POLISCI 157 – Politics of AI

Course Information

Summer Quarter 2026
4 Units
Monday-Wednesday (time TBD)
Location: TBD

Course Instructor

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Meeting hours: Sign-up only (email me if none of the posted times work)

Course Overview

Artificial intelligence is not new. What is new is the speed with which generative AI is moving from laboratory and novelty to ordinary practice: in offices and classrooms, in media and elections, in firms and bureaucracies, and in the everyday production of knowledge. Like earlier general-purpose technologies, it carries promises of productivity and growth, as well as risks of disruption and capture. In some settings, it may broaden access and lower costs. In others, it may concentrate power, deepen inequality, or erode trust in institutions. Either way, GenAI is quickly and inevitably becoming a political object: fought over as it gets regulated, contested as it gets deployed.

This course surveys the emerging politics of AI, combining classic frameworks on technological change and political economy with contemporary empirical trends. To match the complex and fast-paced moment we are living through, we will cast a wide net, drawing insights from across political science. We will study how GenAI reshapes labor markets and distributional conflict; public opinion and the information environment; firm power, lobbying, and market structures; political communication and elections; public-sector adoption and governance; geopolitics and the political economy of compute; environmental politics; and the ethical and regulatory debates that follow. Throughout, we will return to two linked questions: through what mechanisms do transformative technologies redistribute resources, authority, and legitimacy, and what is distinctive about GenAI, relative to prior digital technologies, in its concentration of capabilities and its effects on knowledge production and persuasion.

Course Timeline

Week	Session	Topic
Week 1	Session 1.A	Politics of revolutionary technological change
	Session 1.B	GenAI 101; market structure and diffusion; project idea workshop
Week 2	Session 2.A	Demand side I: labor markets, productivity, automation
	Session 2.B	Demand side II: public opinion, beliefs, and the information environment
Week 3	Session 3.A	Demand side III: firms, platforms, and lobbying
	Session 3.B	Demand side IV: civil society, creators, and knowledge institutions
Week 4	Session 4.A	Supply side I: politicians, campaigns, and elections
	Session 4.B	Supply side II: public institutions and public service delivery
Week 5	Session 5.A	Supply side III: Regulation, standards, and governance capacity
	Session 5.B	Research design studio (in-class design pitches + peer review)
Week 6	Session 6.A	Geopolitics I: US-China competition; compute and chokepoints
	Session 6.B	Geopolitics II: developing countries; data sovereignty; policy diffusion
Week 7	Session 7.A	Environmental politics I: energy and water; grids and disclosure
	Session 7.B	Environmental politics II: data centers siting; local politics; robustness
Week 8	Session 8.A	Ethics and governance; course synthesis
	Session 8.B	Final class research conference (student panels)

Course Learning Goals

1) Articulate the politics of technological change, using core political economy frameworks to analyze how technologies affect power and resources distribution.

2) Isolate the specific and unique impact of GenAI on politics, distinguishing GenAI mechanisms from broader digital or automation trends.

3) Identify emerging empirical trends in the politics of GenAI and assess the quality and limits of available evidence.

Course Requirements

No formal prerequisites are required. Curiosity about politics and technology is essential. Some comfort with basic data analysis (or willingness to learn) will be useful, but students may pursue projects with either quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method empirical components, provided the evidence strategy is concrete and defensible.

Student Expectations

Weekly Preparation (due before class)
Each week, there will be material to review in preparation for class. This may include academic papers, news articles, reports, podcasts, or blog posts. All materials indicated with an asterisk * on Canvas should be considered mandatory.

Class Participation
Much of class time will be devoted to seminar-style discussion and short workshops. Students are expected to engage actively, bring questions from the readings, and provide constructive feedback on peers' project designs and presentations.

Bi-weekly Homework
Each week, students will complete a homework assignment tied to their project. Four assignments are major project components (graded); the remaining weekly tasks are low-stakes check-ins that support steady progress.

Project-Based Assessments

Students will select a specific effect of GenAI on politics and build a research project around it. Projects must include both a theoretical component (mechanisms grounded in literature; hypotheses) and an empirical component (data sources, measurement, methods, and a defensible analysis).

The project has four major components:
- Research proposal (question, motivation, feasibility)

- Theoretical design (theory, literature review, hypotheses)
- Empirical design (data sources, measurement, methods, analysis plan)
- Final paper (integrated argument + evidence + discussion)

Two in-class milestones replace the traditional midterm and final exams: (i) a research design studio (Week 5.B) and (ii) a final class research conference (Week 8.B), where students present their work in themed panels.

Grading

Category	Weight
Participation	15%
Research Proposal	10%
Theoretical Design	20%
Empirical Design	20%
Final Paper	25%
Final Class Research Conference Presentation	10%

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

Research Design Studio Pitch (Week 5.B):
Students will deliver a short research design pitch and receive structured feedback from peers and the instructor.

