

# Policy Analysis & Evaluation

## GOV 384M (39760)

### Fall 2025

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#### **Instructor Information**

Professors: Michael Findley & Derek Epp

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Office hours (Findley): MW 10:30am-12:00pm in BAT 3.102

Office hours (Epp): MW 9:30 – 11:00am in BAT 4.104

Class location: BAT 5.102 (some sessions will be held in the field)

Class day/time: Wednesdays, 12-3pm

#### **Course Overview and Structure**

This course provides a graduate-level introduction to public policy evaluation from a political science perspective. As public policy analysis becomes increasingly central to social science research, scholars are paying greater attention to evaluating whether policies work as intended, how we can know, and why it matters for governance and political outcomes. Many of the most innovative and impactful dissertations, articles, and books in political science are grounded in rigorous policy evaluation, and the discipline's growing focus on policy relevance—both in academia and in practice—underscores the importance of developing strong evaluation skills.

The course is structured in two parts. During the first third of the semester, students will engage in seminar-style discussions that explore foundational theories of the policy process, standard evaluation techniques, ethical and organizational considerations, and methods for drawing causal inferences from empirical data. The final two-thirds of the course are applied, centered on a collaborative evaluation of the City of Austin's bike lane rollout. Students will work together to design and implement an evaluation project—including surveys and interviews—and produce a policy report for city stakeholders. Concurrently, each student will develop the first half of an academic research paper related to their dissertation interests.

The course places special emphasis on causal inference, conceptual clarity, and the practical use of evidence in public decision-making. Students will gain experience with both quantitative and qualitative methods and will develop tools to rigorously

assess the impact of real-world policies. Ultimately, the course aims to equip students to translate rigorous evaluations into high-impact, publishable academic research.

## Required Texts

Philip G. Joyce. *The Congressional Budget Office: Honest Numbers, Power, and Policymaking*.

Gertler et al 2016.. *Impact evaluation in practice*, second ed. [[Link here](#)]

## Other Texts/Resources that May be Useful

- William Dunn. *Public Policy Analysis* (6th ed.)
- Rachel Glennerster and Kudzai Takavarasha. *Running Randomized Evaluations: A Practical Guide*.
- Nancy Cartwright and Jeremy Hardie. *Evidence-Based Policy: A Practical Guide to Doing it Better*.
- Rossi, Lipsey, and Henry. 2019. *Evaluation: A Systematic Approach*. (8<sup>th</sup> ed)
- Newcomer, Hatry, & Wholey. 2015. *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation*. (4<sup>th</sup> ed)
- Glewwe & Todd. 2022. *Impact Evaluation in International Development: Theory, Methods, and Practice*. World Bank
- Bjarkefur et al. 2021. *Development Research in Practice: The DIME Analytics Data Handbook*.
- Bowers, Voors, Ichino. 2025. *Theory and Practice of Field Experiments*. [[Link here](#)]
- Blair et al. 2023. *Research Design in the Social Sciences*.
- JPAL research resources [[Link Here](#)]
- EGAP methods guides [[Link Here](#)]

## Assignments and Grading

Grades will be based on participation, a group evaluation project, and an individual project:

**Participation (25%):** Active participation is essential to your success in this course and accounts for 25% of your final grade. Participation includes thoughtful preparation, regular attendance, seminar leadership, and in-class contributions that promote rigorous and collaborative learning. We expect you to come to each session fully prepared, having carefully read and reflected on the assigned materials. While

the minimum expectation is to contribute meaningfully at least once per session, you should aim to engage substantively and regularly, posing questions, connecting ideas, and helping to advance discussion. If you have concerns about speaking in class, please speak with us separately during the first two weeks so we can support your engagement in a way that works best.

Your participation grade has three main components:

1. *Seminar Engagement*: You should be actively involved in all class sessions, including field-based meetings. Thoughtful questions, constructive disagreement, and clear synthesis of ideas are all valued contributions. (Roughly 5%)
2. *Discussion Leadership*: Each of you will serve as agenda-setter for at least two seminar sessions. The agenda-setter is responsible for preparing a brief (1-page) discussion agenda, sharing it with the class 24 hours in advance, and guiding the session to ensure clarity, engagement, and breadth of insight. Starting in the second half of the semester, agenda-setters will also select and share 1–3 real-world policy evaluation examples (from academic articles, think tanks, or government reports) relevant to the week’s topic. These should be emailed to the instructors at least four days in advance for posting on Canvas. (Roughly 10%)
3. *Final Research Presentation*: In the final week of the semester, you will present your individual research paper to the class. This presentation is the culmination of your semester-long project with an eye towards moving from design to execution. Each presentation should be a concise 8-10 minutes, including Q&A and feedback. The goal is to clearly articulate your causal research question, your theoretical argument, and your proposed research design, preparing you to move forward with your project. (Roughly 10%)

**Group evaluation project (40%)**: The second major component of the course is a collaborative evaluation project conducted in partnership with the City of Austin. Students will work together as a team to design and implement an applied policy evaluation focused on the city’s recent rollout of bike lanes across multiple neighborhoods.

