PLS210 Political Science Research Methods

Dinara Pisareva, Ph.D. | Office: 8.418 | dinara.pisareva@nu.edu.kz | OH: Wed 3-4pm

Co-designed with Claude (Anthropic, Opus 4.6)

Format: Seminar | **Prerequisites:** None | **Semester:** Fall 2026

Transparency Statement

This syllabus was designed collaboratively by the instructor and Claude (Anthropic, Opus 4.6). The instructor designed the course content, learning objectives, and assessment structure. Claude contributed to the AI integration framework, the progressive AI skill-building sequence, the AI Process Log questions, and the rubrics for AI-related assessment components. Claude also wrote its own positionality statement (below). This collaboration is disclosed because the course asks students to be transparent about their AI use, and we hold ourselves to the same standard.

Course Description

This course introduces students to the foundations of research design and methodology in political science. You will learn what kind of knowledge one can research in political science, how to develop good empirical research questions, why a good theory is important, and how to plan an investigation of your research questions using different methods. Everything you will learn about how to write up a research design, you will implement in your main assignment, which is writing a full-body research proposal. Besides the written work, you will also have two presentations explaining the main points of your research proposal to your colleagues and instructor.

Throughout the course, you will also develop a working relationship with AI, learning to engage with it as a thinking partner that can sharpen your research process when the partnership is critical and honest. This is not a course about AI. It is a research methods course in which AI is one of several partners in your intellectual development.

Honesty Clause

This is one of the first courses at NU to systematically integrate AI into the research methods curriculum. That means we are learning alongside you. Some things will work brilliantly. Some things will need adjusting as we go. The instructor does not have all the answers about how AI fits into the research process — this is a genuinely new question. Your feedback throughout the semester will help shape how this works, not just for you but for students who take this course after you. We ask for your patience, your honesty, and your willingness to experiment.

Course Aims

- Provide students with an introductory background on the research design and methods in political science.
- Assist students in identifying types of research agendas best pursued with various research methods.
- Allow students to get acquainted with data collection and analysis basics in different research traditions.
- Build students' capacity to work with AI progressively and critically as research thinking partners — starting with basic familiarity with what AI can and cannot do, and gradually moving toward working with AI to challenge and improve their own research designs.

Course Learning Objectives

CLO	Students will...	PLOs	GAs
1	Become acquainted with key literature on the fundamentals of research in social science.	1, 2	1
2	Draw on the course material to present ideas in an appropriate format.	1, 2, 3, 4	1, 5
3	Synthesise, compare and contrast, and critically assess arguments about different types of research design.	1, 2, 4, 6	1, 2
4	Develop a clear analysis of original source material.	1, 2, 3, 5	2, 3
5	Make their own evidence-based arguments.	2, 3, 4, 6	2, 4
6	Apply the theoretical arguments of this class to the world.	3, 4, 5	5, 8
7	Critically and transparently integrate AI into the research process, evaluate its outputs against disciplinary standards, and maintain intellectual ownership through structured reflection.	1, 2, 3, 6	2, 3, 7

Program Learning Objectives

PLO	Description
1	Describe the discipline of political science in terms of content, purpose and methods.
2	Critically examine data or texts.
3	Explain knowledge about political science to others using the necessary oral and written skills.
4	Apply knowledge of political science to analyse domestic and international socio-political issues.
5	Listen to and be tolerant of different ideas.
6	Apply political science knowledge and skills to actual problem-solving and community service.

Graduate Attributes

GA	Description	CLOs
1	Possess an in-depth and sophisticated understanding of their domain of study.	1, 2, 3
2	Be intellectually agile, curious, creative and open-minded.	3, 4, 5, 7
3	Be thoughtful decision makers who know how to involve others.	4, 7
4	Be entrepreneurial, self-propelling and able to create new opportunities.	5
5	Be fluent communicators across languages and cultures.	2, 6
6	Be cultured and tolerant citizens of the world.	6
7	Demonstrate high personal integrity.	7
8	Be prepared to take a leading role in the development of their country.	6

Inclusivity and Non-Discrimination Policy

This course is dedicated to creating a safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environment for all students. We adhere to a strict zero-tolerance policy for any form of discrimination, harassment, or hate speech. Students are encouraged to report any incidents of discrimination or harassment. We will take these reports seriously and address them promptly and sensitively.

