

GOV 360R: Civil Wars and Ethnic Violence, Spring 2026
Department of Government, University of Texas at Austin
Tuesday / Thursday, 8:00–9:30 a.m.

[UPDATED SYLLABUS: FEB 12, 2026]

1 Instructor Information

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2 Course Overview, Format, and Objectives

Civil wars pose one of the greatest threats to international peace and security today. Recent conflicts in contexts as diverse as Israel/Gaza, Yemen, Ethiopia, Ukraine, Syria, Colombia, Afghanistan, and the former Yugoslavia demonstrate the severe human, political, and economic consequences of internal armed conflict. Reflecting this pattern, more than 90% of United Nations peacekeeping operations since 1989 have been deployed to disputes with a significant internal conflict component. At the same time, recent and partial successes in cases such as Colombia underscore that civil wars are not inevitable and that violence can sometimes be prevented, limited, or resolved. A central premise of the course is that these divergent outcomes reflect underlying causal processes that can be systematically studied and compared across cases.

This course examines civil wars and ethnic violence through a series of enduring *empirical puzzles*: observable patterns that demand explanation. Rather than organizing the course around a single theory or perspective, we ask a set of recurring questions: Why does organized violence appear in some places and years but not in otherwise similar settings? Why do some political conflicts escalate into civil war while others with comparable grievances do not? Why do some individuals join armed groups while others abstain? Why are civilians sometimes protected and sometimes deliberately targeted? And why does peace so often prove difficult to sustain even when leaders publicly commit to ending violence?

Throughout the semester, students engage with a wide range of theoretical and empirical approaches used in the scholarly literature on political violence. Materials are selected for their analytical value and contribution to academic debate rather than for the promotion of any particular ideological, political, or normative position. Students are expected to critically evaluate arguments and evidence, compare competing explanations, and assess their strengths and limitations.

Rather than treating these puzzles as independent, the course examines them as part of a cumulative causal sequence. We trace how conflicts move from grievances and political competition to escalation under conditions of uncertainty and misperception, to breakdowns in bargaining driven by commitment problems, and, in some cases, to large-scale organized violence. Later in the course, we return to these same mechanisms to understand why peace processes fail, why

institutions and enforcement sometimes stabilize peace and sometimes do not, and why postwar outcomes vary widely across otherwise similar conflicts.

The course draws on competing explanations from political science and related social sciences, including political, economic, organizational, and psychological accounts of conflict and cooperation. A central analytic goal is to evaluate how well different explanations travel across contexts and where they break down. To that end, the course examines a range of cases, including Colombia, Rwanda, Israel/Gaza, Ethiopia, Ukraine, Syria, Bosnia, and Afghanistan, integrating case material throughout as evidence used to test, refine, and challenge theoretical arguments.

The course is organized into three segments. The first focuses on the origins and escalation of civil war and ethnic violence, including how civil wars are defined and measured, why violence is concentrated in time and space, and why escalation occurs in some conflicts but not others. The second examines participation, organization, and violence during war, including why individuals and communities participate, how armed groups govern or fragment, and how civilians are treated. The final segment addresses conflict management, resolution, and aftermath, examining why peace processes fail, how institutions and enforcement attempt to overcome commitment problems, why external intervention has mixed effects, and why similar conflicts can leave very different long-run legacies.

Through readings, seminar discussions, analytical writing, and exams, students will (a) develop a substantive understanding of major theoretical approaches and empirical findings on civil wars and ethnic violence; (b) critically evaluate competing explanations and the quality of evidence used to support them; (c) analyze how causal mechanisms operate across different conflict settings and policy environments; and (d) formulate and communicate evidence-based arguments about policy responses to violent conflict. These analytical skills are foundational for civic and professional life, including the ability to distinguish explanation from advocacy, assess evidence, and reason carefully about policy tradeoffs under uncertainty. Learning outcomes are assessed through active participation in class discussions, written assignments that require close engagement with the readings, and exams that test students' ability to apply course concepts to empirical and policy-relevant problems. Students who do best in this course are those who consistently ask, "What problem is this reading trying to solve, and how well does it solve it?"

