

Ethical Considerations for SoTL Research in Political Science Education

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ABSTRACT


In recent years, political science has expanded its focus on pedagogy, developing its own subfield in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Although this research is seemingly low risk, it nevertheless raises distinctive ethical questions. It also is increasingly subject to rigorous ethics review, often justified as necessary to protect students as a vulnerable category. Until recently, the field has made little comment on which ethical issues political scientists should be attuned to when designing SoTL studies. Building on the wider literature on ethics and SoTL research, this article presents research findings on how political science students view their own experiences of becoming participants in SoTL research, and it highlights several resultant ethical considerations. We accompany these findings with recommendations for conducting ethically sound SoTL research on political science education.


Given the contemporary state of politics, teaching political science arguably is more important than ever; as educators, we must ensure that the teaching and learning of political science is done well. A key tool to improve approaches to pedagogy is Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). SoTL research is conducted to improve and advance pedagogy, and it often studies student learning in the classroom. Both at a normative level and to ensure continued public trust in university-level education, it also is necessary to ensure that such research is carried out ethically. However, political science has seen little subject-specific engagement with this important topic. For example, in 2023, *PS: Political Science & Politics* published a special issue on undergraduate involvement in research, addressing a range of vital topics, but with no discussion of ethical issues. Scholarship on research ethics offers tools to guide ethical practice; however, they are not always a good fit for political science (Dionigi et al. 2025; Tapscott 2025; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2016). Moreover, SoTL has its own ethical

norms (Fedoruk 2022). These distinct but related approaches highlight a need for further research and reflection on how we might adapt research ethics practices to SoTL research in political science classrooms.

Another reason to develop subject-specific tools for research ethics in SoTL is practical. As political science SoTL has grown (Craig 2014), it increasingly has fallen under the ambit of ethics review, at times limiting the development of this important area (Fedoruk 2022). On one hand, SoTL research has relatively low conventional risks: research typically studies activities that students would engage in regardless of whether research takes place, and it is conducted to improve the student experience. On the other hand, an important justification for strenuous ethics review of SoTL research is concern for harms that students might experience through the research process, often attributed to assumptions about their vulnerability and anxieties (Fedoruk 2022, v–vi). There is little empirical evidence about whether and in what ways students see becoming an object of study (especially relative to their learning) as a potentially harmful activity. The evidence that does exist is discipline specific and often reflects different types and levels of risk (e.g., nursing and psychology; see Norton 2023), which reveals a need to attend to the particularities of political science.

We therefore drew together scholarship on research ethics in political science and SoTL to initiate a subject-specific discussion

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on this important topic. To supplement our insights and ground them in the student experience, we held focus-group discussions with undergraduate political science students. These discussions highlighted how political science students perceive their involvement in research and resultant ethical issues, yielding valuable findings—especially because the student experience remains a key justification for rigorous ethics review. The findings further nuance and tailor our discussion to overcome top-down assump-

processes that can curtail potentially important research; and the increasing focus on research ethics in political science, it is important to address research ethics in this potentially sensitive area. Critically engaging with the ethics of SoTL research and developing appropriate disciplinary norms and awareness of them is a useful and timely undertaking, and one that can provide the foundation for further consideration, discussion, and research.

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tions and provide a basis for improved ethical conduct in political science SoTL research.

First, we highlight key considerations that emerge from the literature on the ethics of SoTL research. Second, we set out the methods and ethical considerations for our study. Third, we present results and practical recommendations, including insights into how political science students conceptualize and understand ethical issues arising from their participation in research.

ETHICS AND SOTL RESEARCH

There is growing scholarship on the ethics of SoTL research. Extant literature, although not tailored to the substantive and methodological predilections of political science, nevertheless offers a helpful framework to flag key ethical issues, emphasizing the student-instructor relationship, its inherent power dynamics, and resultant ethical considerations. For example, Clark and McCann (2005, 46) identified four ethical areas to consider when conducting research on students: (1) unequal power relationship and coercion; (2) obtaining valid informed consent; (3) anonymity and confidentiality of data; and (4) fair treatment. Similarly, Lees, Godbold, and Walters (2023, 57) highlighted that ethical SoTL researchers must include “provisions for voluntariness, protection of grades, and not having their competence undermined through concerns of being judged.” Important variation can be attributed to disciplinary norms—for example, psychology students traditionally have been required to participate as subjects in their instructors’ research studies (Clark and McCann 2005, 43).