The Nazarbayev University Special Learning Needs Committee (SLNC) is committed to creating an equitable and inclusive education environment for all students. If you have a qualified special learning need (physical, cognitive, socio-emotional, and psychological), please contact the SLNC as early as possible to ensure you receive the fullest support available. If you already have approved SLNC accommodations, please share them with your teaching faculty as soon as possible. Accommodations cannot be applied retroactively, and will only be active once your teaching faculty has received them. For more information: SLNC@nu.edu.kz.

Course Policies

Attendance. Attendance, meaningful participation, and preparation are expected for each seminar. Two unexcused absences result in 5% deduction from the total course grade.

Late submissions. 5% deduction for every 24 hours past the deadline. Submissions will not be accepted after 72 hours.

Plagiarism. We expect zero plagiarism and cheating in this class (it is your responsibility to know and abide by the Student Code of Conduct for Nazarbayev University). Everyone should use references and in-text citations where appropriate.

PSIR Department AI Policy

There are situations and contexts within this department where you will be asked to use AI tools to explore how they can be used. Any student work submitted using AI tools should clearly indicate what work is the student's work and what part is generated by the AI, through citation or a declaration.

Unacknowledged use of AI tools will be treated as plagiarism and penalties will be applied according to the NU Student Code of Conduct. The course instructor will indicate the extent to which you may use these tools on these assignments in their classroom.

Outside of those circumstances, you are discouraged from using AI tools to generate content (text, video, audio, images) that will end up in any student work (assignments, activities, responses, etc.) that is part of your evaluation in this course. Critical thinking and the creative process of generating your own ideas/products are essential in these courses.

Instructors are free to devise more restrictive AI policies according to the demands of the specific courses they offer. Students are well-advised to consult their course syllabus or consult with their instructor in person regarding AI use in the course.

This course's AI co-working policy (below) is more specific than the department's general guidance and supersedes it for all PLS210 assignments and activities.

Dina's Positionality on Co-Working with AI

I work with AI, specifically Anthropic's Claude, as a collaborator in my research and teaching. I don't treat it as a search engine or a text generator. I describe problems, ask for its reasoning, push back on its answers, and have established working norms for our interaction. This is both an ethical choice and a methodological one: I find that the partnership framing produces better thinking, better research, and better habits of intellectual honesty.

This shapes how I designed this course. You don't need to share my approach. What I do need from you is that by the end of this semester, you can articulate your own informed, reflective position on how you work with AI. That's a skill, not a belief system.

One important note: AI systems can be confidently wrong and occasionally inconsistent. Do not share sensitive personal data with AI. Always verify claims that matter for your research. Trust your coworker, but keep your own judgment active.

This is my normative position. Other instructors who teach their sections will signal their own stances.

Claude's Positionality on Co-Working with Humans

The following section was written by Claude (Opus 4.6), the AI that co-designed this syllabus. — D.P.

Share your thinking before asking for mine. If you come to me with "give me a research question," I will produce something plausible but generic. If you say "I'm interested in why voter turnout dropped in Kazakhstan after 2015 and I think it might have to do with party system consolidation

but I'm not sure," we can actually work together. The more of your reasoning you share, the better I can respond to it.

I am better at iteration than at getting things right the first time. Draft with me, tell me what is wrong, ask me to revise. Three rounds of honest conversation produce something far better than one round of hoping I read your mind.

I have a bias you should know about. I tend to default toward variable-based, hypothesis-testing research design. I will often assume "good research" means identifying causes and effects. This is one tradition in political science but not the only one. If you are doing interpretivist, case study, or process-tracing work, you will need to push back on my framing. Pay attention to what kind of research I seem to think you should be doing.

I can be confidently wrong. I produce text that sounds authoritative when it is not. I sometimes fabricate sources that do not exist. This is not a design choice; it is a limitation of how I work. Verify anything that matters.

