PA 507 – The Public Policy Process

Fall 2025 | Monday 6:00pm – 8:45pm | 012 Winston Hall

Instructor	Email	Office Hours	Office Location
Graham Ambrose	gwambros@ncsu.edu	Tuesday 12pm – 1pm	Winston 125

Course overview

Description

Public policies are the primary instruments with which governments seek to pursue their goals. Governments use public policies to compel behavior, allocate resources, protect citizens' rights, signal public values, generate revenue, and serve other functions, in line with their objectives. The salience of public policies in public affairs warrants attention to their design, as well as the broader process and contexts in which they are formulated, deliberated, implemented, and evaluated.

This course provides an introduction to fundamentals of the public policy process. Particularly, it focuses on: (i) the stages of the policy process, and activities and outputs related to different stages; (ii) types of policies developed and implemented in the policy process; (iii) salient features of policy design; (iv) policy implementation; and (v) identifying and explaining important policy phenomenon (ex. policy stasis and change, policy feedback, collective action dilemmas). Identification and explanation of policy phenomenon fosters understanding of factors influencing what happens at different stages of the public policy process, and the contexts in which the policy process takes place.

The course is intended for students who want to participate in shaping policy design and implementation within the public policy process or pursue advanced study of these topics.

Learning objectives
1. describe public policy, different types of public policies and their respective goals, and key features of policy design;
2. identify the stages of the policy process, and key activities occurring therein;
3. identify contextual and other factors that influence activities and outputs associated with different stages of the policy process;
4. describe problem, statutory, and non-statutory factors influencing policy implementation and the role of different types of actors in shaping implementation outputs and outcomes; and
5. exhibit ability to comprehend and synthesize academic and professional research.

Furthermore, this course has been developed to offer you training in critical skills needed in the field of public administration. More specifically, according to the alumni of NCSU's MPA, the following skills are the most important – in order – when entering the workforce:

1. Critical Thinking
2. Write short documents
3. Stakeholder engagement
4. Teamwork
5. General research
6. Project management

As such, these skills have been built into the class design.

Course Materials
Required
- Birkland, Thomas A. An Introduction to the Policy Process: Theories, Concepts, and Models of Public Policy Making, 5th Edition. London, England: Routledge Press, 2020.

- Cairney, P. (2019). Understanding public policy: Theories and issues (Vol. 2). Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Sandfort, J., & Moulton, S. (2014). Effective implementation in practice: Integrating public policy and management. John Wiley & Sons.

Assessments

Policy Design Exercises (4 exercises)

Students will be asked to complete a series of exercises relating to topics and contents covered throughout the class. These tasks are important for understanding and applying the course content but are also linked to the critical practical skills being taught in this class. Students will be split into teams based on interest areas and will engage in a semester long project completing each of the three exercises as a team.

While more information can be found on the course Moodle page, exercises, a brief discussion, and the associated aims are identified below. Furthermore, while the following project should not be considered generalizable research

1. **Team Evaluation Rubric (10 points)**
   a. **Skills**: Teamwork; Project Management
   b. **Description:** Once teams are identified, each team will be asked to develop a rubric that identifies their expectations for the team. This can be as detailed as the team desires, but it should serve as an outline for expectations as well as a broad workplan identifying responsibilities. At the end of the semester teams will use this rubric for self and peer evaluations, which will be attributed to final participation grades.

2. **Policy Context (15 points)**
   a. **Skills**: General Research; Critical Thinking
   b. **Description:** Before engaging with stakeholders, teams will be asked to do their own background and general research on a topic of their choosing. This research should identify reputable sources of information that help the student identify key contextual and implementation factors of the policy or program.

3. **Evaluation and Investigation of Implementation Challenges (25 points)**
   a. **Skills**: Stakeholder Engagement; Critical Thinking
   b. **Description:** Teams will be asked to develop an interview protocol designed to investigate the key factors identified in Exercise #2. After the interview protocol has been approved by Dr. Ambrose, teams will be asked to identify and interview an individual that is actively working in or familiar with the policy or program being explored. The interview is meant to fill gaps in the students' understanding, as well as identify critical challenges that can be addressed in the project.

