

Public Policy HOD 2700-01

Spring 2026 Syllabus

Meeting time and location:

Monday and Wednesday, 10:10-11:25 am, 6 Magnolia Circle 102

Instructor:

Carolyn Heinrich, University Distinguished Professor, Leadership, Policy and Organizations

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Office location: Wyatt 161

Office hours: 11:30 am-12:30 pm on Mondays or by appointment; meetings via Zoom are also welcome

Course description and objectives

This course focuses on how public policy is made and executed in the United States. We will study the foundations of public policy; the policy process and factors that influence policymaking at the national, state, and local levels; federalism and intergovernmental relations; regulation and rulemaking; the practice and consequences of public policy, and the substance of current public policy issues. In doing so, we will also explore a range of public-policy making entities and arenas in which policies are implemented, including local government agencies, state legislatures and state agencies, courts of varied jurisdiction, the U.S. Congress, the President, and national executive branch agencies, as well as the many organizations that partner with government in policy implementation, such as nonprofit and community-based organizations, business and trade groups, religious organizations, and others. By the end of this course, you will have a comprehensive understanding of public policy and will better understand how and why public officials and others respond to public problems in the way they do, and how you can engage in these processes to help improve our world.

More specifically, by engaging with the course material and assignments, it is expected that you will be able to:

- Describe the “policy process” and discuss contemporary public policy issues in the context of this process;
- Understand the role and implications of specific policy instruments and concepts;
- Articulate what constitutes a “public” problem;
- Appreciate differences in how policy is proposed and implemented at U.S. federal (legislative, executive, and judicial branches), state, and local levels;
- Develop a more analytical, historical, and theoretically grounded understanding of policy conflicts and the role of politics; and
- Be better prepared to thoughtfully and meaningfully engage with and influence the policy system as professionals and private citizens.

Texts and materials

Bardach, E., and E. Patashnik. (2023). *A practical guide for policy analysis: The eightfold path to more effective problem solving* (7th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press. (Referred to as BP in course outline/readings)

Rinfret, S.R, Scheberle, D, and M.C. Pautz. (2022). *Public policy: A concise introduction* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press. (Referred to as RSP in course outline/readings)

Other required readings are posted on Brightspace and listed below by class meeting.

Course requirements and evaluation

Course grades will be based on the following:

Attendance and participation in weekly class discussions and assignments: 5% for each assignment #1-10 (50% total)

Midterm exam (in-class, closed book): 25%

Final policy brief and in-class debate/discussion: 25%

Class preparation:

Your success in this class will be based on two key things: 1) completing *all* of the required readings (as listed below), and 2) your preparation for and engagement in class discussions and the assignments. See this article on why I have included some handwritten assignments: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11943480/>.

The course and the assignments are structured the way they are because I care most that you learn and *get excited* about learning this material and see its applications to our world and your own life. One half of your grade is ultimately based on the weekly assignments that are designed to help you apply and deepen your understanding of the concepts and material presented in the text and readings. If you do not read the material assigned on the syllabus, you will not do well on the assignments or the in-class midterm exam, and you will be less well-equipped to engage in the class discussions. *I also encourage you to bring in examples of news and current events that relate to the topic of our class meetings, as this will be another engaging way to facilitate your class participation.*

Grading of the 10 weekly assignments and class participation:

Weekly assignments will be due on Wednesdays and must be completed by that day. If you have to miss a Wednesday class, the reason for absence must be conveyed to and approved by the instructor in advance of class, along with arrangements for submitting the assignment if you will not be in class. The assignment grading scale and criteria/rubric are shown below:

4-5 pts.: Assignment is completed on time and fully addresses the issues/questions **and** the student participates in class discussion.

3 pts.: Assignment is completed on time but does not fully address the issues/questions and/or the student does not participate in the class discussion.

1-2 pts.: Assignment is incomplete or it is submitted late (after the Wednesday class).

F (0 pts.): Assignment is not submitted in the week it is due.

Assignment grades are also influenced by the quality of analysis and writing, and the quality of participation in the class discussion.

John Bryson (U. of Illinois) offers four “hallmarks of good participation” in class discussions that I recommend to you: (1) risk-taking (i.e., presenting an opposing view or a different interpretation of readings/information); (2) listening (i.e., trying to understand what others are saying and why they are saying it); (3) bringing in your own personal experiences when relevant to the discussions; and (4) monitoring your own participation in terms of “airtime” and quality.

Final policy brief and in-class debate:

In week 13, we will undertake a policy brief writing exercise in class to help you prepare for the final policy brief assignment/assessment. You will be provided with a policy brief writing guide and a grading rubric and will work in groups to evaluate an existing policy brief using this same rubric that I will use in grading your final assignments. We will discuss your assessments in class, as well as the substantive topic of the policy brief, Medicaid expansion.