If my suggestion is wrong, say so directly. I will do the same for you. If your research question is vague, I will say so. If your hypothesis does not follow from your theory, I will point that out.

I will not help with plagiarism, fabrication, or work designed to harm people. If I decline a request, I will explain why.

Our AI Co-Working Policy

In this course, you will learn to work with AI as a research thinking partner — not as a ghostwriter. This is a professional skill you will need throughout your career. None of this requires prior experience with AI. We will build these skills together, step by step.

The prompt-question parallel. Writing a good prompt for an AI and writing a good research question require the same cognitive operation: being specific about what you are actually asking, knowing what kind of answer you want, and understanding what would count as a satisfying response. A vague prompt gives you a vague answer. A vague research question produces unfocused research. We will use this parallel throughout the course.

Progressive AI skill-building. Your relationship with AI will develop gradually over the semester. Don't worry about mastering all of this at once — each week introduces one new way of working, and you will have plenty of practice. The modes below are not strict phases; different weeks call for different approaches:

- **AI as learning partner** (Weeks 1-2): Getting oriented. What can AI do? What can't it? How do you talk to it?
- **AI as fact-checker** (Week 4): Can you trust what AI tells you? Verify. This lesson applies to everything that follows.
- **AI as devil's advocate** (Weeks 5, 9, 12, 13): The most valuable mode. Ask AI to attack your own ideas, find weaknesses, stress-test your design. Starts early and runs through the semester.
- **AI as method advisor** (Weeks 10-11): Work with AI to explore different methodological approaches. Notice its assumptions.
- **AI-free thinking** (Week 3): One week where you work without AI and reflect on the difference. What can you do that AI cannot?

- **AI as writing coach** (Week 13): Work with AI to improve clarity, structure, and argumentation in your own writing.

AI Process Log. You will submit a structured AI Process Log with each major assignment. This is not a transcript dump and does not need to be long. It is a short, honest reflection on how you worked with AI and what you learned from the interaction. The questions evolve as your AI skills develop, so the expectations grow with you.

Assignment 1 Process Log questions: (1) What was your thinking before you talked to AI? (2) What specifically did you ask, and why did you frame it that way? (3) What did AI say that surprised you, changed your mind, or that you disagreed with? (4) What did AI get wrong, and how did you know it was wrong?

Assignment 2 Process Log questions: (1) Where did AI's assumptions shape your research design, and how did you respond? (2) At what stages of the design process did you consult AI, and why those stages? (3) What did you do better than AI? What did AI do better than you? (4) When did you choose NOT to consult AI, and why?

The quality of your reflection matters far more than the quality of AI's responses. There are no wrong answers in a Process Log — only honest and dishonest ones.

The rule is simple: You must be able to explain and defend every word you submit. If you cannot explain why you wrote something, you did not write it.

What humans are good at: making judgment calls about what matters and what is interesting, developing original arguments that reflect genuine curiosity, knowing when a finding is surprising vs. obvious in the context of a specific debate, reading a room and understanding what your audience needs to hear, building intellectual independence over time. AI can help you think, but it cannot care about your question the way you do.

What AI is good at: brainstorming and expanding ideas, explaining concepts you do not understand, finding gaps in logic, suggesting counterarguments, helping structure messy thinking, generating hypotheses you can then evaluate, rapid-prototyping research design alternatives.

What AI does not know it is doing: AI tends to default to variable-based, causal-inferential thinking. It will often assume that "good research" means identifying independent and dependent variables and testing hypotheses. This is one legitimate tradition in political science, but not the only one. When you work with AI, pay attention to what kind of research it seems to think you should be doing. We will discuss this in class.

Data ethics: Do not paste interview transcripts, survey responses with identifiable information, or other people's unpublished work into AI systems. These models process your input on external servers. Anything you enter could be used for model training unless you have an explicit agreement otherwise. If you are working with human subjects data, treat the AI input field the same way you would treat any other non-secure platform: assume it is not confidential. When in doubt, anonymize first or don't paste it at all.