3 Requirements

3.1 Required Readings

One book is required for purchase. All other readings will be posted on Canvas.

Blattman, Christopher. 2022. *Why We Fight: The Roots of War and the Paths to Peace*. New York: Viking. *This book serves as the core theoretical and empirical backbone of the course, providing a unifying framework for many of the puzzles examined throughout the semester.*

3.2 Syllabus

Each of you needs to post to the Canvas assignment by **Thursday, January 22** to let us know that you have read through the syllabus and that you understand all that is required of you. If you have larger course questions, please ask in your post or in class. Also, readings for this

course may be updated as the semester progresses (e.g., to incorporate relevant new research). For the most part this will not happen, but if so, I will give as much notice as possible.

3.3 Attendance and Participation

Attendance and participation are worth 15% of your grade. I expect all students to attend class regularly and to participate actively in discussions that connect theoretical arguments to empirical cases introduced across multiple sessions. Attendance, quizzes, and short writing assignments will be used to assess participation. Students should complete readings by the date listed and be prepared to discuss them.

3.4 Writing Assignment

Students must complete one writing assignment, which is worth 10% of your final grade. It is due at the beginning of class on the date listed. The paper must be submitted via Canvas. Citation style is flexible, but references must be complete, consistent, and accurate.

For this assignment, you will analyze data on civil wars using the Uppsala Conflict Data Program. The maximum length is six single-spaced pages (excluding tables/figures).

Students must address:

1. How civil war is defined and measured
2. Number of civil war onsets
3. Countries with the most onsets
4. Most conflict-prone region
5. Most conflict-prone decade

You will also compare alternative measures, reflect on observed trends, and propose three research questions.

3.5 Oral Presentation

Students will complete a team-based oral presentation (eight minutes plus discussion) and submit a 3–4 page outline in advance. This assignment is worth 10% of the final grade.

3.6 Exams

There will be two midterm exams and a final exam. Both midterm exams will be handwritten in blue books, which you must purchase (at Co-op) and bring to class. The final exam will be administered during the scheduled final exam period; details on format and logistics will be provided once the university releases the final exam schedule. Exams will emphasize the ability to identify core empirical puzzles, compare competing explanations, and apply course mechanisms to new cases rather than rote memorization of readings.

3.7 Schedule of Important Dates

The dates below correspond to the course schedule as presented in the reading calendar. Any updates will be announced in class and on Canvas.

Date	Assignment	Time	% of Grade
Jan 22	Syllabus Canvas assignment	By 11:59pm	Required
Feb 5	Obtain presentation assignment	In class	Required
Feb 12	Midterm Exam I	In class	20%
Mar 5	Midterm Exam II	In class	20%
Mar 26	Writing Assignment due	Midnight	10%
Apr 30, 1–3pm (RLP 1.106)	Final Exam	University exam period	25%
	Attendance / Participation		15%

3.8 Make-up Exams and Assignments

No make-up exams or quizzes will be given unless either prior consent is obtained from the instructor or a valid excuse is obtained according to university guidelines. I will consent to give makeup exams only in the case of a documented emergency or some other commensurate event.

Papers arriving late (same day) will be subject to a 1/3 grade reduction. For each successive late day, your grade will be reduced by 1/3 each day (i.e., an *A* will be lowered to an *A–* on the first day late, an *A–* to a *B+* on the second day late, and so on).

3.9 Assignment of Grades

Grades are assigned on the following scale: *A* = 94–100; *A–* = 90–93; *B+* = 87–89; *B* = 84–86; *B–* = 80–83; ...; *F* = 63 or lower. If you have a complaint about how your exam (or paper) was graded, I am happy to take a second look. You must type a formal appeal addressing the problem and explain clearly what you originally wrote, why you wrote it, and how you think your original response correctly answered the original question. Additionally, you must turn in the original exam (or paper) along with your typed appeal.

4 University and Course Policies

4.1 Prerequisites

There are no formal prerequisites for this course. Prior coursework in political science, international relations, or related social sciences will be helpful but is not required.

4.2 Online Resources

The syllabus, all grades, paper topics, lecture outlines, and more will be posted on Canvas. Although the lecture outlines will be posted here, do not assume that this exempts you from taking notes in class. The outlines will facilitate your note taking, but will not provide sufficient detail from which to study for exams.