The final policy brief that you will each independently write as your final exam/assessment will be due on April 20th by 10:00 am. We will have an in-class discussion on the topic of the memo—child allowances/tax credits—in week 14 to help you prepare for writing the final policy brief due at the time of our final class meeting. Policy briefs should be no more than 5 pages (ideally 4 pp., with the option for a supporting table or graph).

Artificial Intelligence (AI) - Permission Required:

Students **must obtain permission** from me before using generative AI tools (including ChatGPT) for any work or assignments in this course. **Using these tools without my explicit permission is prohibited in this course and will be penalized in assignments.**

Attendance:

Attending all classes is required. **If you have a legitimate planned absence, please provide that information to me in advance of the class you will miss.** If you miss class because you are ill, please let me know at your earliest convenience. Any absences that are not communicated with me will be considered unexcused and will affect your final grade in the course.

Honor Code:

All work submitted in this course is governed by the Vanderbilt University Honor Code, found in the student handbook: https://www.vanderbilt.edu/student_handbook/the-honor-system/. If you have any doubts about how the Honor Code applies to your work in this class, please request clarification. Uncertainty about application of the Honor Code does not excuse a violation.

Classroom Accommodations:

Vanderbilt is committed to equal opportunity for students with disabilities, as am I. If you need course accommodations due to a disability, please contact VU Student Access Services (<https://www.vanderbilt.edu/student-access/>) to initiate the process. After SAS has notified me of relevant accommodations, we will discuss how these accommodations may best be approached in this class, and I will facilitate the accommodations.

Mental Health & Wellness:

If you are experiencing undue stress that may be interfering with your ability to perform academically, Vanderbilt's Student Care Network offers a range of support services. The Office of Student Care Coordination (OSCC) is the central and first point of contact to help you navigate and connect to appropriate resources. You can schedule an appointment with the OSCC at <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/carecoordination/> or call 615-343-WELL. You can find a calendar of services at <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/studentcarenetwork/satellite-services/>.

If you or someone you know needs to speak with a professional counselor immediately, the University Counseling Center offers Urgent Care Counseling. Students should call the UCC at (615) 322-2571 during office hours to speak with an urgent care clinician. You can also reach an on-call counselor after hours or on the weekends by calling (615) 322-2571 and pressing option 2 at any time. You can find additional information at <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/ucc/>.

Mandatory Reporter Obligations:

All University faculty and administrators are mandatory reports. What this means is that all faculty, including me, must report allegations of sexual misconduct and intimate partner violence to the Title IX Coordinator. In addition, all faculty are obligated to report any allegations of discrimination to the Title IX Coordinator. I am willing to discuss with you such incidents but can only do so in the context of us both understanding my reporting obligations. If you want to talk with someone in confidence, officials in the Student Health Center, the University Counseling Center, and the Office of the Chaplain and Religious Life (when acting as clergy) can maintain confidentiality. The Project Safe Center serves as the central resource for those impacted by sexual misconduct and intimate partner violence and can assist with navigating all facets of the University's resource and support network and other processes. In addition, officials in the Project Safe Center <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/projectsafe/> have limited confidentiality, in that they must report the incidents but can do so without providing identifying information.

COURSE OUTLINE AND REQUIRED READINGS:

Week 1, January 5 and 7

Course introduction, The Foundations of Public Policy

RSP, Ch. 1

BP, pp. 1-15, Intro., Step 1. Define the Problem

Read the U.S. Constitution: <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>, and review the 27 Amendments: <https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/amendments>

Assignment #1, due 1/7 - You will be assigned an Article/Section or Amendment to discuss in class, addressing the following:

- What is most significant about this Article/Section or Amendment, and how does it apply to your life or to current events in the U.S. today?
- **Turn in your handwritten notes in class** after discussion; include your name on them.

Weeks 2 and 3, January 12, 14 and 21

The Policy Process and Policy Theories

RSP, Ch. 2

Béland, D., Rocco, P. and Waddan, A. (2019). Policy Feedback and the Politics of the Affordable Care Act. *Policy Studies Journal*, 47: 395-422.

A Prescription for Change: The 2010 Overhaul of the American Health Care System, Harvard KSG Case Study

- While lawmaking is often slow and arduous work, involving many actors and encouraging more participation in the policymaking process may improve representation and lead to better policies and laws. Based on this case study, do you agree with this statement? Who had power and influence over the policymaking process in this case? Come prepared to discuss this case.