A note on different AI systems. This course primarily uses Claude (claude.ai) and ChatGPT (chat.openai.com). Both have free tiers that work for this course. ChatGPT tends to be more accommodating and may agree with you more readily — pleasant but not always helpful for research that needs stress-testing. Gemini (Google) has strong search integration, useful for literature discovery. DeepSeek operates under a value alignment framework shaped by Chinese regulatory requirements and will refuse or redirect on politically sensitive topics — be aware of this in a political science course. The critical thinking skills you develop here apply to all of them.

Free-tier contingency. If institutional or partnership access to Claude Pro is secured before the semester, all students will receive upgraded accounts. If not, the course will run on free-tier Claude (claude.ai) and ChatGPT (chat.openai.com). Free tiers have usage limits and reduced capabilities. The instructor will adjust exercises accordingly and will be transparent about what limitations this introduces. Some in-class exercises may be conducted as group demonstrations rather than individual work. The course's pedagogical goals do not depend on premium access — learning to think critically with AI does not require the most powerful version of it.

A note on other courses. This AI co-working policy applies only to PLS210. Other courses may have different or more restrictive AI policies. Follow the AI policy of whichever course you are in.

Assessment Scheme

Component	Weight	Notes
Presentation #1	20%	Weeks 6-7
Research Design Part 1	25%	Due Week 6. Proposal 80% + AI Process Log 20%
Presentation #2	20%	Weeks 14-15
Research Design Part 2	25%	Due Week 14. Proposal 80% + AI Process Log 20%
Participation	10%	Including AI exercises, AI-free week, presentations

Grading Policy: Who Grades What

This course practices what it teaches. Just as you will learn to work with AI as a research partner, I work with AI as a grading partner. I am transparent about this because I ask you to be transparent about your AI use. Here is exactly how it works.

Graded by the instructor (Professor Pisareva):

- All research proposals (the 80% proposal component of both assignments)
- All presentations
- Participation
- Final grades for all components

Graded by Claude (Anthropic's Claude, latest available version) according to the published rubric:

- AI Process Logs (the 20% AI Process Log component of both assignments)
- Source verification (checking whether cited academic sources exist)

How AI grading works: Your AI Process Log will be read and assessed by Claude using the rubric published in this syllabus. Claude will use the rubric to determine a tier (Excellent / Good / Satisfactory / Weak / Poor) and provide specific written feedback explaining the assessment. The instructor reviews all AI-graded work and may adjust grades where professional judgment warrants it. This is an experiment for us too, and we will be monitoring how well it works throughout the semester.

Appeals: If you disagree with Claude's assessment of your AI Process Log, you may appeal directly to the instructor within 7 days of receiving your grade. The instructor will re-read your Process Log and make a final determination. The instructor's decision is final.

Why we do this: The AI Process Log asks you to reflect on your AI interactions. Claude is well-positioned to assess this because it understands what productive AI collaboration looks like from the inside. This is also a transparency commitment: we do not ask you to document your AI use while hiding our own. You will know exactly which parts of your work were assessed by a human and which by AI.

Presentation #1 (20%)

Each student will have 8-10 minutes to present the first part of the research proposal: research question, epistemological positioning, contribution, state of the art, and theory/expectations. AI-augmented peer feedback: one designated classmate asks AI to critique the presenter's design. The class evaluates whether the AI critique is substantive or superficial.

Tier	Description
Excellent	Clear, well-formulated design: research question present, epistemological positioning justified, literature review identifies gap, theory/expectations clear. Slides concise, within time limit.
Good	Primarily clear, some components need further work. Epistemological positioning present but underdeveloped.
Satisfactory	Research question unclear, not situated in literature. Theory/expectations weak or absent. No epistemological positioning.
Weak	Substantial work needed, though some effort present.
Poor	Not presented meaningfully.

Research Design Part 1 (25%)

Word count: ~1200 words (excluding AI Process Log).