Political science recently has made an “ethical turn,” demonstrated in APSA’s 2020 “Ethics Guidelines” and the growing discourse on the topic. However, existing scholarship mainly approaches students as researchers—for example, stressing the need to prepare them for ethics review processes and train them for the practicalities of conducting field research (Irgil et al. 2021). Other scholars highlight a need to sensitize political scientists—and political science students—on good ethical practice (Fujii 2012; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2016). This emphasis on rigorous ethics training often is reserved for postgraduate students.

Given the importance of advancing pedagogic practice in political science; the reality that ever-more research is conducted on and with students in political science classrooms; the growing practice of subjecting such research to rigorous ethics review

METHODOLOGY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

To explore student perspectives on the benefits and risks of SoTL research, we held three focus groups with undergraduate political science students at the University of York in the United Kingdom. The department regularly offers students research-participation opportunities, including surveys, focus groups, and interviews. Focus groups critically explored students’ perceptions of ethical practices and dilemmas in SoTL research through reflection on ethics principles, as well as student expectations and experiences and how their position as political science students might impact those perceptions. Innocente, Baker, and De Faria (2022, 112) noted: “Student voice is notably absent in the literature exploring the intersections of SoTL and ethics....” Our approach provided an opportunity to explore political science students’ perspectives of SoTL and ethics. We selected the focus-group method to source a range of opinions, to provide the opportunity for direct and subtle challenges to opinion, to allow students to react to others’ experiences, and to facilitate in-depth discussion (Smithson 2000, 115–16). We also were guided by ethical considerations in adopting this method: some students prefer participating in research alongside their peers because it can allay feelings of judgment and vulnerability (Lees, Godbold, and Walters 2023, 50–51).

After securing ethics approval,¹ we issued a call for undergraduate student participants. We recruited undergraduates in part because they can offer a multiyear perspective on studying political science (i.e., a master’s degree in the United Kingdom typically requires one year). Thus, they are more likely to have firsthand experience of SoTL research. Future research that focused on postgraduate political science students and non-UK based students would be important to identify variation and probe the validity of our findings.

Our research design was informed by the emerging best practice on SoTL research (Fedoruk 2022; Lees, Godbold, and Walters 2023). The project’s participant information sheet and consent form are in the online appendices. Students received compensation for their participation: £12.28 per hour, according to the University of York’s standard hourly rate for student employment, for a two-hour focus group. This compensation was required by our funder and reflects recommendations by some scholars to value student time (Henshaw 2023, 178). In total, 18 students² participated, representing a range of degree programs (including joint honors) and year groups.³ Our commitment to voluntariness in the research design created certain limitations—namely,

students who opted in were likely to be comparatively comfortable with participating in research. This may mean that our observations skew toward favorable views of SoTL research and underrepresent students who identify as vulnerable or face barriers to participation. Although this is a notable limitation, it also is not easily overcome, given that voluntariness is critical to both student and researcher views of what constitutes ethical SoTL research.

We began our focus groups with a brief introduction to the topic of research ethics. We then asked participants to write an independent short response to the question, “Is it ethical for academics to do research with students? Why/why not?” This opening exercise served as a baseline from which to build focus-group discussions, a method to preempt the risk of opinions being socially formed (Smithson 2000, 116). Following this exercise, we facilitated semi-structured discussions around predetermined topics, including power dynamics, vulnerability, calls for participation, forms of research, and SoTL.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In written responses to our introductory prompt, students were unanimously positive: one third stressed the value of such work. For example, one student wrote: “Research is important for universities—these studies could help participating and non-participating students in the long term.” In discussions, another student noted that they were happy to be a “guinea pig” for innovations in teaching and learning, aligning with Brewer and Robinson’s (2018) findings, wherein one respondent said they liked being a “lab rat.”