4.3 Academic Integrity

UT students should seek to be totally honest in their dealings with others. They should complete their own work and be evaluated based upon that work. They should avoid academic dishonesty and misconduct in all its forms, including plagiarism, fabrication or falsification, cheating, and other academic misconduct. Students are expected not only to be honest but also to assist other students in fulfilling their commitment to be honest.

While students should make a general commitment to proper academic conduct, there are still specific skills most students need to master over time in order to correctly cite sources, especially in the age of the internet, as well as deal with the stress and strain of college life without resorting to cheating. Please know that as your professor I will notice instances of cheating on exams or plagiarizing on papers.

Writing submitted for credit at UT must consist of the student's own ideas presented in sentences and paragraphs of his or her own construction. The work of other writers or speakers may be included when appropriate (as in a research paper or book review), but such material must support the student's own work (not substitute for it) and must be clearly identified by appropriate introduction and punctuation and by footnoting or other standard referencing.

The substitution of another person's work for the student's own or the inclusion of another person's work without adequate acknowledgment (whether done intentionally or not) is known as plagiarism. It is a violation of academic, ethical, and legal standards and can result in a failing grade not only for the paper but also for the course in which the paper is written. In extreme cases, it can justify expulsion from the University. Because of the seriousness of the possible consequences, students who wonder if their papers are within these guidelines should visit a writing lab or consult a faculty member who specializes in the teaching of writing or who specializes in the subject discussed in the paper. Useful books to consult on the topic include the current *Harbrace College Handbook*, the *MLA Handbook*, and James D. Lester's *Writing Research Papers*.

Please also see the University Honor Code site for more information at: [\[Link here\]](#).

4.4 Generative AI

The University encourages all students to engage with AI responsibly and to recognize the important limitations of using generative AI for learning. The University offers specific guidance for responsible adoption of AI for learning and the limitations of using generative AI for learning that all students should review regularly. In this course, students are 100% responsible for all academic work they produce. The use of generative artificial intelligence tools (or Large Language Models [LLMs]) such as CoPilot, UT Spark or ChatGPT in this class is permitted for students who wish to use them, provided the content generated by AI is properly cited according to the citation policies in this syllabus. If you are considering the use of generative AI but are unsure if your use is aligned with course policy, or the extent to which they may be utilized responsibly, please ask.

4.5 Classroom Civility

This course depends on an environment that supports respectful, focused, and engaged discussion. Behaviors that disrupt class, such as arriving late, packing up bags before the end of class, using cell phones, or engaging in unrelated activities during class, detract from the learning experience for everyone.

Browsing the internet, checking messages or email, and playing games on laptops during class are inappropriate because they interfere with attention and participation. Taking notes on a laptop is, of course, appropriate. In calculating attendance and participation grades, I will take into account whether students are engaged in discussion and lecture or are distracted by unrelated activities.

The exchange of diverse viewpoints is central to the goals of the course, and disagreement is both expected and encouraged. However, incivility toward others is not acceptable. Students should not demean, dismiss, or target others based on their viewpoints. Questions about expectations for classroom conduct are always welcome and should be directed to me.

4.6 Sharing of Course Materials

No materials used in this class, including, but not limited to, lecture hand-outs, videos, assessments (quizzes, exams, papers, projects, homework assignments), in-class materials, review sheets and additional problem sets, may be shared online or with anyone outside of the class without my explicit, written permission. Unauthorized sharing of materials may facilitate cheating. The University is aware of the sites used for sharing materials, and any materials found online that are reasonably associated with you, or any suspected unauthorized sharing of materials, will be reported to Student Conduct and Academic Integrity in the Office of the Dean of Students. These reports can result in initiation of the student conduct process and include charge(s) for academic misconduct, potentially resulting in sanctions, including a grade impact.

4.7 Class Recordings

Class recordings are reserved only for students in this class for educational purposes and are protected under FERPA. The recordings should not be shared outside the class in any form. Violation of this restriction by a student could lead to Student Misconduct proceedings.