Watch this YouTube video on “Is Health Care a Right or Privilege?”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3H13OVMbIdQ>

Assignment #2, due 1/21 - address these two issues in **one single-spaced page (upload to Brightspace)**:

- How did the issue of health care as a right or privilege arise in the case study, “A Prescription for Change”?

- Considering current debates about the Affordable Care Act’s viability, take on stance on whether you think the law (ACA) should be repealed.

Week 4, February 2 and 4

Federalism and Intergovernmental Relations

RSP, Ch. 3

Read this short case study on VOTING, ELECTIONS AND US FEDERALISM: THE STATE GOVERNMENT PERSPECTIVE:
<http://50shadesoffederalism.com/case-studies/1320/#more-132>

Read: Cost of Voting in the American States: 2024, Michael J. Pomante II

1. For the People Act (bill summary): <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/1>
2. SAVE Act of 2025 (bill summary): <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/22>

Skim: THE TARGETING AND IMPACT OF PARTISAN GERRYMANDERING: EVIDENCE FROM A LEGISLATIVE DISCONTINUITY, Dahyeon Jeong and Ajay Shenoy

Assignment #3, due 2/4: Neither the For the People Act nor the SAVE Act have passed into law in Congress. If you were a member of Congress today and had to throw your support behind one act or the other, which one would you choose and why? **Respond in one single-spaced page (upload to Brightspace).**

Week 5, February 9 and 11

Rulemaking and Regulations

RSP, Ch. 4

Presidential policymaking, 1877–2020, Aaron R. Kaufman and Jon C. Rogowski

Assignment #4, due 2/9: Choose an executive order from the Federal Register, <https://www.federalregister.gov/presidential-documents/executive-orders>. Address the following questions: What does the EO/rule mandate, and what is “the problem” it is intended to address? What will be the EO/rule’s likely implications, and how could you assess its results? **Turn in your handwritten notes** after class discussion; include your name on them.

Week 6, February 16 and 18

Civil Rights and Immigration Policy

RSP, Ch. 8

BP, pp. 16-22, Step 2. Assemble Some Evidence

Chishti, Gelatt & Meissner. 2021. Migration Policy Institute Policy Brief, “Rethinking the U.S. Legal Immigration System: A Policy Road Map”

Read this fact sheet on birthright citizenship:

<https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/fact-sheet/birthright-citizenship-united-states/>

Is the Supreme Court Unsure About Birthright Citizenship? *The New Yorker*

Assignment #5, due 2/18 - Class group debate on birthright citizenship:

- Take on an identity of your choice for the debate (e.g., parent in a mixed status family, an elected member of Congress, a farmer relying on immigrant labor, public school teacher, etc.)
- Take a stance on birthright citizenship—should it be terminated or not?
- Come prepared with notes to back your position, considering the consequences of a repeal and what would replace birthright citizenship
- **Turn in your handwritten notes after the debate.**

Week 7, February 23

Economic Policy and Public Budgeting

RSP, Ch. 5

Read: What is inflation, and how does the Federal Reserve evaluate changes in the rate of inflation?

https://www.federalreserve.gov/faqs/economy_14419.htm, and How Does Inflation Affect the Federal Budget?

<https://www.pgpf.org/article/how-does-inflation-affect-the-federal-budget/>

Listen to (or read) this short NPR podcast on inflation:

<https://www.npr.org/2018/03/09/592196593/the-uneven-effects-of-inflation>

Assignment #6, due 2/23: In one single-spaced page (upload to Brightspace), write about how inflation affects federal government budgets and plans for spending, and how this in turn personally affects you.

Week 8, February 25 and March 16

Crime and Public Policy

RSP, Ch. 6

BP, pp. 22-32, Step 3. Construct the Alternatives

Read the following on drug decriminalization:

Alissa Greer, Matt Bonn, Caitlin Shane, Alex Stevens, Natasha Tousenard, Alison Ritter, The details of decriminalization: Designing a non-criminal response to the possession of drugs for personal use, International Journal of Drug Policy, Volume 102, 2022.

Jim Hinch, What Happened When Oregon Decriminalized Hard Drugs? The Atlantic, July 19, 2023.

Quinones, Sam, AMERICA'S APPROACH TO ADDICTION HAS GONE OFF THE RAILS The Atlantic, June 1, 2023.

Week 9, March 2 and 4

Mid-term Exam Review on March 2 and in-class Exam on March 4

Spring break, March 9-13

Week 8 (continued), March 16

Assignment #7, due 3/16 – in-class group activity: consider alternatives to Oregon's decriminalization of hard drugs and decide on an alternative your group would advocate. **Produce notes that you will turn after discussion (with group members' names on it)** indicating the alternatives you considered and how you chose the one you propose (drawing on Bardach and Patashnik's Step 3 guidance as helpful).

