

# POSC 315: Introduction to Public Policy

Summer 2026

Asynchronous Online

May 26 – June 26, 2026

## Faculty Information

**Instructor:** David P. Adams, Ph.D.

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**Virtual Office Hours:** Tuesdays 9:30–10:30 a.m. and 7:00–8:00 p.m. on the [Discord Office Hours Channel](#), and by [appointment](#).

**Schedule meetings:** [dadams.io/appointments](http://dadams.io/appointments)

## Course Communication

All course announcements and communications will be sent via *Canvas* and university email. Students are responsible for regularly checking their *Canvas* notifications and email, and for ensuring that *Canvas* notifications are set to receive course messages. Because this is a fully asynchronous course running on a compressed five-week schedule, students are expected to check *Canvas* and their email **at least once daily**, including weekends.

**Response time:** I will strive to respond to all student emails, Discord posts, and *Canvas* messages within 24 hours, except on weekends and holidays. If you have not received a response within 24 hours, please send a follow-up message. If you are still waiting after 48 hours, contact me via phone or SMS at (657) 278-4770.

## Technical Problems

If you encounter any technical difficulties, contact the instructor immediately to document the problem. Then contact: [student IT help desk](#), [email](#), phone (657) 278-8888, walk-in [student genius center](#), or online chat via the [portal](#) (“Online IT Help” then “Live Chat”).

**For issues with Canvas:** Canvas Support Hotline = (657) 278-8888, [search the CSUF Canvas Guides](#), or [report a problem](#).

**Alternative submission:** If you cannot submit an assignment via *Canvas*, contact the professor as soon as possible to document the issue and arrange an alternative. Because of the compressed summer schedule, do not wait to report a Canvas issue.

## Course Information

**Prefix, number, title:** POSC 315, *Introduction to Public Policy*

**Modality:** Fully asynchronous online (Canvas)

**Term dates:** May 26 – June 26, 2026 (5 weeks)

**Units:** 3    **Schedule Code:** 10666

**Catalog description:** Federal domestic policymaking. Structure, functions, and relationships among American national institutions, including executive, legislative and judicial branches, media, political parties, and pressure groups.

**Policy regarding the use of generative AI:** See the *Policy on the Use of Generative AI and Other Technology* section below.

**Course materials and equipment:** Canvas; reliable computer and internet connection; a Google account with access to Google Docs (all written work in this course is submitted as a Google Doc); access to Zoom for optional meetings.

**Required text:** Birkland (2020). See *Required Text* below.

## Course Description

In this course, students will explore and engage in thoughtful discussions on the processes and key players in creating public policy in the United States. The curriculum focuses on the structure, functions, and relationships among American national institutions, including the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government, the media, political parties,

and interest groups. We will examine the various official and unofficial influences on the policy process and the limitations imposed by institutional and structural factors.

This course delves into the historical and constitutional development of the policy process, as well as the distinct characteristics of public policy within a federal system. By understanding policy-making in the context of a constitutional republic and a federalized governance system, students will gain a deeper appreciation for the complexities and uncertainties surrounding agenda setting, policy making, policy implementation, and policy evaluation in the American political system.

Because the course runs across five weeks rather than a full semester, weekly workload is condensed. Plan to invest the equivalent of a full-time course's effort during each week of the term.

## **Student Learning Outcomes**

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. Discuss and explain the key features of the public policy-making process in the United States.
2. Recognize and describe the distinct stages of the public policy process.
3. Describe the various internal and external actors that influence public policy, their interactions, and their impact on the policy process.
4. Articulate the historical and contemporary structures and institutions that facilitate, expand, or constrain the public policy process.
5. Differentiate and describe the various theories that attempt to explain the drivers and influences leading to policy change or maintaining the status quo.
6. Apply their knowledge of the policy process to analyze specific policy domains impacted by multiple policy actors and diverse elements of the policy process within the context of public policy-making in the United States.