Most participants (11/18) had previous experience participating in research as part of their studies, including SoTL research⁴; all who did so spoke positively of the experience. Students reflected on various benefits, including that participating in research could constitute an active-learning experience, broaden their horizons and general knowledge, and provide insight on research processes relevant to their final-year research projects. As one student noted: “It kind of creates an environment, like a culture of inquiry....It sparks intellectual curiosity among students.” At the same time, all but one response (17/18) contained caveats, including the importance of recognizing power dynamics, establishing professional boundaries, and securing informed consent. This reflected an underlying view that education and research are not necessarily complementary and that learning should be prioritized over experimentation. The following subsections analyze key themes that emerged from the focus groups, in conjunction with key literature, and on this basis we present recommendations for conducting ethical SoTL research in political science classrooms.

view that they were not *a priori* vulnerable due to their identity as students. Rather, they highlighted that personal circumstances could produce individual vulnerabilities, which replicates findings by Innocente, Baker, and De Faria (2022, 111). As one participant stated: “I’d imagine there will be students who would be considered vulnerable, but they’re not vulnerable as a result of being a student.” Another provided more insight into factors that influence perceptions of vulnerability, stating that “Depending on how homogeneous or diverse an environment is will impact on how vulnerable you see yourself in university.” In all three focus groups, students mentioned financial, academic, and social stresses as contributing to their willingness to participate in research. Participants expressed concern that voluntariness might mean research is not fully inclusive of students who are overburdened, but they also believed that voluntary participation was the more important consideration: “It is important to be representative... but it should be weighted more on volunteering.”

Many students reflected on the potentially personalized nature of SoTL research when it is conducted by instructors with whom they already had a relationship. Although students were generally positive about preexisting relationships, they also noted concerns. For instance, some students expressed a fear that participating in research could influence academic assessment, creating an unconscious bias that might impact grading—even in their specific institutional context in which all grading is anonymous and grades are moderated. Others noted that there could be collective effects—for example: “If you have a cohort of students telling you how much they hated your teaching style...you might be a bit mean marking them.”

At the same time, students expressed confidence in their understanding and ability to manage dynamics between themselves and a researcher–instructor. One student suggested that because power dynamics are central to studying political science, students and instructors were well positioned to discuss and navigate them during research, reflecting on power dynamics: “We literally study them.” In this sense, we found that students perceived themselves as capable of navigating their own potential vulnerabilities while demonstrating a keen concern for the perceived vulnerabilities of others. Replicating insights from Lees, Godbold, and Walters (2023, 51–52), respondents articulated an existing relationship between researcher–instructor and student as a factor that generally mitigated against vulnerabilities rather than creating them.

Recommendation 1: Maximize Pedagogic Benefits

Considering the previous discussion, there is a clear opportunity to use the process of research—especially in discussions

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Vulnerability and Power Dynamics

Vulnerability is a key consideration in SoTL scholarship, typically framed as emerging from unequal power dynamics. As highlighted by Ferguson, Yonge, and Myrick (2004), students are “captive” in the relationship and, in this sense, vulnerable regardless of other factors. However, in our research, all participants expressed the

around providing consent—to ensure pedagogic benefits for political science students. This includes providing insight into the research process (e.g., using methods that they may use in their research) and—particularly relevant for the discipline of politics and international relations—as an entry point to discuss privilege, positionality, and power in the substance and

practice of our discipline, as well as in their own lives and identities.

Student–Instructor Relationship and the Social Context of the Classroom

Power dynamics similarly are a key focus of SoTL research, which typically highlights concerns of undue influence in

Recommendation 2: Take Student Context and Social Dynamics Seriously

Educators often observe only a small sliver of the student experience; it is important to tailor research in consideration of the broader picture, including planning research that complements student commitments and is sensitive to the social environment that they inhabit. This includes considering the particular social

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recruitment and vulnerability. However, another element is the social context of research. As Hollander (2004, 604) elaborated, the social context of research, including “relationships among the participants and between the participants and the facilitator, as well as the larger social structures within which the discussion takes place,” has significant implications for the resulting data. This aligns with our focus-group discussions, in which students emphasized the social context of the classroom as highly particular.

