present that requires a conversation, not just revision. No credit is awarded until a successful resubmission, which is capped at an 80. A meeting with the instructor is required before resubmission may be submitted. Resubmission is due within 10 days of that meeting.

The above outcomes apply to Stages 1 through 4 only. **Stage 5 is Accept or Reject only — no resubmission is available.** By the time Stage 5 is submitted, students will have received feedback on four prior stages, participated in a peer review session, and had a full semester to develop their work. Stage 5 is where that development is demonstrated. If Stage 5 does not receive an Accept, the instructor assigns a percentage directly based on the criteria met and the quality of work present.

Each stage receives one resubmission opportunity only. A resubmission that does not meet all Accept criteria will have its grade locked at the partial credit level with no further opportunity to revise. The criteria are not a checklist where partial completion earns partial credit — they are standards. Meeting four of six criteria for Accept does not constitute an Accept; it constitutes an R&R with specific feedback on the unmet criteria. If you receive an R&R or Reject, come to office hours before resubmitting. Late resubmissions are not accepted.

Grading Scale

A	85 - 100
B	70 - 84.99
C	less than 70

Course Policies:

Withdrawal Policy

The last date a student can withdraw from this class with a “W” is [Friday, November 6, 2026](#). Withdrawing from a graduate course is a serious matter with potential implications for funding and academic standing. Please consult with me before making that decision.

ADA Accommodation Statement

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.

Instructor Availability

Generally speaking, any question, point of confusion, or comment can easily be addressed with me via email. I will reply or otherwise address any concerns within one business day. I do not check emails on the weekends. You may also make use of office hours.

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](#).

Academic Integrity Standards and Consequences

According to UNT Policy 06.003, Student Academic Integrity, 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.

Technical Support

Here at UNT we have a Student Help Desk that you can contact for help with Canvas or other technology issues. **Please do not rely on me for technical support – I am not the person for that.**

UNT IT Help Desk: [UNT IT Student Help Desk site](#)

Email: helpdesk@unt.edu

AI Policy: Stanaland’s Artificial Intelligence Use Policy (with help from ChatGPT!)

Guiding Principle

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

I reserve the right to use AI-detection software. 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.

A note on the research project: Because the research project develops over the course of the semester, I reserve the right to ask students at any point — in class, during office hours, or in written feedback — to explain their analytical choices, defend their interpretations, or walk me through their argument. This is a normal part of graduate training and not an accusation of wrongdoing. Submissions that cannot be explained or defended by the student will be treated as a potential academic integrity concern.

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.

Tentative Course Outline:

All readings should be completed *before* the class session for which they are assigned. Project stages are due Thursdays at 23:59 except Stage 4, which is due before the Week 13 class session.

Phase 1 — Foundations

Week 1 | 20 Aug *Course Intro; Asking Good Research Questions; Research Ethics*

- ▷ Franco, Ch. 9
- ▷ Come ready to discuss your research interests

Week 2 | 27 Aug *How to Review Literature*

- ▷ Knopf, J. W. (2006). Doing a literature review. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 39(1), 127–132
- ▷ McMenamin, I. (2006). Process and text: Teaching students to review the literature. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 39(1), 133–135

Week 3 | 3 Sep *Theory and Hypothesis Building*

- ▷ Fearon, J. D. (1991). Counterfactuals and hypothesis testing in political science. *World politics*, 43(2), 169–195
- ▷ Mearsheimer, J. J., & Walt, S. M. (2013). Leaving theory behind: Why simplistic hypothesis testing is bad for international relations. *European journal of international relations*, 19(3), 427–457
- ▷ Coppedge, M. (2007). Theory building and hypothesis testing: Large-n versus small-n research on democratization. *Regimes and Democracy in Latin America: Theories and Methods*, 163
- ▷ Franco, Ch. 4

Due: Stage 1 — Research Question

Phase 2 — Research Design

Week 4 | 10 Sep *Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs*

- ▷ Stuart, E. A., & Rubin, D. B. (2008). Best practices in quasi-experimental designs. *Best practices in quantitative methods*, 155–176
- ▷ Gerber, A. S., & Green, D. P. (2000). The effects of canvassing, telephone calls, and direct mail on voter turnout: A field experiment. *American political science review*, 94(3), 653–663
- ▷ Franco, Ch. 6
- ▷ Lane, Ch. 6