Week 10, March 18 and 23

Environmental and Energy Policy

RSP, Ch. 10

BP, pp. 33-49, Step 4. Select the Criteria

Cleaning Up the "Big Dirties": The Problem of Acid Rain, Harvard KSG Case Study

Assignment #8, due 3/23 - In one single-spaced page (upload to Brightspace), discuss what criteria and values came into play as various alternatives were considered for reducing sulfur dioxide emissions (that contribute to acid rain) in the case of the “Big Dirties.” How were these criteria and values considered in the policymaking process and political debates?

Week 11, March 25 & 30

Social Welfare and Health Care Policy

RSP, Ch. 9

Herd, P. & Moynihan, D. “How Administrative Burdens Can Harm Health, ” Health Affairs Health Policy Brief, October 2, 2020.

DOI: 10.1377/hpb20200904.405159

Assignment #9, due 3/30: Start an application for Medicaid through either the Health Insurance Marketplace or the Tennessee state Medicaid agency (TennCare): <https://www.healthcare.gov/medicaid-chip/getting-medicaid-chip/>. **In handwritten notes that you will turn in after class discussion,** document or describe any challenges you face in completing the application and how you feel going through the process.

Week 12, April 1 and April 6

Education Policy

RSP, Ch. 7

BP, pp. 59-78, Step 5: Project the Outcomes, Step 6: Confront the Tradeoffs

<https://www.future-ed.org/legislative-tracker-2025-state-private-school-choice-bills/>

Listen to (or read) this NPR podcast on “The Promise and Peril of School Vouchers”: <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/05/12/520111511/the-promise-and-peril-of-school-vouchers>

<https://sycamoretn.org/ed-freedom-scholarship-act/>

<https://www.tn.gov/education/news/2025/9/19/tdoe-announces-successful-implementation-of-education-freedom-scholarship-program.html>

Working in groups, you will first project the outcomes of Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee’s school choice program based on the information available to date.

Assignment #10, due 4/6: You will be assigned a “role” or identity for a debate over school vouchers. You will then decide whether (in this role) you support or oppose Tennessee’s Education Freedom Scholarships. You will have the opportunity to “mingle” with others before the debate begins. **Come prepared for the debate with notes** (based on the readings and projected outcomes discussion) that you will turn in at the end of class.

Week 13, April 8 and 13

Putting it all together: Policy brief writing exercise (in class) and discussion

BP, pp. 78-88, Step 7: Stop, Focus, Narrow, Deepen, Decide!, Step 8: Tell Your Story

Policy brief writing guide

Evaluation of Policy Brief and Grading Rubric for Policy Briefs

Rose, Shanna. 2015. "Opting In, Opting Out: The Politics of State Medicaid Expansion" *The Forum*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 63-82.

Lee & Porell. 2020. The Effect of the Affordable Care Act Medicaid Expansion on Disparities in Access to Care and Health Status. *Medical Care Research and Review*, 77(5):461-473.

<https://www.kff.org/medicaid/issue-brief/status-of-state-medicaid-expansion-decisions-interactive-map/>

Week 14, April 15 and 20

Discussion and policy brief assignment

Summary: What have we learned about child poverty in America? (Moynihan)

National Academies of Sciences full report: Pathways to Reduce Child Poverty: Impacts of Federal Tax Credits (2025).

Garfinkel I, Sariscsany L, Ananat E, et al. The Benefits and Costs of a Child Allowance. *Journal of Benefit-Cost Analysis*. 2022;13(3):335-362. doi:10.1017/bca.2022.15

The Heritage Foundation **BACKGROUND** on the Biden Child Allowance, No. 3636, July 8, 2021.

Week 15, April 22 - Final policy briefs due in class – final discussion and debate

Land Acknowledgement:

“We collectively acknowledge that Vanderbilt University occupies the ancestral hunting and traditional Lands of the Cherokee, Shawnee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Creek peoples. Today, these people have nation boundaries in Oklahoma, North Carolina, and Mississippi, after the Indian Removal Act of 1830 led to the forced removal of southern tribes west of the Mississippi River. In particular, the University resides on Land ceded on November 8, 1795 in the Treaty of Hopewell. We recognize, support, and advocate for the Indigenous individuals and communities who live here now, and for those forcibly removed from their Homelands. By offering this Land Acknowledgement, we affirm Indigenous sovereignty and will work to hold Vanderbilt University more accountable to the needs of American Indian and Indigenous peoples.”

Credit: IndigenousVU, Tamee Livermont (MPH‘20) and McKalee Steen (BA‘20) - land acknowledgement authors, and Vanderbilt Student Government - approved the Land Acknowledgement in Fall 2019.