When:
Wednesday, July 22 (in class).

Content:
- Research question and motivation
- Theory mechanism and hypotheses
- Empirical plan (data, measurement, methods)
- Key risks (feasibility, bias, validity) and mitigation

Length:
5-7 minutes with Q&A; 1-2 slides.

Final Class Research Conference Presentation (Week 8.B):
Students will present their final projects in themed panels. Panels will be organized by topic area (e.g., labor, public opinion, geopolitics, public-sector adoption, environment). Each panel will aim to produce a coordinated agenda, including shared definitions, comparable outcomes, or a lightweight meta-analysis across projects.

When:
Wednesday, August 12 (in class).

Length:
8-10 minutes with Q&A; 3-5 slides. A short panel summary slide may be required depending on panel size.

Research Project Guidelines

Each student will write a focused research paper on the politics of GenAI. The paper should identify a clear political outcome (or set of outcomes), specify a theoretical mechanism linking GenAI to that outcome, and develop an empirical strategy to assess the claim. Empirical work can be quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method, but must include a concrete plan for evidence and transparent limitations.

Students may work individually or in groups of up to three. For group projects, expectations for the final product should scale with group size (length and complexity), and groups must submit a brief statement of roles and division of labor.

Expectations and Formatting
- Final paper: minimum 10 pages / 2500-3500 words (excluding bibliography, title page, and figures)
- Times New Roman, 12pt; double-spaced
- Any citation style is acceptable (APA, Chicago, etc.) as long as it is consistent

Empirical Component Options (examples)
- Public opinion: survey analysis, experiments, or survey experiment design with pre-analysis plan
- Political communication: content analysis of speeches, ads, social media, or synthetic media incidents
- Firm influence: lobbying disclosures, comment letters, coalition mapping, procurement or contracting
- Public-sector adoption: case study + administrative data; policy and procurement tracking; interviews (if feasible)
- Geopolitics: policy documents, export controls, alliances/standards, and cross-national strategy comparison
- Environment: energy/water/data-center politics using public datasets and local policy records

Project Components and Deadlines

Component	Due Date	Expectations	Min. Requirements
Research Proposal	Sun, Jun 28 (11:59 p.m.)	Motivate the project; define the outcome and GenAI mechanism; explain feasibility.	500-700 words; 3-5 sources
Theoretical Design	Sun, Jul 5 (11:59 p.m.)	Literature review; theory; hypotheses; scope conditions and alternative	800-1200 words; 8+ citations

		explanations.	
Empirical Design	Sun, Jul 12 (11:59 p.m.)	Data sources and measurement; identification logic; methods; risks to validity; analysis plan.	800-1200 words; 1 table/figure
Final Paper	Fri, Aug 14 (5:00 p.m.)	Integrate theory and evidence; present analysis; discuss limitations; implications and extensions.	10+ pages; figures/tables; bibliography

Note: The research design studio on July 22 is a structured in-class checkpoint. Students should arrive with a clean 1-2 slide pitch and a consolidated design brief (built from the theoretical and empirical design submissions).

Course Policies

Absences
The course is highly interactive and participation is key to its pedagogy and learning objectives. However, life happens and sporadic absences can be excused. Students can make up through a short reflection on the week's readings or a brief peer-review memo.

Extensions
The course follows a steady pace and is structured to even out student work. I strongly encourage students not to delay assignments. That said, I will consider personal circumstances in granting extensions when requested in advance.

Re-Grading
Each graded assessment has clearly stated expectations and grading rubrics. The margin for re-grading will be slim. Students who believe their work deserves a major letter-grade change can bring this up 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. Disagreement is inevitable; mutual respect is non-negotiable. Please listen attentively, critique ideas rather than persons, and help create space for others to contribute.

Inclusivity
My course strives to include a diverse array of authors, opinions, cultural and intellectual backgrounds. Similarly, the assessment strategy recognizes that students may hold different strengths due to individual and/or cultural differences.

Using Technology in the Classroom
During most class time, including lectures, presentations, and 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
Because this course studies AI, we will discuss and sometimes demonstrate GenAI tools. However, all written assignments must be in your own words. You may use GenAI for brainstorming, debugging code, or exploring alternative explanations, but you must disclose substantive use and you must never submit AI-generated text as your own. Using AI writing tools and submitting the output as your own violates the Stanford Honor Code.

Academic Integrity
Academic integrity is vital to a supportive and engaging learning environment. Please review Stanford's Honor Code and documentation and citation resources from the Hume Center for Writing and Speaking. When in doubt, cite and ask.

Academic Accommodations

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) within the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). SDRC staff will evaluate the request, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty. Students should contact SDRC as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations.

OAE location: 563 Salvatierra Walk (650-723-1066). For more information: 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 free of such discrimination. Many employees of Stanford, including course instructors, 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, or 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.

More information 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 Tips and Tools, from the Center for Teaching and Learning
Well-Being services, including well-being coaches, Vaden Health Center
Student Tech Resources and Support

Academic Disruptions

Stanford is committed to the highest quality education. As your instructor, my priority is to uphold your educational experience, including through short- or long-term disruptions (public health emergencies, natural disasters, protests, demonstrations). If adjustments are necessary, we will communicate clearly and promptly to ensure expectations remain clear and achievable.

Preliminary Course Schedule

Session 1.A - June 22 - Politics of Revolutionary Technological Change

Class Topics
- What makes a technology politically transformative?
- Historical examples: printing press, electrification, internet (mechanisms, not trivia)
- Framework: winners/losers, state capacity, legitimacy, and regulation

Suggested Readings
* Winner, Langdon. "Do Artifacts Have Politics?" (1980).
* Jovanovic, Boyan and Peter Rousseau. "General Purpose Technologies" (overview).
Optional: Mokyr, Joel. "The Second Industrial Revolution" (selected).

Assignment
Homework (due Sun Jun 28): Research Proposal.

Session 1.B - June 24 - GenAI 101; Diffusion, Concentration, Winner-Take-All

Class Topics
- What is GenAI (capabilities, limits, evaluation basics)?
- Why GenAI may diffuse differently (compute, data, platforms, complements).
- Project workshop: selecting a political outcome and mechanism.

Suggested Readings
* Bommasani et al. "On the Opportunities and Risks of Foundation Models" (2021), Intro.
* Bender et al. "On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots" (2021), selected.
Optional: NIST AI RMF (overview) for vocabulary.

Assignment
Project topic check-in (bring 2 candidate questions to class).

Session 2.A - June 29 - Labor Markets: Productivity and Automation

Class Topics
- Task substitution vs. augmentation; distributional politics.
- Collective action: unions, professional associations, licensing.
- Policy levers: training, safety nets, industrial policy.

Suggested Readings
* Acemoglu, Daron and Pascual Restrepo. "Tasks, Automation, and the Labor Market" (selected).
* Brynjolfsson et al. "Generative AI at Work" (field/experimental evidence), selected.
Optional: Eloundou et al. "GPTs are GPTs" (occupational exposure), selected.

Assignment

Low-stakes: one-paragraph map of winners/losers for your topic (submit on Canvas).

Session 2.B - July 1 - Public Opinion, Beliefs, and the Information Environment

Class Topics
- Attitudes toward AI: risk, trust, fairness, consent.
- Synthetic media and misinformation; enforcement and platform policy.
- Measurement: survey modules and experiments.

Suggested Readings
* Pew Research Center: recent survey on public views of AI (latest posting on Canvas).
* Chesney, Robert and Danielle Citron. "Deep Fakes: A Looming Challenge" (2019), selected.
Optional: Vaccari and Chadwick on misinformation and democracy (selected).

Assignment
Homework (due Sun Jul 5): Theoretical Design.

Session 3.A - July 6 - Firms, Platforms, and Lobbying

Class Topics
- Market structure: platforms, complements, and concentration of capabilities.
- Lobbying, standard setting, and policy influence.
- Open vs. closed models and governance coalitions.

Suggested Readings
* Khan, Lina. "Amazon's Antitrust Paradox" (2017), selected (platform power logic).
* One policy brief on AI governance coalitions and standards (posted on Canvas).
Optional: Grossman and Helpman on lobbying and protection (selected).

Assignment
In-class: stakeholder map for your project (bring 1-page draft).

Session 3.B - July 8 - Civil Society, Creators, and Knowledge Institutions

Class Topics
- Copyright and data rights; creators and compensation politics.
- News/media, education, and norms of authenticity and expertise.
- NGOs, advocacy, and the politics of AI safety.

Suggested Readings
* One legal/policy overview of GenAI + copyright (posted on Canvas).
* One case study on newsroom or education sector responses (posted on Canvas).
Optional: Policy advocacy report on responsible AI governance.

Assignment
Low-stakes: Annotated bibliography (5 sources) for your theoretical design.

Session 4.A - July 13 - Politicians, Campaigns, and Elections

Class Topics
- GenAI in political communication: persuasion, microtargeting, fundraising.
- Synthetic political media and disclosure regimes.
- Election administration and integrity challenges.

Suggested Readings
* One empirical paper/report on GenAI and political persuasion (posted on Canvas).
* Platform or election-authority guidance on synthetic media (posted on Canvas).
Optional: Comparative cases of election regulation.

Assignment
Homework (due Sun Jul 12): Empirical Design.

