



Senior Thesis Project Planning Map and Timeline (Class of 2026)

Key Dates:

Tuesday, October 21, 2025	Politics Senior Thesis Research Funding Application Due in SAFE by 11:59 PM
Thursday, December 4, 2025	Senior Thesis Progress Report Due by 5:00 PM
Monday, March 2, 2026	Draft of Senior Thesis Due to Adviser by 5:00 PM
Tuesday, March 31, 2026	Senior Thesis Due by 4:00 PM to Department of Politics

July-August

Goal: Begin corresponding with your assigned thesis adviser and identify a research question.

1. Start with a topic, then define a few specific, **researchable**, questions.

Important: Your senior thesis must be written on a topic related to your primary field.

[If you're unsure if your proposed research topic falls under your designated primary field, please check with Politics Director of Undergraduate, Professor Vreeland (jrv@princeton.edu). In the event a primary field change is warranted to conform with your senior thesis, you may need to adjust your course schedule since our policy is that three courses within your primary field must be completed by graduation.]

- Drawing on past coursework, independent work, or maybe just curiosity, decide on a topic that interests you personally. What problem puzzles you? What aspect of politics would you like to understand in depth?
 - The secret at this stage is to identify an interesting area to do research in without narrowing your mind so much that you won't benefit from other people's advice -- most importantly, the Politics faculty.
 - Begin exploratory reading on your topic. You may wish to read dozens of article abstracts before taking the time to study a specific article in depth -- just to give yourself a broad sense of what research has already been published on a subject. As you read, note specific questions that you might want to answer. It helps to come up with several specific questions in case one turns out to be impractical.
 - A good thesis topic is one that excites and motivates you; a good research question is one that can be answered by an advanced undergraduate in six months! Try to find a balance between what passions you and what is pragmatic to research.
2. Begin corresponding with your adviser
 - In early June, Professor Guess (the previous DUS) sent a confirmation email notifying you of your thesis adviser assignment. If you haven't already connected with your designated thesis adviser, please reach out to them before the academic year begins. You will need to meet in-person with your adviser on a regular basis, as part of the new POL 498 Fall thesis requirement. Schedule an in-person meeting for early September, and plan to meet no later than the second week of classes.

September

Goal: Start meeting with your adviser, work out your specific research question, and make a detailed plan including determining a regular schedule in which the two of you can meet going forward.

[NOTE: If you are interested in conducting thesis research over Winter Break, consider applying for funding but first discuss your plan with your adviser. The Politics thesis funding application deadline is October 21 – so start early!]

- We encourage you to apply for funding because conducting your own research with your own money is fun. But you need a plan, and you must work with your adviser in developing the plan.
- Find out whether you need approval for your research from the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Subjects at the Office of Research and Project Administration here: <https://ria.princeton.edu/human-research>. If you plan to conduct any interviews or surveys, you will definitely need IRB approval. **NOTE:** ALL students who apply for Politics thesis funding are REQUIRED to ask the IRB to review their proposed project PRIOR to submitting the funding application in SAFE. You will be asked to upload proof of the email that you sent the IRB (irb@princeton.edu) as part of submitting your application. This important step must be completed by the October 21 application deadline to demonstrate that you have started the process.
- **If you collect data and your data collection falls under the IRB's jurisdiction, you cannot start without formal IRB approval, and the IRB process may take one to two months.**
- Senior thesis research funding opportunities will be posted in the Student Activity Funding Engine (SAFE) via this link: <http://www.princeton.edu/studentfunding/>. **NOTE:** The Politics thesis research funding application is now available in SAFE. You should apply to the Office of Undergraduate Research and other University funders as applicable, but make sure you check their deadlines in SAFE as they will differ from that of the Politics Department.

October

Goal: Fine tune your specific research question/topic with your adviser; formulate your plan.

Deadline: October 21 - Politics thesis research funding application is due online in SAFE by 11:59 PM

[NOTE: See above for more information about funding opportunities.]

1. Write a tentative, working thesis statement that spells out your research question, why it matters, and how you intend to answer it.
2. Create a working list of important secondary sources to read and locate them. Consult the bibliographies of the most useful secondary sources (check your syllabi). As noted above, you may wish to read dozens of article abstracts and book summaries before taking the time to study any specific reading in depth - just to give yourself a broad sense of what research has already been published on a subject. When you're ready, try to identify 5-10 most important sources, which you will eventually study in more depth.
3. Turn in a short thesis proposal and your bibliography to your adviser for feedback.
4. Schedule time to discuss your research plan with Politics Librarian Jeremy Darrington (jdarrington@princeton.edu), the Survey Research Center (<https://psrc.princeton.edu>) or other relevant entities to assist with primary evidence collection.

November

Goals: Thesis proposal and start working on thesis progress report (due early December).

1. Turn in a full thesis proposal (5 pages or so) to your advisor. A good proposal:
 - lays out the problem
 - justifies the topic as a significant one for understanding politics
 - clearly states the argument you will make
 - tells the reader how your argument builds on other scholarship
 - lays out the **specific** research plan for gathering evidence -- be very clear about the timely availability of the sources of your evidence (data, interviews, archives)
 - concludes with some thoughts about the broad implications of your proposed research for future studies and/or policy
2. Consider turning in an annotated bibliography to your adviser for feedback. Explain how the readings will inform your own argument. Will a given book help you elaborate your argument? Will it help you to locate primary sources? Will it offer an alternative argument to your own, one you will refute with evidence?
3. Consider your adviser's feedback. Work with them to get ready for collection of original data, interviews, archival work, or whatever evidence you will use in your research.

December

Goals: Submit senior thesis progress report; start draft of one chapter.