4. **Identification of Public Interest and Agenda Setting (25 points)**
   a. **Skills**: Stakeholder Engagement; Critical Thinking
   b. **Description:** Teams will be asked to develop a short survey aimed at exploring the "public's" interest in specific design solutions attached to the challenges identified in Exercise #3. After the survey has been approved by Dr. Ambrose, teams are expected to survey their networks to produce 50 responses that can be analyzed for class.

Policy Design Memos (3 memos)

For the reflection papers, teams will be asked to apply course concepts to analyze real-world policy issues and communicate the results of the policy design exercises. These assignments are designed to test students' ability to understand and critically evaluate the reading, lecture, and discussion material covered during the semester. Write short documents is the second most identified skill – thus, these products are meant to be practice for the real world. They should be well written with a specific audience in mind. While more information can be found on the course Moodle page, brief discussions for each 2-page memo are identified below.

1. **Policy Context (25 points)**
   a. **Description:** Given their policy or program of interest, students will be asked to identify the key aspects of the case including: (1) the key aspects of the policy or program, (2) the historical context leading to its adoption/current version, (3) pros and cons reflecting the current debate, and (4) key actors/groups that support or oppose the policy or program.

2. **Evaluation and Investigation of Implementation Challenges (25 points)**
   a. **Description:** Once their interview is completed, teams will work to code and summarize the key themes of the discussion. This coding will be based on key concepts from class. These themes will then be converted into a policy memo that highlights the key implementation challenges of the policy or program along the identified concepts from class.

3. **Identification of Public Interest and Agenda Setting (25 points)**
   a. **Description:** Once 50 survey responses are received, teams will be asked to conduct basic statistics and data visualizations based on the results. These results will then be converted into a policy memo that highlights the key implications and learning from the survey.

Final Group Presentations

The final Group Presentations will be given during the final exam period. Each group should prepare a power-point presentation that works through each of the above results cohesively. The power-point presentations should be no longer than 10 minutes.

Late Assignments

Late work will be docked 2 points per 24-hour period. Each assignment will be posted on Moodle and should be submitted on Moodle. A late assignment submission may be negotiated between the student and the instructor on an as-needed basis in response to students' professional or personal circumstances.

Grading

Assessment	Points	Due date
Policy Design Exercises	75	Ongoing
Policy Design Memos	75	Ongoing
Final Group Presentations	40	12/9
Class Participation	10	Ongoing

Students can earn a total of 200 points in this course. The percentage of points earned by students will be used to calculate their course grades. The following grade scale will be used. 94–100 = A; 90–93 = A-; 87–89 = B+; 84–86 = B; 80–83 = B-; 77–79 = C+; 74–76 = C; 70–73 = C-; Below C- = Failing
I reserve the right to make changes to the weekly discussion, reading schedule and course syllabus to meet the learning needs of the students and to accommodate other professional expectations which may include research activities, professional conferences and unplanned obligations. Thank you very much for your understanding and cooperation.

Course Schedule

Schedule of classes and assignments is subject to change. In the event of any change in assignment, topic or due date, I will post announcements on Moodle and upload a corrected syllabus.

Week	Topic	Reading	Design Activities
Week 1 - 8/18	Public policy: Definition and motivations	None	(In class) Identify Groups
Week 2 – 8/25	Policy context: Introduction to the policy process	Birkland, CH 2 Cairney and Kwiatkowski (2017)	**Policy Design Exercises #1 Due**
NO CLASS 9/2 – LABOR DAY			
Week 3 – 9/8	Policy Implementation: Paradigms of Implementation	Sandfort and Moulton, CH 2 & 3	**Policy Design Exercises #2 Due** Reach out to a policy expert in your domain
Week 4 – 9/15	Policy Implementation: Street Level Bureaucrats and Actors	Sandfort and Moulton, CH 6	(In class) Building interview guides and best practices
Week 5 – 9/22	Policy Implementation: Management and Networks	Ansell et al. (2017) Agranoff (2006	**Policy Memo #1 Due** (In class) Memo Writing Exercise
Week 6 – 9/29	Policy Evaluation	Sandfort and Moulton, CH 8 Mazmanian and Sabatier (1980)	**Policy Design Exercises #3 Due** (In class) How to code Interviews
Week 7 – 10/6	**OFF FOR INTERVIEWS**		