For example, students emphasized social anxieties in the classroom and a concern that SoTL research might exacerbate these dynamics. Students reflected on feeling silenced in discussions dominated by a few strong voices and their fear that they might be judged by their peers and instructors. One student explained how this might be particular to the classroom setting: “You know, traditional focus groups, you enter and you feel able to freely speak because you are around strangers. So, if the people around you disagree and judge you, it really has no long-term bearing on you. But if...there are people that you spend time with outside of the classroom, you might not feel that you’re able to speak how you truly feel, especially if it’s—maybe if we’re talking about political attitudes and values.” The discussion surfaced conflict aversion, a concern for inclusion, and the view that these dynamics would be important to manage in focus-group settings, both for ethical reasons and to ensure the methodological validity of the findings. Mainly, students without previous experience of research participation raised these concerns. We interpreted this correlation as an uploading of classroom experiences to imagination of research participation.

Students’ reflections highlighted that the experience of research is shaped importantly by contextual and sometimes intangible factors (e.g., how friendly the researcher–instructor is and the culture of the classroom), such that the same research protocol could create negative or positive experiences. This insight highlights something that often is difficult to capture in the ethics review process related to the virtue and good faith of the researcher, along with their social skills and even their likeability on one hand—realities that speak to student biases as much as those of instructors (Chávez and Mitchell 2020)—and cultural sensitivity on the other. This highlights that considerations about culture and comfort are as relevant in the classroom as they are in far-flung field research settings and that people’s feelings about research often are highly personalized.

context of the classroom and the larger social structures that may shape classroom dynamics from students’ perspectives. For research that intervenes in classroom dynamics, it may be prudent to solicit student feedback before launching the project, similar to how we understand foreign research environments.

Recruitment

Students expressed strong opinions about recruitment, with some reacting particularly poorly to the idea of being recruited as a convenience sample. As one participant stated: “I do definitely think that there’s a distinction between having students as a focus group because you’re investigating students and then using students as a population because they’re what’s available.” This view was mitigated with observations that there still may be important educational and scientific benefits to such research that could justify its continuation. As one student noted, “If you were to cut students out of research, realistically how many research programs would never get off the ground?” Although these examples illustrate the heterogeneity of opinions, they also suggest that SoTL research should be easier to justify on ethical grounds (“because you’re investigating students”) as opposed to other types of student-involved research (“because they’re what’s available”).

We also discussed compensation for research and found that students were universally positive about payment, viewing it as a practical way to incentivize participation and compensate participants rather than as an ethical matter. One student explained that it is not necessary to pay respondents for research to be ethical “because it’s still on a voluntary basis. If someone decides to come up and take part, knowing that they’re not going to get paid, that’s fine.” The question of compensation versus undue influence may have sharp cultural and legal differences. For example, Innocente, Baker, and De Faria’s (2022, 122) discussion of using bonus grades as compensation in Canadian universities would not be possible with the UK higher-education quality-assurance controls.

Recommendation 3: Prioritize Justice

The principle of justice emphasizes that research benefits should be accessible to participants. For research in political science classrooms, this has several implications: using students as a convenience sample requires greater ethical justification than studying a substantive topic relevant to them. SoTL is the most easily justifiable research; however, researchers also should consider whether and how the benefits of any given study can be

shared with the specific participants rather than improving the educational outcomes of only future cohorts.

Pedagogic Considerations

Of particular concern to participants was the potential pedagogic impacts of SoTL research. Scholarship also highlights this as a key area of concern: Clark and McCann (2005, 49) underlined that fair treatment of student participants includes ensuring that they do not lose too much in-class time contributing to SoTL research. Some participants proposed that being the object of research could constitute an intervention in itself, creating a Hawthorne effect, in which students modify their behavior in response to being observed. They reflected that this could benefit or harm students with heterogeneous effects depending on their individual dispositions. It is interesting that participants who expressed this view found such an effect undesirable even in hypothetical cases in which it would improve academic performance. We interpreted this as an aversion to non-pedagogically-motivated interventions that shape learning and create potentially unequal outcomes, despite potential benefits. It is notable that only those students with no prior experience of SoTL research expressed this view, underscoring that previous experience may mitigate students' concerns about pedagogic risks. That political science students lean conservative and risk averse on the question of experimental pedagogy also, in part, may be related to the limited pedagogical innovation in the field to date (Moulton 2024). This conservatism was in tension with students' expressed support for SoTL research.