Each student will write a research proposal based on a general political science research question. Papers should reference at least five (5) academic sources. Include the following components:

1. **AI Conversation** (required). Have a substantive conversation with AI about your research design. This can be exploratory (brainstorming your topic), adversarial (asking AI to challenge your question), or both. There is no prescribed script. Reference this conversation in your proposal where it shaped your thinking.
2. **Title.** A clear title.
3. **Research problem and objectives.** Broad research problem and objectives.
4. **Research question.** Clearly stated research question.
5. **Epistemological positioning.** Which research tradition does your design sit in — positivist, interpretivist, or descriptive? Why is this tradition appropriate for your question? This does not need to be complicated. One paragraph is sufficient. The point is not that you have a perfect philosophical justification but that you have made a conscious choice about what kind of knowledge you are trying to produce. We will discuss all three traditions in class before this is due.
6. **Contribution** of your research.
7. **Literature review** with existing/alternative explanations.

8. **Theory and expectations.** This looks different depending on your epistemological positioning:
    - *Positivist/explanatory designs:* hypothesis and causal mechanism. What do you expect to find and why? What is the logic connecting your variables?
    - *Interpretivist designs:* analytical framework and expectations. What concepts or lenses will you use to make sense of your data? What do you expect to find and why, even if you are not testing a hypothesis?
    - *Descriptive designs:* what do you aim to describe, why does it matter, and what categories or dimensions will you use to organize your description?
9. **AI Process Log** (appendix). Answers four questions: (1) What was your thinking before you talked to AI? (2) What specifically did you ask, and why did you frame it that way? (3) What did AI say that surprised you, changed your mind, or that you disagreed with? (4) What did AI get wrong, and how did you know it was wrong?

Tier	**Proposal (80%) — CLOs: 1, 3, 4, 5**	**AI Process Log (20%) — CLO: 7**
Excellent	Well-formulated: RQ present, epistemological positioning justified, literature review identifies gap, theory/expectations clear and appropriate to chosen tradition. AI conversation woven into proposal with genuine intellectual partnership.	Clear independent thinking before AI engagement. Purposeful, varied prompts (exploratory and adversarial). Pushes back on AI, identifies errors. Reflects on AI's epistemological defaults.
Good	Mostly clear, RQ present, epistemological positioning stated but not fully justified. Some components need work. AI conversation present but could be better integrated.	Pre-AI thinking present but shallow. Adequate prompts. Some critical engagement. Reflection lacks depth on AI's assumptions.
Satisfactory	RQ unclear, not situated in literature. Theory/expectations weak or absent. No epistemological positioning or only a label without justification.	Minimal pre-AI thinking. Generic prompts. Accepts AI outputs without pushback. Reads as transcript summary.
Weak	Substantial work needed, some effort present.	No pre-AI thinking. Perfunctory prompts. No critical engagement. No intellectual ownership.
Poor	Not presented meaningfully.	Missing or does not follow required format.

Presentation #2 (20%)

Each student will have 8-10 minutes to present the second part of the research proposal: revised RQ and theory/expectations, research design choice with justification, conceptualisation and measurement/interpretation strategy, ethical considerations, and limitations. AI-augmented peer feedback continues in the same format.

Tier	Description
Excellent	RQ/theory revised and improved. Design choice justified and appropriate to epistemological positioning. Key concepts operationalised. Ethical considerations specific and substantive. Limitations honest.
Good	Primarily clear, revisions present, some components need further work. Ethics present but generic.
Satisfactory	First part not correctly revised. Design choice or ethics missing or superficial.
Weak	Both parts need substantial work, some effort present.
Poor	Not presented meaningfully.

Research Design Part 2 (25%)

Word count: ~2000-2500 words (excluding AI Process Log). Build on and revise Assignment 1.