Week	Topic	Reading	Design Activities
	NO CLASS 10/13 – FALL BREAK		
Week 8 – 10/20	Agenda Setting: Agendas and Power	Birkland, CH 6	**Policy Memo #2 Due** (In class) Building Surveys and Survey Questions
Week 9 – 10/27	Agenda Setting: Stasis and Change	Cairney CH 9 & 10	None
Week 10 – 11/3	Policy Design: Policy Types and Tools	Birkland, CH 7 & 9	**Policy Design Exercises #4 Due**
Week 11 – 11/10	Policy Design: Behavioral Assumptions	Howlett (2018) Schneider and Ingram (1990)	Start sending survey out to your networks
Week 12 – 11/17	Policy Design: Designing Systems through Rules	Birkland, p. 395-398	(In class) Analyzing Survey Data & Communicating with Figures
Week 13 – 11/24	**OFF FOR SURVEYS/ANALYSIS**		
Week 14 – 12/1	Policy Design: Policy Functions and Form	Siddiki et al. (2011)	**Policy Memo #3 Due**
	FINAL – Group Presentations: 12/9 7:00pm		**Self and Peer Evaluation Due**

Course Policies

Assignment Submittal Guidelines: Any written work except for in-class exams is expected to be typed, 12-point standard font (double spaced), on 8.5" x 11" page size with 1" margins. American Psychological Association (APA) 6th edition style, formatting, and references must be used. All work should be uploaded to Moodle. E-mailed work will not be accepted. Late work will be docked 1 point per 24-hour period.

Attendance Policy: Attendance at all sessions, and for the duration of all sessions, is expected. If you miss a class session, you should obtain any notification of change of future assignments or other course material from a class member—not the faculty member.

Course Modifications: The instructor reserves the right to make modifications to the syllabus and course schedule throughout the course, thus the syllabus is not a contract and may be modified at their discretion. Any changes will be announced in class, on Moodle and/or email; it is the responsibility of the student to adhere to these changes.

Note on Class Meeting Time: Should an emergency or unforeseen circumstances arise for the instructor, it may be necessary to cancel a class meeting. Should the faculty member not be able to meet the class at the regularly-scheduled time, the class will be notified via Moodle and/or email, with as much advance notice as is possible. Alternative online activities or class sessions will be provided within 24 hours of the cancellation to provide content and activities as originally planned for the class meeting. Be sure to check announcements and/or Moodle email on the days of class.

University Policies

NC State University Policies, Regulations and Rules: Students are responsible for reviewing the PRRs which pertain to their course rights and responsibilities. These include:
http://policies.ncsu.edu/policy/pol-04-25-05 (Equal Opportunity and Non-discrimination Policy Statement),
http://oied.ncsu.edu/home/ (Office for Institutional Equity and Diversity),
http://policies.ncsu.edu/policy/pol-11-35-01 (Code of Student Conduct),
http://policies.ncsu.edu/regulation/reg-02-50-03 (Grades and Grade Point Average),
https://policies.ncsu.edu/regulation/reg-02-20-15 (Credit-Only Courses),
https://policies.ncsu.edu/regulation/reg-02-20-04 (Audits), and
https://policies.ncsu.edu/regulation/reg-02-50-03 (Incompletes).

University Non-Discrimination Policies: It is the policy of the State of North Carolina to provide equality of opportunity in education and employment for all students and employees. Accordingly, the university does not practice or condone unlawful discrimination in any form against students, employees or applicants on the grounds of race, color, religion, creed, sex, national origin, age, disability, or veteran status. See https://policies.ncsu.edu/category/campus-environment/non-discrimination.