4.8 Access

The university is committed to creating an accessible and inclusive learning environment for students with disabilities consistent with university policy and federal and state law. Please let me know if you experience any barriers to learning so I can work with you to ensure you have equal opportunity to participate fully in this course. If you are a student with a disability, or think you may have a disability, and need accommodations please contact Disability and Access (D&A). Please refer to D&A's website for contact and more information. If you are already registered with D&A, please deliver your accommodation letter to me as early as possible in the semester so we can discuss your approved accommodations and needs in this course.

4.9 Religious Holidays

By UT Austin policy, you must notify me of your pending absence for a religious holy day as far in advance as possible of the date of observance. If you must miss a class, an examination, a work assignment, or a project in order to observe a religious holy day, you will be given an opportunity to complete the missed work within a reasonable time after the absence. For questions regarding religious accommodations, please contact the Office of the Dean of Students.

4.10 Security and Emergencies

Please familiarize yourself with important safety information available to you on the Security and Emergency Management website: [\[Link here\]](#).

4.11 Sensitive Content

This is a course on civil wars and ethnic violence. As such, course materials, discussions, and assignments will necessarily engage with sensitive subject matter, including topics such as violence, kidnapping and abduction, sexual assault, abuse, racism, ethnic discrimination, religious discrimination, and sexism. Much of this material may be emotionally and intellectually challenging, and some content may be particularly sensitive.

I will provide advance notice when readings, discussions, or assignments involve physical or emotional harm or other potentially disturbing material. Where appropriate, content warnings will also be indicated on the course schedule next to readings or activities that involve hate, harm, or violence. At the same time, because this is a course centered on political violence within states, students should expect that many class sessions will involve difficult material.

Because I am not a mental health professional, I may not be aware of all the ways course material could affect individual students. If you would like me to be aware of particular circumstances, please visit with me in office hours or provide an accommodations letter, and I will do my best to adjust where possible. To the full extent feasible, I will provide alternative readings, assignments, or discussion options to support student learning.

More generally, I aim to create space for thoughtful, respectful, and meaningful discussion of difficult topics throughout the semester, while balancing the weightiness of the subject matter with clear expectations and, when possible, advance notice of especially sensitive material. Students with concerns related to these topics are encouraged to consult the UT Counseling and Mental Health Center ([\[Link here\]](#)) or another appropriate support resource. (Some material adapted from University of Michigan inclusive teaching resources.)

4.12 Caregiving Responsibilities

I am not aware of a specific university policy governing children or other dependents in the classroom. The following guidelines are intended to support students with caregiving responsibilities while maintaining a productive learning environment for everyone (adapted from Melissa Cheyney's syllabus). Specifically: (a) students caring for infants, including breastfeeding parents, are welcome to attend class with their child as often as necessary; (b) unforeseen disruptions in caregiving responsibilities may occasionally require a student to miss class, in which case such absences will be excused and I will work with you to ensure you can keep up with course material, with comparable flexibility available for other serious, unavoidable circumstances that affect students' ability to attend class; (c) while this is not intended as a long-term childcare solution, occasionally bringing a child to class to cover gaps in care is acceptable; (d) all students are expected to help create a respectful and welcoming environment that recognizes a range of caregiving and personal responsibilities; (e) when children are present in class, students should sit near the door so that if a child needs attention and is disrupting learning for others, the student may step out briefly, and I will work with you to ensure you remain caught up; and (f) while I maintain the same academic expectations for all students regardless of caregiving status, I am happy to problem-solve with you to support your progress in balancing coursework with caregiving responsibilities.

5 *Tentative* Course and Reading Schedule

5.1 Orientation and the First Puzzle: Patterns of Violence

Course Overview and Global Patterns (Tue 1/13)

Puzzle 1: Why does organized violence show up in some places and years, but not in otherwise similar places and years?

- Read syllabus

What Is Civil War? Measurement and Thresholds (Thu 1/15 & Tue 1/20)

Puzzle 1 (continued): Why do credible datasets disagree about where and when civil wars occur?