# General Education Information

## Requirements Satisfied

This course satisfies General Education Explorations in Social Sciences subarea D.5. The writing assignments in this course, including the scaffolded policy memo project described below, meet the requirement of UPS 411.201:

Writing assignments in General Education courses shall involve the organization and expression of complex data or ideas and careful and timely evaluations of writing so that deficiencies are identified, and suggestions for improvement and/or for means of remediation are offered. Evaluations of the student's writing competence shall determine the final course grade....

A grade of "D" (1.0) or higher is required to meet this General Education requirement. A grade of "D-" (0.7) or below will not satisfy this General Education requirement.

## General Education Student Learning Goals

Students completing courses in this subarea shall encounter the following learning goals:

1. Examine problems, issues, and themes in the social sciences in greater depth; in a variety of cultural, historical, and geographical contexts; and from different disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives.
2. Analyze and critically evaluate the application of social science concepts and theories to particular historical, contemporary, and future problems or themes, such as economic and environmental sustainability, globalization, poverty, and social justice.
3. Analyze and critically evaluate constructs of cultural differentiation, including ethnicity, gender, race, class, and sexual orientation, and their effects on the individual and society.
4. Apply theories and concepts from the social sciences to address historical, contemporary, and future problems confronting communities at different geographical scales, from local to global.

## Required Text

1. Birkland, T. A. 2020. *An Introduction to the Policy Process: Theories, Concepts, and Models of Public Policy Making*, 5th ed. Routledge. ISBN: 978-0367333286.

Additional readings, if any, will be posted on *Canvas* and noted in the course schedule.

## Student Resources Website

It is the student's responsibility to read and understand the required and important [student information for course syllabi](#). Included is information about:

- University learning goals and General Education learning objectives
- Students' rights to accommodations
- Campus student support resources and academic integrity
- Emergency preparedness; library and IT services
- Software privacy, accessibility statement, diversity statement, and land acknowledgement
- Final exam schedule and semester calendar

## Course Requirements

### Course Format

This is a fully asynchronous online course. There are no required synchronous meetings. Each week, students complete assigned readings from Birkland, view any posted lecture or supplementary content, take a Canvas reading quiz, and submit one stage of the scaffolded policy memo project. Optional virtual office hours are available on Discord (see *Faculty Information*).

## Reading Quizzes (20% of Final Grade)

Weekly reading quizzes assess your understanding of the assigned material and help you stay engaged with key concepts. Quizzes consist of multiple-choice questions delivered through *Canvas*. Each quiz opens on Monday (Tuesday during Week 1) and closes Friday at 11:59 p.m. Late quizzes are not accepted due to the compressed schedule.

## Policy Writing Project (75% of Final Grade)

This course features a scaffolded policy writing project designed to build your analytical and writing skills in applied policy analysis. You will complete a series of short, focused assignments that culminate in a final policy memo. Page lengths and expectations have been deliberately scaled to fit a five-week term: each stage builds directly on the previous one, so you are revising and extending a single document rather than writing from scratch each week.

**Submission format — Google Docs only.** All stages of the policy writing project must be drafted and submitted as a single Google Doc that you carry forward across all five weeks. **Before your first submission, share the document with [dpadams@fullerton.edu](mailto:dpadams@fullerton.edu) as an Editor** (Share → add [dpadams@fullerton.edu](mailto:dpadams@fullerton.edu) → set access to *Editor*). Each week, paste the shareable link into the Canvas assignment by the Friday deadline. Microsoft Word, PDF, or other file uploads will not be accepted. If you lose editor access or move the file, your submission will be considered late until access is restored.

### Project Stages and Deadlines

- 1. Policy Problem Proposal (10% of Final Grade) — Due Friday, May 29**
  - Submit a 1-page memo identifying a policy problem, why it matters, and the principal policy actors involved.
- 2. Problem Definition Memo (15% of Final Grade) — Due Friday, June 5**
  - Write a 1–2 page memo clearly defining the chosen policy problem, including relevant policy context and key stakeholders.
- 3. Alternatives and Evaluation Matrix (15% of Final Grade) — Due Friday, June 12**

- Create a policy alternatives matrix summarizing at least three possible solutions. Include a brief (half-page to one page) narrative explaining your evaluation criteria.

