

# TWO: LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

## The First Step: Choosing a Topic

Hopefully, you use the spring and summer before your senior year to think about a research topic that fascinates you. At this point, your interests can be incredibly broad—but remember, this is the earliest stage of your research. The process eventually entails that you will narrow down your interests to a workable project. Here are some tips for choosing a good topic:

- **Choose what fascinates you.** This is *your* project, it will consume most of your senior year. Take ownership of your project and pick a topic that excites you, but choose a topic that you can also envision committing to for six months. Think about topics you discussed in your coursework—could you expand on some of those ideas for thesis?
- **Pay attention to the world around you.** How has politics come up in your everyday life? Look to the news, your friends, local issues—what issues come up? What’s the debate? What questions or puzzles need to be solved?
- **Ground yourself.** Make sure that you are choosing a political science topic. Politics is wide-ranging. Can you think of your topic as belonging to one of our subfields: American Politics, Public Administration, International Relations, Comparative Politics, Public Law, Political Theory?
- **Brainstorm.** Do not force one topic. Students usually go through multiple iterations of their project in which where they begin in August is very different than when they write the paper. Take the time to write out your ideas. Do not be afraid to take a sheet of paper and write down 5 to 10 topics that interest you.
- **Look ahead.** Perhaps most crucial is to think ahead with your topic. Can you sensibly write 30 to 40 pages on this idea? Have political scientists written about these issues before? What type of evidence will you collect? Will this eventually bore you in the next six months?

Again, your research topic does not have to be specific yet. In the next section, we discuss moving from topic to research question. Talk with friends, professors, and family to see which topics are the most interesting (and could provide the starting point for a strong thesis). Once you have decided on a topic, you are ready for the next step.

## From Topic to Research Question

What is the difference between a research topic and a research question? A topic is a broad subject area while a research question is narrow. A **research question** is a specific problem or puzzle that can be addressed with evidence in the typical length of a senior thesis. The research question begins with a topic, but is able to be narrowed by identifying a clear causal relationship to investigate. This relationship should be anchored in the discipline’s literature and should be testable with a valid research method. This is a tall order! But here is what we mean: