

PLSC 260-02: INTRODUCTION TO PUBLIC POLICY

Spring 2024
Department of Political Science
University of Richmond

Instructor	Mackenzie R. Dobson Instructor of Political Science University of Richmond
Contact	mackenzie.dobson@richmond.edu
Course Time & Location	Tuesdays & Thursdays 12:00pm-1:15pm, Weinstein Hall 303
Office Hours	Tuesdays & Thursdays 10:30am-11:45am, Weinstein Hall 203

Course Description

Welcome to PLSC 260: Introduction to Public Policy! Questions that motivate this course include: Why do governments deal with certain issues/problems, while others are dealt with by the private sector or not at all? How do political actors and institutions shape the policies that exist in America? How do we determine what is best policy? How do scholars, politicians, and administrators evaluate public policies? Can we evaluate policy in a non-political way?

These are a handful of the questions we will explore in this course. In answering these questions, students will be introduced to the fundamental elements of public policymaking in the United States. Attention is given to the various steps of the policy process, the institutions and actors involved, and the conditions that facilitate or impede policy adoption and implementation at all levels of government. We will also discuss policy tradeoffs between efficiency, effectiveness, political feasibility, and equality. The first half of the course focuses on how and why policies are developed and how they change. The second half deals with substantive policy areas including economic/budgetary, health, welfare, social security, environmental, and education policy. By the end of the course, students should have a social scientific lens that they can use to systematically understand and evaluate public policy issues in their roles as engaged citizens.

Required Course Materials

- Kraft, Michael E. and Scott R. Furlong. *Public Policy: Politics, Analysis, and Alternatives. Seventh Edition.* CQ Press, 2021.
- Cairney, Paul. *Understanding Public Policy: Theories and Issues. Second Edition.* Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.

In addition to these textbooks, there are several supplementary readings listed on the syllabus. These readings can be downloaded from the course Blackboard site.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of the course, students will:

1. Understand the essential elements of public policy, how public policy is developed and implemented, and the various strategies available to government for addressing policy problems;
2. Be able to explain how American political institutions and actors affect the development and implementation of public policy;
3. Be able to identify and map the interests, institutions, and formal and informal actors that surround policy issues;
4. Apply policy analysis tools to compare the potential trade-offs of different policy approaches to address a particular policy problem;
5. Identify and describe the stages of policy development, and explain how public policy theories and models relate to real world issues;
6. Critically argue perspectives on policy issues using evidence and public policy concepts;
7. Gain familiarity with social science research methods and develop skills to critically analyze academic scholarship.

Course Requirements

Your course grade will be determined from the following assignments:

Exams 45%

■ A midterm exam that accounts for 20% of your overall grade and a final exam that accounts for 25% of your overall grade.

Policy in Practice Assignment 20%

■ An individual writing assignment that will be developed throughout the semester in which you will step into the role of a policy practitioner! You have the option to write an issue brief, a policy history, or a decision memo based on a policy issue of your choosing that corresponds with the substantive issue areas covered in the course (economic/budgetary, health, welfare, environmental, education).

Weekly Reading Quizzes 12.5%

■ Weekly reading quizzes that will be taken on Blackboard asynchronously. These quizzes are designed to ensure that you are doing the assigned reading. Students who complete the reading will find these quizzes to be relatively quick and easy.

Attendance & Participation 12.5%

■ Grade assigned based on attendance, engagement with lecture, class discussion, and class activities.

Critical Reaction Papers 10%

■ Two (2) critical reaction papers based on supplementary readings where you should 1) briefly summarize the article, 2) point out things in the article that you found interesting or novel, and 3) point out things in the article that you felt were incorrect or unclear, each accounting for 5% of your overall grade.

Exams

You will complete both a midterm and final exam in this course. Each exam will be administered and completed *in class*. The midterm exam will be held on **Tuesday, February 27th** during our scheduled class time. The final exam will be held on **Tuesday, April 30th** from 2pm-5pm, as required by the Registrar. Each exam will include multiple choice, short answer, and essay questions.

Policy in Practice Assignment

In this course, we will delve into a range of substantive policy issues, including economic/budgetary policy, welfare policy, environmental policy, health policy, and education policy. To enhance your understanding and engage practically with these topics, you will have the opportunity to complete a unique writing assignment. You may choose to write a policy brief, a policy history, or a decision memo, focusing on a policy issue related to one of the areas we discuss. This assignment is designed to develop your analytical and writing skills in real-world policy contexts.

I will support you extensively in this endeavor. Resources on how to effectively craft each type of document will be provided. Additionally, we will hold a class workshop dedicated to this assignment, and a special session with a social science librarian who will introduce and discuss relevant resources. I will also be available during office hours for personalized assistance and discussions about your work.

The specific requirements, such as length, target audience, and content focus, will vary depending on the topic and the type of document you choose. Detailed guidelines will be provided as the course progresses. This assignment is an excellent opportunity to apply the theoretical knowledge gained in class to practical, real-world policy analysis and communication. I encourage you to explore these issues creatively and critically, as you develop skills that are essential for policy practitioners.

Weekly Reading Quizzes

Weekly reading quizzes that will be taken on Blackboard asynchronously, meaning you can take the quiz anytime between finishing the weekly readings each Thursday, and when the quiz is due the following Monday at 5pm. These quizzes are designed to ensure that you are doing the assigned reading. Students who complete the reading will find these quizzes to be quick and easy. Each quiz will contain a few questions that relate to the reading for the respective week. Students will have ten (10) minutes to complete each quiz^a. I will drop your two (2) lowest quiz grades and average the rest.

^aStudents with Disability Accommodation Notices that feature extended time accommodations will be accommodated accordingly through Blackboard's time management software.

Critical Reaction Papers

You will also complete two (2) critical reaction papers. Each paper will account for 5% of your final grade, meaning your written work will constitute 10% of your final grade. In these two-page papers, you will review one of the supplementary academic articles assigned during Part III of the course and posted on Blackboard. In these reaction papers, you should 1) briefly summarize the article, 2) point out things in the article that you found interesting or novel, and 3) point out things in the article that you felt were incorrect or unclear. The summary should constitute no more than one-half page of the reaction. Your papers should be a full **two** pages, not 1.5 or 1.75. In addition to your two-page reaction, you should include a full bibliographic citation to the articles you read. Please use Chicago style citations (with parenthetical in-text citations rather than footnotes). You should use 12-point, Times New Roman font with 1-inch margins.

Your reactions should focus on the quality of the argument and the suitability of the tests of that argument. This is an analytic exercise, not a rhetorical one. Concentrate on questions like “has the author conveyed his or her point clearly”, “does the evidence convince you”, and “what evidence would convince you.” Do not discuss the normative implications of the research. We are interested in how and why things happen, not what should be happening. Be sure this perspective is reflected in your essays.

This sort of an assignment requires a very different kind of reading and writing than that to which you are probably accustomed. Scientific writing is very different than narrative writing and journalistic writing. There is strong focus on clarity and logic. Since this is likely to be unfamiliar to you, we will spend some time in class learning to consume social science research and literature. We will learn how to read an article, to examine its results, and to tell when solid or faulty conclusions have been drawn. It is my strong belief that a familiarity with logical discourse and scientific research will be a benefit to all of you, regardless of your long-term career interests. At some point in your lives, you will all have to convince someone of something. Learning how professional scientists craft and evaluate an argument meant to convince other scientists will certainly assist you when that day comes.

Your reaction to these papers should focus on clarity in writing. Do not waste time and space on fluffy flowery introductions. Be clear and specific in your writing. Make sure every sentence needs to be there. If you can say it with 12 words instead of 20, do so. If you can write a paragraph with 3 sentences instead of 4, do so. Your reaction papers should be printed and turned in at the beginning of class on their respective due dates.

Attendance & Participation

You are expected to be present in class. I allow one unexcused absence, though additional unexcused absences will negatively affect your participation grade. If you are not present when I take attendance, it is your responsibility to check in with me to make sure your presence is recorded.

Participation includes attendance, class discussion, and group activities. You are expected to come to class prepared to engage with the assigned readings. This does not mean that you have to fully understand each reading before class, however, it does mean that you should have read **all** assigned readings and prepare questions.

Class sessions will consist of lectures, but I work quite hard to make lecture engaging, so your participation is paramount in the course's success. Coming to class prepared and attentive will make all the world of difference in turning this into a quality experience for all of us.

Keeping Current With The News

One neat feature of this course is that some of the topics we learn about in this course will be happening in real time. It is important, both for this course and to be an engaged citizen, that you regularly read the news. I do not expect that you will spend an hour every day reading the entire daily edition of the New York Times. I do expect, however, that you will have a working knowledge of what is happening in American politics. The University of Richmond provides all students with free access to the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. (click [here](#) to sign up).

Here are some other news sources that I recommend checking out:

- [The Daily Podcast](#) (New York Times)
- [Up First Podcast](#) (NPR)
- [The Monkey Cage](#) (Washington Post)
- [The Richmond Times-Dispatch](#) (Local News)

Grade Scale

Final grades for the course will be based on the following scale. I reserve the right to make adjustments to grades based on overall performance in the course. There will be no extra credit offered in the course, nor will there be curving grades.

Letter Grade	Percentage	Letter Grade	Percentage	Letter Grade	Percentage
A	93-100	B-	80-82	D+	67-69
A-	90-92	C+	77-79	D	63-66
B+	87-89	C	73-76	F	62 or below
B	83-87	C-	70-72		

Expectations and Procedure*Honor Code*

The academy comprises a network of scholars who are engaged in learning and creating knowledge. We must follow codes of both professional and ethical conduct. A large part of this is academic integrity. I encourage you to think about academic integrity in two primary ways:

1. First, we help one another grow as scholars. This oftentimes happens by sharing our ideas so they may be subjected to criticism, sharpening the ideas of our colleagues, and learning from one another. In fact, this is what research is all about. Throughout this course, we will discuss scholarship, oftentimes critically, and consider each other's thoughts on the work. Giving and receiving criticism in order to become a better scholar, however, requires that, at all times, we remain respectful and professional with one another, even when we disagree with folks.
2. Second, we are forthright about the contributions we make. Being a scholar means we are tasked with adding to the world of extant research and, in effect, allow future scholars to build off of our contributions. This means that we must cite the sources we use that aren't our own. This allows it to be made clear whose work aided us in our pursuit of knowledge, and we allow future scholars build upon our work; failure to do so constitutes plagiarism. Similarly, repurposing work as your own violates the pillars of academic integrity.

I assume that all work, pledged or not pledged, has been completed in accordance to the University of Richmond's Honor Code. Click [here](#) for more information about the Honor Code at the University of Richmond.

Professional Conduct in the Classroom

In our course, there will be many opportunities to discuss ideas in large and small groups. To support a productive, respectful, and learning-focused classroom, I ask that you participate with the following classroom norms, which we will review and add to together as a class:

1. *Listen respectfully.* Don't interrupt, turn to other tabs/apps, or engage in private chats while others are speaking.
2. *Understand that we are bound to make mistakes* in this space, as anyone does when approaching complex tasks or learning new skills. Strive to see your mistakes and others' as valuable elements of the learning process.
3. Understand that *your words have effects on others.* Speak with care. If you learn that something you've said was experienced as disrespectful or marginalizing, listen carefully and try to understand that perspective. Learn how you can do better in the future.
4. *Recognize how your own social positionality (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, ability) informs your perspectives and reactions* to your instructor, peers, and those whose work you study in this course.
5. *Strive for intellectual humility.* Be willing to grapple with challenging ideas.

Technology

I invite you to bring technology into the classroom. You may use laptops or tablets to take notes and access course readings during lecture. Please use technology only for the purposes of course work during lecture.

Communication

I will post grades, send class e-mails, upload lectures, etc. within our Blackboard site. Be sure that you can access the e-mail address listed. I will only send e-mail out to your Richmond e-mail accounts listed on the course roster in Blackboard. I will not keep track of any other e-mail addresses you may use. The best way for you to contact me is via my Richmond email (listed on page 1). If you'd like to schedule an office hours meeting or discuss a course related issue please feel free to send me an email. Please always remember to include the course number and section number ("PLSC 260-02") somewhere in the subject line of any email you send to me.

Office Hours

I will hold weekly office hours on **Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10:30am to 11:45am** in-person (right after lecture). Please make regular use of office hours. I am available during this time to meet with students to discuss course materials, political science, or other issues that may arise. Holding office hours and engaging with students is part of my job, so please do not feel as though it is a “nuisance” to ask questions or to come chat. It is one of my favorite parts of being an instructor!

Late Assignments

Late assignments will result in a reduction of 1/2 of a letter grade for every 24 hours that pass. If you have an exceptional circumstance that prevents you from completing your work on time, please contact me before the assignment is due and I will be happy to work with you.

Inclusive Learning Statement

Every member of this class must engage in discussion in ways that display respect for everyone in the space, so that we may build a community of trust and open inquiry. Bigotry and discriminatory language will not be tolerated. As an educator, I aim to create a learning environment that respects and affirms the diversity of students' experiences and perspectives.

Additional Resources

If you require academic accommodations, please reach out to me and make arrangements with the appropriate university offices (linked [here](#)). I want you all to have the resources that you need to succeed in this course. I will honor any approved accommodation as long as you are able to provide documentation from the University.

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) offers resources for students experiencing pressing personal circumstances. Please reach out to CAPS at this [link](#) or call 804-289-8119 if needed.

Given that this course requires writing assignments, you may find the Writing Center useful (linked [here](#)). The Writing Center assists writers at all levels and provides feedback on your work.

About Your Instructor

Hello! My name is Mackenzie Dobson and I am a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Virginia studying American politics, public policymaking, and quantitative research methods. In particular, my research focuses on American legislatures, representation, party conflict and compromise, and the policy process. Given my interest in public policy, I am delighted to be your instructor for this course!

My overarching goal for this course is for each and every student to learn about and engage with the public problems and potential solutions to those problems that our nation confronts. We will work collectively to meet all the learning objectives (outlined on page 6) in our study of the policymaking process; and use course concepts in an applied way, such as through news events, conversations with friends and family, and the like.

My approach as an educator is rather involved. I enjoy helping students think through their ideas and clarify confusion as it arises, for we will grapple with difficult concepts throughout this course. As such, I aim to help students proactively. I would much rather have students engage with me and their peers in real time as we work through questions together rather than have students voice these concerns after exams and other assignments are due. I also maintain a flexible office hours schedule, in which I am happy to accommodate you by meeting in person during my traditional office hours, or over Zoom at an alternative time.

I promise to be prepared for each class meeting and to give you my undivided attention during class. I expect the same of students. It goes without saying that surfing the web, answering email or texts, or completing work for other courses during class time is unprofessional and will not be tolerated.

Important Dates

Exams

Midterm Exam Tuesday, February 27

Final Exam Tuesday, April 30

Critical Reaction Papers

Paper #1 Thursday, February 15

Paper #2 Thursday, March 21

Policy in Practice Assignment

Topic Decision Thursday, February 1

Policy in Practice Assignment Tuesday, April 23

Course Schedule

The schedule below is tentative. As your instructor, I reserve the right to amend the syllabus. Any unexpected changes to the schedule will be announced in-class and an updated version of the syllabus will be posted to our Blackboard site.

Part 1: Introduction to public policy: What is it and why should we care about it?

This section of the course is two fold. First, it aims to provide both a foundation and orientation to vocabulary and concepts that will be used throughout the rest of the course as we discuss theories of the policy process, policy alternatives and implementation, and policy case studies. Second, it explores and clarifies basic concepts and discusses why we should care about and be aware of public policy decisions. Public policy is not made in a vacuum, so this section of the course integrates the social, economic, political, governing, and cultural contexts that affect the development and implementation of policy decisions. It does this through exploring the political, moral/ethical, and economic rationales for government involvement and intervention. Finally, it covers how market failures can occur in a variety of ways.