Deadline: December 4 – Senior thesis progress report due to Politics Department.

Your senior thesis progress report should not exceed 10 pages, and it must be submitted directly to the Department. Submission instructions will be provided prior to the deadline. At a minimum, this report should include:

- confirmation of your primary field (AP, CP, IR, PT)
- a brief written prospectus/summary of the project
- a summary of the student's research activities to date
- list of specific dates you have met with your adviser this semester
- a detailed plan for completion, including timeline

The best way to make progress and get help from your adviser is to share your work. Have at least one chapter drafted and submit it to your adviser for feedback before Winter Break.

Winter Break

Goal: Examine your evidence, start answering your research question.

You should use this time for evidence gathering and writing. Write a rough draft of one evidence chapter.

January

Goal: A draft of your evidence chapter

Turn in a draft of one evidence chapter immediately after break. Also provide a short outline of the thesis, chapter by chapter (one paragraph each). Write a rough draft of the remaining evidence chapters.

Make a realistic plan for the next two months; time management helps you complete your thesis.

[NOTE: Your POL 498 grade (on a P/D/F basis) will be reported to the Registrar's Office. You must get a passing grade in order to advance to the Spring semester.]

February

Goal: A full draft of your thesis.

[NOTE: Two senior thesis poster information sessions will be held this month, dates, TBA, where you will learn more about this requirement.]

February is writing time! Complete the main analyses, revise earlier chapters in light of new developments and adviser suggestions.

Faculty need time management, too. That's why we have a draft deadline. If you turn in your draft by the deadline, your adviser will have sufficient time to read it -- and more importantly, you will have sufficient time to implement changes. Drafts turned in past the deadline may not receive full comments and feedback.

March

Goal: Finish the job by submitting full draft and final version of senior thesis.

Deadlines: Monday, March 2 at 5:00 pm - Turn in a full draft to your adviser via email
Tuesday, March 31 at 4:00 pm - Submit your senior thesis to Politics Department

Submit complete draft to your adviser, and then revise thesis based on adviser feedback.

→**TIP:** Students are encouraged to view existing Politics senior theses as samples. You can either visit the Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, where all senior theses submitted to Princeton University are housed, or you can log into Thesis Central (<https://thesis-central.princeton.edu>) to conduct a search. If you would like to examine theses that have won prizes, go to: <https://politics.princeton.edu/honors-and-awards> and then navigate to "Recent Recipients, Senior Thesis Prizes". Here you can view exemplary senior theses by primary fields.

April

Goal: Submit senior thesis poster and present it at Poster Session.

Deadlines: Wednesday, April 15 at 12:00 pm – Turn in senior thesis poster to Politics Department
Wednesday, April 29 at 1:30-4:30 pm – Poster Session and presentations

Senior Thesis Guidelines

Every thesis is different, but here is a general outline of how you may choose to organize your thesis.

Outline of the Thesis

Abstract

In 150 words, present the following: (1) the research question, (2) your argument—or the debate, (3) the method you use to test or establish your argument, (4) the main findings of your research, (5) the implications of your work for future scholarship and/or policymaking. Aim for about one sentence for each. (Note that being aware of this general approach to writing abstracts may help you better read the abstracts of other studies.)

Chapter I: Introduction

The introduction should make clear the question your thesis addresses. It should explain why addressing this question is important in the field of politics. You may wish to explain the alternative arguments that exist (although some theses address this in a separate “background” chapter). You may also wish to provide an overview of the thesis, presenting the information from the abstract (above) with about one paragraph per item.

Chapter II: Theory (and history)

This chapter should develop your argument and ground it in secondary sources. In detail, explain your idea, and justify its validity with as many good reasons as you can. For some theses, this requires a historical component that sets the argument in the context of a sequence of events in the real world of politics. Your core chapters (see below) may also be historical, but, by contrast, they will contain lots of detailed evidence. This chapter is the place to define concepts and explain how your idea relates to and draws on the writings of other people. A short thesis may fold this chapter into the introductory chapter.

Chapters III, IV (and V): Evidence (The Core)

Here, you methodically lay out the evidence that supports the argument that you have developed above. Be sure to explain where the evidence comes from and why it is valid. Depending on the type of original evidence that you have gathered, (interviews, an experiment, a survey, data analysis, archival evidence), you may need a separate chapter that contains the research design and provides details on how you collected the data. If you rely on data collected by someone else, give a brief description of how it was collected, so that readers can judge its validity. Be sure you know the potential sources of error or bias in the data, so that you can explain why it is valid. Always note the sample size and the process of sample selection, and detail the characteristics of the sample. If you are examining a historical case (e.g., a city, or an organization, a leader, a country), then justify the reason for selecting that specific case (and not others). It is often useful to include tables or figures. If you do so, explain in the text what the reader is to learn from each table or figure. Each table should be self-explanatory (with a note that can repeat some of what is in the main text), and the main text should also highlight what is important about it.

Chapter V(or VI): Conclusion

Remind readers of your argument and summarize the evidence you presented. Show how you have established the argument with the evidence. Draw implications for the general topic from the details of what you have found and argued. Remind readers again of the reasons your question is important for understanding politics. Knowing what we now know about your topic, What can we conclude about politics? What lessons can future scholars draw from your work? What further questions have you left for future research? What are the implications of your findings for policymakers or activists?

IMPORTANT NOTE: Your thesis must be your own original work. Be sure to cite sources properly. To avoid inadvertent plagiarism, make sure to read the University regulations regarding academic integrity as taken from Princeton's *Rights, Rules, Responsibilities*. See: <http://www.princeton.edu/pub/rrr/part2/index.xml#comp24>.