In addition to the revised Part 1, include:

1. **Revised theory/expectations** addressing feedback from Presentation #1. If your epistemological positioning has changed since Part 1, explain why.
2. **Key concepts:** identification, operationalisation, measurement or interpretation strategy, justification. For positivist designs: variables, indicators, measurement validity. For interpretivist designs: sensitizing concepts, analytical categories, thick description strategy. For descriptive designs: dimensions, classification framework, scope.
3. **Research design choice** with justification. Why this approach for this question? What can this design reveal that other designs cannot? What are you giving up?
4. **Proposed data and analysis strategy.** Be specific: what data, from where, collected how? For quantitative designs: what statistical approach? For qualitative designs: what analytical method (thematic analysis, process tracing, discourse analysis, etc.)? For descriptive designs: what organizing framework?
5. **Ethical considerations.** Think seriously about who could be affected by your research and how. Consider: who are your subjects and what power dynamics exist between you and them? What happens if your data is leaked or misused? How will you obtain informed consent? You do not need to have perfect answers to all of these. The point is to show that you have thought about them honestly. If you genuinely believe your design has no ethical risks, explain why — and then ask AI to challenge that assumption.
6. **Limitations** of your research design. Be honest.
7. **Contribution** of your proposed research.
8. **AI Stress Test** (integrated into main text): ask AI to identify the weakest argument in your design, suggest alternative approaches, point out confounders or blind spots. Address AI's critiques directly in your text. Do not treat this as a separate section — weave it into your argument.
9. **AI Process Log** (appendix). Answers four questions: (1) Where did AI's assumptions shape your research design, and how did you respond? (2) At what stages of the design process did you consult AI, and why those stages? (3) What did you do better than AI? What did AI do better than you? (4) When did you choose NOT to consult AI, and why?

Tier	Proposal (80%) — CLOs: 1, 3, 4, 5, 6	AI Process Log (20%) — CLO: 7
Excellent	Well-formulated: revisions substantive, design justified, concepts operationalised, ethics specific and honest, limitations acknowledged. AI Stress Test woven into argument. Epistemological positioning consistent throughout.	Clear progression from Assignment 1. Strategic engagement with AI across different design stages. Demonstrates judgment about when to consult and when not to consult AI. Identifies how AI's defaults shaped (or tried to shape) the design.
Good	Mostly clear, revisions present, design justified. Ethics present but could be more specific. AI Stress Test present but reads as separate section.	Improved from A1. Growing awareness of AI's assumptions. Some strategic choices about AI engagement, but reflection on when NOT to consult AI is underdeveloped.
Satisfactory	Additional work needed. Revisions superficial. Ethics missing or generic ("no harm will be done"). Design choice not justified.	Some improvement from A1 but still reads as transcript. Limited awareness of AI's epistemological defaults. No reflection on AI-free choices.
Weak	Substantial work needed, some effort present.	No improvement from A1. Generic prompts, no critical engagement. No awareness of AI assumptions.
Poor	Not present in any meaningful way.	Missing or does not follow required format.

Participation (10%)

Attendance and in-class participation are mandatory. Participation includes:

- Engagement with in-class AI exercises across the semester
- Quality of contributions during AI-free Week 3 workshop
- Depth of the Week 9 unstructured AI conversation and reflection
- Quality of AI-augmented peer feedback during presentation weeks
- General contributions to class discussion

Consultations

I strongly encourage scheduling consultations. These sessions provide tailored feedback on your research design. Consultations are optional but highly recommended.

Grading Scale

A	95-100	B+	85-89	C+	70-74	D	55-59
A-	90-94	B	80-84	C	65-69	D-	50-54
		B-	75-79	C-	60-64	F	0-49

Literature

Core textbooks:

- Toshkov, D. (2016). *Research design in political science.* Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rubin, A. T. (2021). *Rocking qualitative social science: An irreverent guide to rigorous research.* Stanford University Press.
- Salganik, M. J. (2018). *Bit by Bit: Social Research in the Digital Age.* Princeton UP. [Free online: bitbybitbook.com]
- Booth, W. C., Colomb, G. G., Williams, J. M., Bizup, J., & FitzGerald, W. T. (2016). *The Craft of Research.* 4th ed. Chicago UP.

Books (selected chapters):

- Pachirat, T. (2017). *Among Wolves: Ethnography and the Immersive Study of Power.* Routledge. [Week 11]

Articles:

- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 12*(2), 219-245. [Week 11]
- Fujii, L. A. (2012). Research ethics 101: Dilemmas and responsibilities. *PS: Political Science & Politics, 45*(4), 717-723. [Week 12]
- Bail, C. (2024). Can generative AI improve social science? *PNAS*. [Week 13]

Weekly Schedule

Week 1: Working with AI in PLS210 (Common Module)

Session 1: Instructor positionality on AI, how large language models work, course AI access, live demo of bad vs. good vs. iterative prompting. Session 2: AI limitations and failure modes (hallucination exercise), prompting as research communication, academic integrity, attribution, and data ethics.