■ Tuesday, January 16 Course Introduction, Defining Public Policy, and Exploring Basic Policy Concepts

■ Tuesday, January 18 The Contexts of Public Policy

Policy Actor Spotlight: North Carolina Commissioner of Labor Josh Dobson

- Kraft & Furlong pgs. 1-24
- Cairney pgs. 16-19
- [Meet NC Labor Commissioner Josh Dobson](#)

Part 2: Policy Actors: Formal and Informal

This section of the course explores the interrelationships of the major government institutions and informal actors involved in the policy process. We will begin with a discussion of the growth of government by succinctly overviewing the structure of the American government established by the Constitution (federalism, the federal-state relationship, and the separation of powers). We will examine the continuing controversies over the proper allocation of responsibility between the federal government and the states and the variation among the states in their capacity for public policy innovation. We will cover the branches of government (executive, legislative, judicial) and their respective roles in policymaking in our separation of powers and shared powers system.

We will then examine the informal actors that affect policymaking, including the media, public opinion, issue networks, and interest groups. In doing so, we will discuss how the public influences policy solutions and the role of interest groups and lobbying. This will be followed by an explanation of other informal policy actors such as the media and issue networks, or expert involvement in policy development. The purpose of this review is to acquaint students with the basic components of government and to understand the influences on policy formulation and the reasons for policy delays and gridlock.

■ Tuesday, January 23 Government Institutions and Policy Capacity

- Kraft & Furlong pgs. 34-57

Small groups in-class activity: State of the states—exploring variation in state policy capacity

■ Thursday, January 25 Informal Policy Actors and Policy Capacity

Policy Actor Spotlight: Lobbyist Doddie Renfer

- Kraft & Furlong pgs. 58-70

■ Tuesday, January 30 Public Problems and Policy Alternatives

- Kraft & Furlong pgs. 138-162

Small groups in-class activity: Assessing policy alternatives with the ACA as a case study

Part 3: How the Sausage Gets Made: Theories & Models of Public Policymaking

This section of the course builds upon our exploration of basic policy concepts and familiarization of policy actors, both formal and informal, by bringing these elements together through the lens of multiple policy frameworks. These theories and approaches are found in the literature and help to explain and offer insight into which policies are viable, what solutions are available, what policy changes will occur, and at what scale these political and policy decisions will operate.

We will discuss an array of policy frameworks that vary in applicability, scope, and complexity. Students will then be able to apply these frameworks to substantive policy discussions (Part IV of the course). We will cover the following frameworks: The Policy Cycle, Incrementalism, Punctuated Equilibrium, the Multiple Streams Approach, the Advocacy Coalition Framework, and Diffusion of Innovations.

Thursday, February 1 Policy Analysis and The Policy Cycle Model

- Kraft & Furlong pgs. 112-134
- Cairney pgs. 26-36

Thursday, February 1 Policy in Practice Project Type Decision Due

Tuesday, February 6 Decisionmaking, Organizational Choice, and Incrementalism

- Cairney pgs. 55-65

Thursday, February 8 Decisionmaking, Organizational Choice, and Incrementalism (cont.)

- Lindblom, Charles. 1959. "The Science of Muddling Through." *Public Administration Review*. 19:79-88
- Etzioni, Amitai. 1967. "Mixed-Scanning: A Third Approach to Decision-Making." *Public Administration Review*. 27:385-392.
- [Incrementalism and Mixed Scanning](#)

Tuesday, February 13 Agenda Setting and Punctuated Equilibrium Theory

- Cairney pgs.147-169

Thursday, February 15 Agenda Setting and Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (cont.)