- Davies et al., 2025
- Farmer, 1996
- Bara & Schumann, 2025
- Mueller, 2000

5.2 From Conflict to War

Interests, Power, and Opportunity (Thu 1/22 & Tue 1/27)

Puzzle 2: Why do violent organizations emerge in some political conflicts but not others with similar grievances?

- Fearon and Laitin, 2003
- Sambanis, 2004
- Blattman, *Why We Fight*, ch. 1–2

Uncertainty/Escalation (Thu 1/29, Tue 2/3, Thu 2/5, Tue 2/10)

Puzzle 3: Why do actors sometimes escalate conflicts they would prefer to avoid?

- Blattman, *Why We Fight*, ch. 4

Midterm Exam I (Thu 2/12)

In-class midterm exam.

Misperceptions and Fear (Tue 2/17, Thu 2/19, Tue 2/24)

Puzzle 4: Why do conflicts sometimes spiral because actors misunderstand one another's intentions or capabilities?

- Blattman, *Why We Fight*, ch. 6

Commitment Problems and Bargaining Failure (Thu 2/26)**Puzzle 5: Why does bargaining fail even when war is costly for all sides?**

- Blattman, *Why We Fight*, ch. 5

5.3 Participation, Organization, and Violence**Identity, Participation, Mobilization (Tue 3/3)****Puzzle 6: When and how do identities become politically and militarily mobilized?****Puzzle 7: Why do some people join armed groups while others facing similar risks do not?**

- Taras and Ganguly, 2006
- Blattman, *Why We Fight*, ch. 3
- Humphreys & Weinstein, 2008 (Skim)

Midterm Exam II (Thu 3/5)

In-class midterm exam.

5.4 Ending Wars and the Role of External Actors**Violence Against Civilians (Tue 3/10)****Puzzle 8: Why are civilians sometimes protected and sometimes deliberately targeted?**

- Reid, 2018
- Posen, 1993
- Davenport and Stam, 2009

Commitment and Conflict Management (Tue 3/12)**Puzzle 10: Why do peace processes fail even when peace appears preferable to all sides?**

- Walter, 2002
- Blattman, *Why We Fight*, ch. 5 (revisit)

Spring Break (March 16–21)*No classes held.*

Institutions for Peace: Interdependence and Constraints I (Tue 3/24)**Puzzle 11: How do interdependence and institutions help sustain peace?**

- Blattman, *Why We Fight*, ch. 7

Institutions for Peace: Interdependence and Constraints II (Thu 3/26)

- Writing Assignment 1 due March 26 (midnight)
- Arjona, 2014
- Blattman, *Why We Fight*, ch. 8

Rules, Enforcement, and Peacekeeping (Tue 3/31)**Puzzle 12: Why do enforcement and third-party support sometimes make peace credible and sometimes fail?**

- Blattman, *Why We Fight*, ch. 9
- Doyle and Sambanis, 2006
- Autusserre, 2015

External Intervention (Thu 4/2)**Puzzle 13: Why does outside involvement sometimes reduce violence and sometimes prolong it?**

- Blattman, *Why We Fight*, ch. 10
- Findley, 2018
- Callen et al, 2023 (Policy report)

5.5 Consequences and Wrap-Up**Spoilers and Wayward Paths (Tue 4/7)****Puzzle 14: Why do peace processes unravel due to spoilers, fragmentation, or unintended consequences?**

- Stedman, 1997
- Findley and Young, 2015 (Skim)
- Blattman, *Why We Fight*, ch. 11

After War I: Political and Social Consequences (Thu 4/9)**Puzzle 15: Why do similar civil wars leave very different political legacies?**

- Rohner, 2023
- Savun, 2022

After War II: Spillovers and Long-Run Risks (Tue 4/14)

- Salehyan and Gleditsch, 2006
- Milton, et al., 2013

After War III: Feedback, Recurrence, and Prevention (Thu 4/16)

- Walter, 2004
- Blattman, *Why We Fight*, ch. “Conclusion: The Peacemeal Engineer”

Course Synthesis and Policy Implications (Tue 4/21)

- Discussion and synthesis

Review Session (Thu 4/23)

- Readings and preparation TBA

Final Exam (Thu 4/30)

- Thursday April 30, 1–3pm, RLP 1.106

References

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