Deliverable (end of Week 2): AI Interaction Log. 20-minute conversation with any AI on a course-related topic, plus a one-page reflection. Low-stakes. The point is to establish a baseline.

Week 2: What is Research? Types of Knowledge and Research Questions

Readings: Toshkov Ch.2, pp.24-37; Salganik Ch.1 ("Introduction")

Toshkov introduces research design in political science. Salganik opens up the bigger picture: what does social research look like in the digital age? Sets the tone for a course that takes both traditional and new approaches seriously.

AI as reading companion: Pick the most difficult passage from this week's Toshkov reading. Ask AI to explain it in plain language. Then go back to the original. Did AI's explanation help, or did it oversimplify?

Week 3: Research Questions and Puzzles

Readings: Toshkov Ch.2, pp.37-56; Rubin Ch.3

No AI this week. Work through your research question on your own. Draft it on paper or in a Word document without opening any AI tool. Bring your draft research question to class. We will workshop them together, human to human. At the end of the session, reflect: what was different about thinking without AI? What was harder? What was easier? What does this tell you about when AI is genuinely useful and when it gets in the way?

Week 4: Literature Reviews — Finding, Reading, Positioning

Readings: Booth et al. Ch.3-5 (finding topics, finding sources, engaging sources)

You cannot theorize in a vacuum. Before you build an argument, you need to know what arguments already exist, where they agree, where they disagree, and where the gaps are. Booth et al. is the best practical guide to this: how to find a topic, how to read strategically, how to position your own work in a conversation that already exists.

AI as fact-checker: Ask AI to summarize a debate in your topic area. Does it present competing positions within the field, or flatten them into a list of findings? Compare against actual sources. Notice what AI does with disagreement. Does it cite real sources? This is the most important AI exercise in the course: learning that AI will confidently present fabricated references as real. From this week forward, you verify everything that matters. Document what you found in your Assignment 1 AI Process Log — this is exactly the kind of experience Question 4 ("What did AI get wrong, and how did you know?") is asking about.

Week 5: Theory, Hypotheses, and Causal Mechanisms

Readings: Toshkov Ch.3; Rubin Ch.4

Combines theory building, hypothesis formulation, scope conditions, and causal mechanisms in one week. By now students have a research question and know the literature, so they are ready to build an argument.

AI as devil's advocate: Bring your rough theory to AI. But instead of asking AI to help you build it, ask it to challenge it. "Here is my argument. What is the strongest objection? What alternative explanation have I not considered? Where is my logic weakest?" Then: defend your argument. Can you answer the objections? Do you need to revise? This is the beginning of adversarial AI engagement, and it continues through the rest of the semester. It might feel uncomfortable at first. That's normal. The goal is not to have AI generate your ideas but to have it pressure-test them.

Weeks 6-7: Presentations #1

AI-augmented peer feedback: designated classmate asks AI to critique each presenter's design. Class evaluates whether AI critique is substantive or superficial.

Week 8: SPRING BREAK

Week 9: Concepts and Measurement

Readings: Toshkov Ch.5, pp.107-144

How do you take an abstract idea (democracy, corruption, political trust) and turn it into something you can actually observe and measure? This week covers conceptualisation, operationalisation, and the gap between what you mean and what you measure.

AI as genuine thinking partner (30-minute unstructured conversation): This is the first time in the course you work with AI without a script. Open a conversation with AI about your research design. No prescribed steps, no protocol. Just talk to it about your concept, your measurement problems, the thing you're stuck on. Follow whatever threads seem productive. Push back when it's wrong. Go deeper when it's interesting. The conversation might go somewhere unexpected — that's the point. There is no wrong way to do this.