#### **4. Draft Policy Memo (15% of Final Grade) — Due Saturday, June 20**

- Submit a 3–4 page draft memo combining your Executive Summary, Problem Definition, Alternatives Matrix, and a preliminary Recommendation.
- Continue working in the same Google Doc from Weeks 2 and 3. Use *Suggesting mode* so your edits are visible.
- Instructor feedback will be provided as comments and suggestions directly in your Google Doc.

#### **5. Final Policy Memo (20% of Final Grade) — Due Friday, June 26**

- Submit a 4–5 page final memo in the same Google Doc, revised in response to feedback. Use *Suggesting mode* for your revisions to the draft, then accept your suggestions to produce a clean final version at the top of the document.

### **Final Reflection (5% of Final Grade) — Due Friday, June 26**

A 1-page personal reflection on what you learned about public policy, policy analysis, and your own writing process. Submit alongside the final memo.

## **Grading Policies and Standards**

**a. Grading scale:** See Table 1 for the full letter-grade percentage scale used in this course.

**b. Course assignment weights:** See Table 2.

**c. Participation policy:** Because this course is asynchronous, “participation” means timely completion of weekly quizzes and project stages and engagement with instructor feedback on your draft memo. There are no live class sessions to attend.

**d. Make-up and late submission policy:** All assignments are due by 11:59 p.m. on the date specified in the course schedule. Because of the compressed five-week schedule,

Table 1: Grade scale

Grade	Percent	Grade	Percent
A+	97.0–100.0	C+	77.0–79.9
A	93.0–96.9	C	73.0–76.9
A-	90.0–92.9	C-	70.0–72.9
B+	87.0–89.9	D+	67.0–69.9
B	83.0–86.9	D	63.0–66.9
B-	80.0–82.9	D-	60.0–62.9
		F	0.0–59.9

Table 2: Assignment weighting

Assignment	Weight	Due
Reading Quizzes (5)	20%	Fridays, weekly
Policy Problem Proposal	10%	Friday, May 29
Problem Definition Memo	15%	Friday, June 5
Alternatives and Evaluation Matrix	15%	Friday, June 12
Draft Policy Memo	15%	Saturday, June 20
Final Policy Memo	20%	Friday, June 26
Final Reflection	5%	Friday, June 26
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	

late work cannot be accommodated except in cases of documented illness or other unforeseen circumstances. Extensions must be requested in writing *before* the due date. Reading quizzes cannot be made up.

**Alternative procedures for submitting work:** All written work in this course is submitted as a Google Doc, with the shareable link posted in the corresponding *Canvas* assignment by the deadline. If you cannot submit via *Canvas* or are unable to share the Google Doc, contact the professor immediately to arrange an alternative.

**e. Authentication of student work:** Students may be required to submit their work to a plagiarism detection service. Cal State Fullerton uses Turnitin©. Submitted work may be checked for authenticity and originality.

**f. Extra credit:** There are no extra credit assignments in this course.

**g. Retention of student work:** Work submitted for a grade through *Canvas* shall be

retained for a reasonable time after the term ends, not to exceed the last day of the subsequent semester. Students have the right to review graded work in the presence of the instructor. (UPS 320.005) Students are also responsible for retaining personal copies of all submitted and returned work.

## **Academic Integrity**

Students are expected to adhere to the highest standards of academic integrity. Any student found to have engaged in academic dishonesty will be subject to the sanctions described in the [Academic Dishonesty Policy](#) (UPS 300.021). Academic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty, and submitting previously graded work without prior authorization. Students are expected to be familiar with the university's policy and to adhere to it in all aspects of this course.

## **Policy on the Use of Generative AI and Other Technology**

Generative AI (including large language models, image generators, and other tools) is permitted in this course, but use must be transparent, intentional, and in service of learning. The core principle is simple: **you must do the intellectual work of this course**. AI can amplify your thinking, but not replace it.