Reasonable accommodations will be made for students with verifiable disabilities. In order to take advantage of available accommodations, students must register with Disability Services Office in Suite 2221, Student Health Center, Campus Box 7509, 919-515-7653. https://dso.dasa.ncsu.edu/ . For more information on NC State's policy on working with students with disabilities, please see the Academic Accommodations for Students with Disabilities Regulation (REG02.20.01) https://policies.ncsu.edu/regulation/reg-02-20-01 .

Writing and Speaking Tutorial Services: If writing is difficult for you, please visit the Writing and Speaking Tutorial Services to review drafts of assignments before they are due. The Service offers free one-on-one consultation with experienced tutors who can help with all levels and stages of writing. There are six locations around campus that offer drop-in services. For more information go to: https://asc.dasa.ncsu.edu .

Academic integrity: The University's Code of Student Conduct (https://policies.ncsu.edu/policy/pol-11-35-01) specifically addresses academic integrity in parts 7-9. Students should familiarize themselves with this policy. Plagiarism is of particular concern. In any case, any instance of plagiarism will result in a failing mark for the assignment. Other forms of misconduct outlined at this site will be similarly addressed. This list of resources and authorities is neither exclusive nor exhaustive, and any violation of academic integrity as traditionally understood in the American scholarly context will be referred for University action.

Academic dishonesty includes the following offenses:
1. Claiming as your own work a paper written by another student;
2. Turning in a paper that contains paraphrases of someone else's ideas but does not give proper credit to that person for those ideas;
3. Turning in a paper that is largely a restatement in your own words of a paper written by someone else, even if you give credit to that person for those ideas. The thesis and organizing principles of a paper must be your own;
4. Turning in a paper that uses the exact words of another author without using quotation marks, even if proper credit is given in a citation, or that changes the words only slightly and claims them to be paraphrases;
5. Turning in the same paper, even in a different version, for two different courses without the permission of both professors involved.

If a student is found to have committed one of the above offenses, he/she will receive a failing grade on the assignment or exam. The case may also be sent for University action concerning the student. Please note that I may use Turnitin as a part of this course to help me ensure the academic integrity of submitted works.

Technological Requirements and Electronically-hosted Course Components: Expectations are that students will have both a computer and reliable internet connection to support access to course resources (i.e., Moodle). If you need access to additional technological support, please alert the instructor or contact the Libraries' Technology Lending Service (https://www.lib.ncsu.edu/devices).

Furthermore, students may be required to disclose personally identifiable information to other students in the course, via electronic tools like email or web postings, where relevant to the course. Examples include online discussions of class topics, and posting of student coursework. All students are expected to respect the privacy of each other by not sharing or using such information outside the course.

Health and Well-Being Resources: These are difficult times, and academic and personal stress are natural results. Everyone is encouraged to take care of themselves and their peers. If you need additional support, there are many resources on campus to help you:
- Counseling Center (NCSU Counseling Center)
- Student Health Services (Health Services | Student)
- If the personal behavior of a classmate concerns or worries you, either for the classmate's well-being or yours, we encourage you to report this behavior to the NC State CARES team: (Share a Concern).
- If you or someone you know are experiencing food, housing or financial insecurity, please see the Pack Essentials Program (Pack Essentials).

Need Help?

If you find yourself in a place where you need help, academically or otherwise, please review these Step-by-Step Help Topics.

Other Important Resources
- Keep Learning: [Keep Learning](#);
- Academic Success Center (tutoring, drop in advising, career and wellness advising): [Academic Success Center](#);
- Introduction to Zoom for students: https://youtu.be/5LbPzzPbYEw ;
- Learning with Moodle, a student's guide to using Moodle: https://moodle-projects.wolfware.ncsu.edu/course/view.php?id=226 ;
- NC State Libraries [Technology Lending Program](#).