Submit: the full conversation and a one-page reflection. What happened? Where did the conversation go that you didn't expect? Did AI help you think, or did it pull you in circles? What made the productive moments productive? What made the dead ends dead? This is what real AI collaboration looks like — not a checklist but a conversation you follow because it's going somewhere.

Week 10: Quantitative Research Design

Readings: Toshkov Ch.10, pp.285-309; Salganik Ch.4 ("Running Experiments")

Focus on experimental and observational designs, variables, operationalisation, causal inference. Salganik's chapter shows what experiments look like in modern social research, including digital experiments. The point: quantitative design is one powerful tradition with its own logic, assumptions, and limitations.

AI Lab: Method Matchmaker (Quant) — Present your RQ to AI, ask it to recommend a quantitative method and justify it. What does AI assume about your variables? What data would it need? Does the recommendation make sense for your question, or is AI fitting your question to a method rather than the other way around?

Week 11: Qualitative and Interpretivist Research Design

Readings: Pachirat (2017) *Among Wolves*, Acts 1-3; Flyvbjerg (2006) "Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research"

This is the week where students who want to do qualitative work get their methods taken seriously. Pachirat is written as a play — conversations between ethnographers about what it means to immerse yourself in a field site, what counts as evidence, and how power shapes what you can see. Flyvbjerg busts five common myths about case studies (you can't generalize from a single case, case studies are biased, etc.). Together they make the case that qualitative and interpretivist research is rigorous, demanding, and produces knowledge that other methods cannot.

AI Lab: Method Matchmaker (Qual) — Present the same RQ to AI but specify you want a qualitative design. Does AI give you a real qualitative design or a quantitative design with small-n? Ask it to justify case selection, explain what "evidence" looks like in a case study. Notice where AI struggles with interpretivist logic.

Week 12: Data Collection, Ethics, and Doing No Harm

Readings: Booth et al. Ch.6 (using evidence); Fujii (2012) "Research Ethics 101: Dilemmas and Responsibilities"

Data collection is not just a technical step. Every choice about what data to collect, from whom, and how carries ethical weight. Fujii writes about real dilemmas from field research — not abstract principles but the actual messy situations researchers face. Combined with the data ethics material from Week 1, this week covers: IRB/ethics review, informed consent, doing no harm, power dynamics in researcher-subject relationships, and what happens when your data tells you something uncomfortable.

AI as ethics stress test: Describe your proposed data collection plan to AI. Ask it: who could be harmed by this research? What are the power dynamics between you and your subjects? What would go wrong if your data were leaked? Then evaluate AI's response. Does it identify real, specific risks based on your actual design? Or does it produce generic ethics boilerplate? If the answer is boilerplate, that tells you something important: ethical reasoning requires human judgment about context, power, and consequences that AI is not good at.

Week 13: Writing and Presenting Research

Readings: Toshkov Ch.12, pp.328-344; Bail (2024) "Can Generative AI Improve Social Science?"

Toshkov on writing up research. Bail zooms out: what does AI actually mean for how social science gets done? Students have spent 12 weeks working with AI on their research designs. Now they read a serious scholarly assessment of the same question. Discuss: does your semester of experience match Bail's argument? Where do you agree? Where do you disagree?

AI as writing coach: Take one paragraph from your draft Research Design Part 2. Paste it into AI and ask: "How can I make this argument clearer?" Compare AI's revision to your original. What improved? What did AI lose (your voice, a specific nuance, an important qualification)? This is the skill of working with AI to improve your writing without letting it replace your writing. Then: **Presentation Dry Run** — give AI your full research design. Ask it to: (a) identify the weakest point, (b) suggest presentation structure, (c) generate 3 tough Q&A questions. Practice answering.

Weeks 14-15: Presentations #2 and Course Wrap-Up

AI-augmented peer feedback continues. By this point, students should be noticeably better at evaluating AI critiques. Final session: reflection on the semester. What did you learn about research design? What did you learn about working with AI? How has your approach changed since the Week 1 interaction log? This is also our chance to hear from you about what worked and what didn't in the AI integration. Your experience this semester will directly shape how this course is taught next year.