Recommendation 4: Minimize Pedagogic Costs

SoTL research should not sacrifice teaching quality or quantity; rather, it should be designed to complement education. As such, it is necessary to think carefully about experimental pedagogical approaches and consider cutting experiments short if early findings show worse outcomes than alternative pedagogical approaches (which is the norm in experimental research). Class time should be used for research only if appropriately limited or if it is associated directly with learning goals.

Ethics and Method

As noted previously, political science has taken an "ethical turn" in recent years. This focus at the level of research, however, has not translated into how we teach political science, especially to undergraduates and master's students. This is notable because whereas methods serve as the basis by which we justify the reliability of our research, ethics can be a key avenue to discuss its social value.

This gap was evident in our focus-group discussions. It is noteworthy that drawing on both first principles and research experience where it existed, participants expressed greater concern with questions of methodological rigor than with moral justification for research. For instance, in one focus group, we discussed the tension between an obligation to protect vulnerable populations from exploitative research and an obligation to ensure that participants can access the benefits of research. Students concentrated on the need for representativeness to ensure validity of findings, largely overlooking risks linked to unequal distribution of harms and benefits. In another focus group, we discussed a hypothetical experimental SoTL study in which an instructor used two "treatments": emphasizing a rational model of politics for one

cohort and a liberal approach for another to measure the impact on students' views of current electoral politics. Students commented that the focus groups might not be representative of the broader student body and, therefore, the findings would not be valid. They did not express concern that it would be unjust to run a study offering students different curricula. We interpreted this as evidence that our students receive more robust training on methods than on ethics—and, as such, they interpreted questions about whether research was good or bad as methodological questions about validity. We also take this as speculative evidence that students are not especially harmed by SoTL research. Nevertheless, this in no way alleviates researchers' responsibilities to design and conduct ethically sound SoTL research.

Recommendation 5: Promote Ethics Education

Consider integrating teaching on research ethics into curricula to help students develop the tools to discern what makes research reliable, morally justifiable, and to whom. This also can help students to make informed decisions about research participation, to conduct their own research, and to consume research responsibly. To maximize these benefits, educators may consider teaching political science's emerging scholarship on critical research ethics that addresses the contested and political nature of ethics-in-practice rather than the more procedural aspects associated with securing ethical approval.

CONCLUSION

This article presents the importance of taking a closer look at ethical issues associated with SoTL research in political science by drawing on research that features undergraduate political science students in the United Kingdom. This review highlighted the need for a subject-specific understanding of the ethics of researching students akin to that found in other disciplines (Clark and McCann 2005; Norton 2023). We also found that political science students described themselves as well positioned to engage with some aspects of ethical research practice, particularly those around power dynamics, although they were better prepared to engage with questions about research methodology. Drawing on select literature and focus-group discussions with students, we propose five recommendations that, when used in concert with other provisions for SoTL research, could provide a more rigorous basis for ethical conduct. These recommendations also highlight the potential positive impact of expanding students' involvement in research to include students as partners, not only as participants, in the research process (Fedoruk and Lindstrom 2022). The field-specific ethical benefits of allowing students to play a more active role in SoTL research is an avenue for future research that may be of particular interest to political scientists engaged in SoTL.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096525101285>.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. Decision: 119/ELMPS/23-24.
2. Despite being drawn from a gender-balanced cohort, of the 18 respondents, six were male and 12 were female, which reflects broader trends in which women disproportionately engage with ethical questions (Knott and Kostovicova 2024).
3. Participants included three first-year, nine second-year, and six final-year students.
4. Of the 11 participants who had previous experience of research participation, five had participated in more than one research project.

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