- Baumgartner, Frank R. and Bryan D. Jones. 2009. *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*. Chapter 5. University of Chicago.
- [The Punctuated Equilibrium of Telemedicine Digital Health Solutions and Government’s Role](#)

Thursday, February 15 Critical Reaction Paper #1 Due

Tuesday, February 20 Policy in Practice Workshop Day

- Read the resources corresponding to your policy in practice assignment type!

Thursday, February 22 Midterm Exam Review

Tuesday, February 27 Midterm Exam

Thursday, February 29 Policy Networks and the Advocacy Coalition Framework

- Cairney pgs. 170-187

Small groups in-class activity: Advocacy coalitions in US policymaking—gun violence, LGBTQ+ rights, and pesticides in US agriculture as case studies

Tuesday, March 5 Policy Entrepreneurs and the Multiple Streams Approach

- Cairney pgs. 188-206

Thursday, March 7 Policy Entrepreneurs and the Multiple Streams Approach (cont.)

- Kingdon, John W. 2002. *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*. Chapter 9. Little Brown.

Tuesday, March 12 No Class! (Spring Break)

Thursday, March 14 No Class! (Spring Break)

Tuesday, March 19 Policy Learning and the Diffusion of Innovations

- Cairney pgs. 207-226
- [The Influences of Public Opinion and Party Power on Anti-LGBTQ Bills in the 2023 State Legislative Session.](#)

Thursday, March 21Policy Learning and the Diffusion of Innovations (cont.)

- Berry, Frances Stokes and William D. Berry. 1990. “State Lottery Adoptions as Policy Innovations: An Event History Analysis.” *American Political Science Review* 84:395-416.
- Haider-Markel, Donald P. 2001. “Policy Diffusion as a Geographical Expansion of the Scope of Political Conflict: Same Sex Marriage Bans in the 1990s.” *State Politics and Policy Quarterly* 1:5-26.

Small groups in-class activity: Policy diffusion in the American states

Thursday, March 21 **Critical Reaction Paper # 2 Due**

Part 4: Policy Case Studies: Exploring Substantive Policy Issue Areas

This final section of the course aims to synthesize the material from the previous parts of the course by bringing the skills students have honed throughout the various sections full circle. At this point, students will have developed the skills necessary to think critically about and engage with "real-world" policy issues and discussions. In particular, we will discuss the following policy issue areas: economic and budgetary policy health care policy welfare and social security policy, environmental policy, and education policy.

Tuesday, March 26 Economic and Budgetary Policy

Policy Actor Spotlight: Former North Carolina State Budget Director Charlie Perusse

- Meet Former NC State Budget Director Charlie Perusse
- Kraft and Furlong pgs. 207-244

Thursday, March 28 Economic and Budgetary Policy (cont.)

Small groups in-class activity: Analyzing tax policy

Tuesday, April 2 Health Care Policy

- Kraft and Furlong pgs. 250-284

Thursday, April 4 **No Class!**
(Professor Dobson to attend MPSA conference)

Tuesday, April 9 Health Care Policy (cont.)

Policy Actor Spotlight: Director of the Center for Disease Control Dr. Mandy Cohen

- Meet Director of the CDC Dr. Mandy Cohen

Thursday, April 11 Welfare and Social Security Policy

- Kraft and Furlong pgs. 294-321

Tuesday, April 16, 2024 Environmental Policy

- Kraft and Furlong pgs. 367-405

Policy Actor Spotlight: North Carolina Secretary of Environmental Quality Elizabeth Biser

- Meet NC Secretary of Environmental Quality Elizabeth Biser

Thursday, April 18 Education Policy

- Kraft and Furlong pgs. 328-359

Tuesday, April 23 Education Policy (cont.)

Policy Actor Spotlight: TBA

- Affirmative Action and Legacy Admissions (NPR Podcast Episode).
- University of Virginia will limit ‘legacy’ factor in admissions
- Virginia Tech does away with legacy and early decision admissions

Tuesday, April 23 **Policy in Practice Assignment Due**

Thursday, April 25 Final Exam Review

Tuesday, April 30 **Final Exam (2pm-5pm)**