### **Permitted uses:**

- Brainstorming and outlining arguments
- Explaining concepts you don't understand (then explaining it back in your own words)
- Literature searching and summarizing sources
- Editing, proofreading, and revising your work
- Sanity-checking your analysis or logic
- Generating synthetic examples or test cases for your ideas

## **Not permitted:**

- Using AI to generate your analysis, arguments, or conclusions
- Submitting AI-generated text as your own writing
- Using AI to avoid engaging with course concepts or readings
- Letting AI do the intellectual heavy lifting (interpreting sources, building arguments, synthesizing ideas)

## **Disclosure requirement:**

If you use generative AI tools in ways beyond basic editing, you must disclose your use. Include a brief note at the end of your assignment explaining what tools you used and how (e.g., “I used Claude to help organize my outline and check the logic of my argument in Section 3”). This is not a confession—it’s transparency about your process.

## **What this means:**

The goal of this course is for *you* to learn to think like a policy analyst and to develop your own informed arguments about the policy process. AI is a tool that can enhance that learning if used thoughtfully. Using it to avoid thinking will undermine your own education and violates academic integrity. Questions about what constitutes appropriate use? Ask before you submit.

## **Technical Competencies**

Students need:

- Proficiency with Canvas, including submitting assignments, participating in discussions, and accessing course materials
- Ability to use university email and Canvas messages for course communication
- A Google account and proficiency with Google Docs, including sharing documents and using *Suggesting mode* (all written work is submitted as a Google Doc)
- Reliable computer and internet connection

- Ability to use Zoom for optional virtual meetings
- Ability to use online research tools and library databases to find academic sources

## Calendar of Topics / Schedule of Classes

We will follow the schedule below as closely as possible. If adjustments are needed, you will receive advance notice on *Canvas*. All assignments are due by 11:59 p.m. Pacific time on the listed Friday.

### Important dates:

- Memorial Day: Monday, May 25 (course begins Tuesday, May 26)
- Juneteenth (federal holiday): Friday, June 19 — in observance of the holiday, the Week 4 Reading Quiz and the Draft Memo are due Saturday, June 20 at 11:59 p.m. instead of Friday.
- Last day of class: Friday, June 26

### Week 1: May 26 – May 31

**Topics:** Introducing the Policy Process; Elements of the Policy-Making System; Contexts of Public Policy Making.

#### Readings

- Birkland, chapters 1–3

#### Assignments

- Reading Quiz 1 (opens Tuesday, closes Friday, May 29)
- **Policy Problem Proposal (1 page) due Friday, May 29**

### Week 2: June 1 – June 7

**Topics:** Official Actors; Unofficial Actors; Agenda Setting, Groups, and Power.

## Readings

- Birkland, chapters 4–6

## Assignments

- Reading Quiz 2 (opens Monday, closes Friday, June 5)
- **Problem Definition Memo (1–2 pages) due Friday, June 5**

## Week 3: June 8 – June 14

**Topics:** Policies and Policy Types; Decision Making and Policy Analysis.

## Readings

- Birkland, chapters 7–8

## Assignments

- Reading Quiz 3 (opens Monday, closes Friday, June 12)
- **Alternatives and Evaluation Matrix due Friday, June 12**

## Week 4: June 15 – June 21

**Topics:** Policy Design and Tools; Policy Implementation, Failure, and Learning.

## Readings

- Birkland, chapters 9–10

## Assignments

- Reading Quiz 4 (opens Monday, closes Saturday, June 20 — moved from Fri. to observe Juneteenth)
- **Draft Policy Memo (3–4 pages) due Saturday, June 20**

## **Week 5: June 22 – June 26**

**Topics:** Science and Theory in the Study of Public Policy; Course Wrap-Up.

### **Readings**

- Birkland, chapter 11

### **Assignments**

- Reading Quiz 5 (opens Monday, closes Friday, June 26)
- **Final Policy Memo (4–5 pages) due Friday, June 26**
- **Final Reflection (1 page) due Friday, June 26**