Session 4.B - July 15 - Public Institutions Adoption: Service Delivery and Policy Making

Class Topics
- GenAI for public services: chatbots, triage, translation, drafting.
- Administrative law and discretion; procurement and capacity.
- Evaluation: audits, impact measurement, red-teaming.

Suggested Readings
* Coglianese, Cary and David Lehr. "Regulating by Robot" (2017), selected.
* NIST AI Risk Management Framework (selected).
Optional: One agency GenAI guidance memo (posted on Canvas).

Assignment
Low-stakes: 1-page risk register for your empirical design.

Session 5.A - July 20 - Regulation, Standards, and Governance Capacity

Class Topics
- Regulatory instruments: guidance, audits, liability, licensing, disclosure.
- Standards bodies and evaluation benchmarks.
- Institutional capacity and enforcement tradeoffs.

Suggested Readings
* Comparative overview of major AI governance regimes (posted on Canvas).
* One piece on audits/assurance and evaluation (posted on Canvas).
Optional: Farrell and Newman on regulatory power and networks (selected).

Assignment
Prepare design brief + 1-2 slides for Research Design Studio.

Session 5.B - July 22 - Research Design Studio (Midterm Replacement)

Class Topics
- Short design pitches (5-7 minutes) with structured peer feedback.
- Workshop: identification logic, measurement validity, and scope conditions.
- Revision planning and next steps.

Suggested Readings
* Adcock and Collier. "Measurement validity" (2001), selected.
* Egami and Hartman. "Elements of external validity" (2023), selected.
Optional: short memo on threats to validity (posted on Canvas).

Assignment
Revise theory+empirics based on feedback (submit revision plan on Canvas).

Session 6.A - July 27 - Geopolitics I: US-China Competition and Compute

Class Topics
- Compute as a chokepoint: chips, supply chains, export controls.
- Security and information operations; standards diplomacy.
- Strategic dependence and technological alliances.

Suggested Readings
* Miller, Chris. Chip War (2022), selected chapters.
* Farrell, Henry and Abraham Newman. "Weaponized Interdependence" (2019).
Optional: policy brief on export controls (posted on Canvas).

Assignment
Low-stakes: one-page country or alliance strategy memo (your choice).

Session 6.B - July 29 - Geopolitics II: Developing Countries, Diffusion, and Data Sovereignty

Class Topics
- Opportunities and constraints for the Global South.
- Data governance, language access, and state capacity.
- Empirical strategies using cross-national data.

Suggested Readings
* One UN/World Bank/OECD brief on AI and development (posted on Canvas).
* One paper on digital sovereignty or data governance (posted on Canvas).
Optional: case study on AI policy in a developing country.

Assignment
Low-stakes: data feasibility check (identify at least 2 usable sources).

Session 7.A - August 3 - Environmental Politics I: Energy, Water, and Disclosure

Class Topics
- Energy and carbon footprint of training and inference.
- Grid politics, disclosure, and accounting.
- Policy levers: procurement standards, reporting, efficiency.

Suggested Readings
* Strubell, Ganesh, and McCallum. "Energy and Policy Considerations for Deep Learning" (2019).
* Patterson et al. "Carbon Emissions and Large Neural Network Training" (selected).
Optional: IEA or utility-focused brief on data centers (posted on Canvas).

Assignment
Low-stakes: 2 figures or tables relevant to your empirical strategy.

Session 7.B - August 5 - Environmental Politics II: Data Centers Siting and Local Politics

Class Topics
- Siting politics: local incentives, zoning, community opposition, water rights.
- Distributional effects and environmental justice.
- Robustness and limitations in small-N evidence.

Suggested Readings
* One data-center siting case study (posted on Canvas).
* Blog note on robustness and credible evidence (posted on Canvas).
Optional: policy paper on environmental justice and infrastructure siting.

Assignment
Panel assignment released; prepare 1-slide abstract for conference booklet.

Session 8.A - August 10 - Ethics, Accountability, and Course Synthesis

Class Topics
- Fairness, accountability, transparency; consent and data rights.
- Dual-use and misuse; governance tradeoffs.
- Synthesis: the politics of GenAI across demand, supply, geopolitics, and environment.

Suggested Readings
* Barocas, Hardt, and Narayanan. Fairness and Machine Learning (selected).
* One governance proposal and critique (posted on Canvas).
Optional: responsible innovation frameworks.

Assignment
Conference slides due Tue Aug 11 (11:59 p.m.).

Session 8.B - August 12 - Final Class Research Conference (Panels)

Class Topics
- Student presentations in themed panels.
- Panel synthesis: coordinated agenda and meta-analysis discussion.
- Course wrap-up.

Suggested Readings
No new readings.

Assignment
Final paper due Fri Aug 14 (5:00 p.m.).