Week 5 | 17 Sep*Non-Experimental and Observational Designs*

- ▷ Seawright, J., & Gerring, J. (2008). Case selection techniques in case study research: A menu of qualitative and quantitative options. *Political research quarterly*, 61(2), 294–308
- ▷ Lijphart, A. (1971). Comparative politics and the comparative method. *American political science review*, 65(3), 682–693
- ▷ Ankar, C. (2008). On the applicability of the most similar systems design and the most different systems design in comparative research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 11(5), 389–401

Due: Stage 2 — Competing Explanations

Phase 3 — Quantitative Methods**Week 6** | 24 Sep*Types of Data, Variables, and Operationalization*

- ▷ Adcock, R., & Collier, D. (2001). Measurement validity: A shared standard for qualitative and quantitative research. *American political science review*, 95(3), 529–546
- ▷ Bollen, K. A. (1990). Political democracy: Conceptual and measurement traps. *Studies in comparative international development*, 25(1), 7–24
- ▷ Franco, Ch. 5
- ▷ Lane, Ch. 1

Week 7 | 1 Oct*Descriptive Statistics and Visualization*

- ▷ Kastellec, J. P., & Leoni, E. L. (2007). Using graphs instead of tables in political science. *Perspectives on politics*, 5(4), 755–771
- ▷ Nash, K., Trott, V., & Allen, W. (2022). The politics of data visualisation and policy making. *Convergence*, 28(1), 3–12
- ▷ Franco, Ch. 8
- ▷ Lane, Ch. 3

Due: Problem Set 1

Week 8 | 8 Oct*Bivariate Analysis and OLS Regression*

- ▷ King, G. (1986). How not to lie with statistics: Avoiding common mistakes in quantitative political science. *American Journal of Political Science*, 666–687
- ▷ Bartels, L. M. (2000). Partisanship and voting behavior, 1952-1996. *American journal of political science*, 35–50
- ▷ Stapleton, C. E., & Langehennig, S. R. (2024). Partisanship and voting behavior reconsidered in the age of polarization. *Electoral Studies*, 88, 102752
- ▷ Lane, Ch. 4

Due: Problem Set 2

Phase 4 — Qualitative Methods

Week 9 | 15 Oct

Case Studies and Process Tracing

- ▷ Collier, D. (2011). Understanding process tracing. *PS: political science & politics*, 44(4), 823–830
- ▷ Ricks, J. I., & Liu, A. H. (2018). Process-tracing research designs: A practical guide. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 51(4), 842–846
- ▷ North, D. C., & Weingast, B. R. (1989). Constitutions and commitment: The evolution of institutions governing public choice in seventeenth-century england. *The Journal of Economic History*, 49(4), 803–832
- ▷ Geddes, B. (1990). How the cases you choose affect the answers you get: Selection bias in comparative politics. *Political analysis*, 2, 131–150

Due: Problem Set 3

Week 10 | 22 Oct

Document Analysis, Content Analysis, and Source Evaluation

- ▷ Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative research journal*, 9(2), 27–40
- ▷ Semetko, H. A., & Valkenburg, P. M. (2000). Framing european politics: A content analysis of press and television news. *Journal of communication*, 50(2), 93–109
- ▷ Franco, Ch. 7

Due: Problem Set 4

Phase 5 — Application and Synthesis

Week 11 | 29 Oct

Workshop I — Data and Evidence Gathering

- ▷ Purpose: Downloading, managing, summarizing, and visualizing data

Due: Stage 3 — Research Design; Problem Set 5

Week 12 | 5 Nov

Workshop II — Drafting and Integrating Findings

- ▷ Purpose: Building out preliminary results

Week 13 | 12 Nov

Workshop III — Peer Review and Revision

Due: Stage 4 — Preliminary Results (due *before* class)

Week 14 | 19 Nov

Final Exam

Week 15 | 26 Nov

Fall Break — No Class

Week 16 | 3 Dec

Project Presentations

Week 17 | 10 Dec

Final Product Due

Due: Stage 5 — Final Paper