Although city bike lanes may be far from your core research interests, this project offers valuable experience working with a policy partner to conduct a real-world evaluation. It will expose you to the full arc of the research process—something rarely possible within the confines of a single graduate course. The project will emphasize methodological rigor, transparency, and clear communication of findings, and is meant to simulate the collaborative, applied nature of professional policy work.

We expect each of you to contribute meaningfully to every phase of the project.

1. Components include:

- *Formulating Research Questions and Hypotheses:* As a group, you will define evaluation goals in consultation with city stakeholders, and formulate focused research questions and theoretical expectations.
- *Conceptualization and Research Design:* You will collaboratively define key variables, identify mechanisms of interest, and determine an appropriate evaluation strategy—with attention to both quantitative and qualitative methods.
- *Instrument Development:* The group will design survey and interview protocols tailored to the Austin context. Each of you will assist in developing questions, pre-testing them, and piloting the overall instruments.
- *Institutional Review Board (IRB):* As a class, we will submit the protocol to UT's Institutional Review Board and respond to any required revisions. Students will gain experience navigating the IRB process for field-based social research.
- *Pre-registration and Transparency:* As a class, we will formally pre-register the protocol with EGAP via the Open Science Framework (OSF), reinforcing best practices in research transparency.
- *Data Collection:* Once the protocol is approved, students will conduct fieldwork, collecting original data through surveys, interviews, or observations.
- *Data Analysis and Interpretation:* After fieldwork, students will collectively analyze the data and synthesize both qualitative and quantitative findings in a coherent evaluative framework.
- *Deliverable for the City:* The final product will be a concise, professionally written 10-page policy report summarizing the evaluation's goals, findings, and implications. A series of annexes will accompany the report, documenting the full research design, instruments, and analytic results. The report will be shared with the City of Austin and used to guide future implementation decisions.

## 2. Group-related assignments

- The weekly schedule details what you (individually) need to do as part of the group assignment.
- **Submit this material through Canvas by midnight on the Tuesday before class so that we have time to review and incorporate into the class practicum discussion.**
- Note that these are tentative as the evaluation timeline is dependent on the City of Austin.

**Individual project (35%):** Each of you will develop the first half of an original research paper related to your dissertation, thesis, or broader research agenda. The paper should center on a causal question related to public policy evaluation. You will identify a relevant policy or class of policies and propose a theoretical explanation as

well as a research strategy to evaluate it. The goal is to produce a manuscript suitable for future data collection and eventual publication.

We will discuss each stage of the paper in seminar. Class sessions throughout the semester will include time for collaborative troubleshooting and writing support. Although you will not conduct data collection and empirical analysis during the course, we expect you to engage seriously with the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological components of the evaluation process.

This paper will be completed in four cumulative stages. The first three assignments should be 3–6 double-spaced pages unless otherwise noted. The final integrated draft should be 15-20 pages.

### *1. Introduction & Research Question*

Clearly state the causal research question your study seeks to answer. Frame the question in terms of a policy-relevant puzzle that matters both empirically and theoretically. Your introduction should explain what policy or class of policies motivates the question, why the topic is timely or important, and what outcome and explanatory variables are at the center of your proposed study.

You should briefly sketch the hypothesized causal relationship and provide a motivating rationale or example. Identify the policy domain and clarify whether your research will speak to implementation, uptake, effectiveness, equity, or other relevant concerns. While you may not know the final design yet, anticipate the empirical and conceptual tools you will draw on.

This section will lay the foundation for the rest of your paper. We will discuss strategies for identifying strong questions and building compelling introductions in class.

**This paper will be due week 4 (September 17<sup>th</sup>) and will be worth ~5% of the course grade. Submit through Canvas by midnight (after class) at the latest.**

### *2. Theoretical Argument*

Develop a clear and logically coherent explanation for how your chosen explanatory variable—typically a public policy or policy-relevant condition—causally influences the outcome of interest. This section should articulate the underlying mechanism(s) that connect cause to effect and explain why this relationship is expected to hold. Clarify any assumptions you are making about actors, institutions, preferences, incentives, or informational constraints.

You should also situate your theory within the relevant scholarly literature. This requires a brief, synthesized literature review—not a serial summary of individual sources. Focus on identifying major debates, conceptual gaps, or unresolved tensions

that your argument helps address. Your goal is to explain what we know, what we don't, and how your theory moves the conversation forward.

The theoretical argument should yield specific, testable predictions that will be carried forward into the research design.

**This paper will be due week 8 (October 15<sup>th</sup>) and will be worth ~10% of the course grade. Submit through Canvas by midnight (after class) at the latest.**

### 3. *Research Design*

Propose a feasible and causally credible research strategy for evaluating the theoretical claims you developed in the previous section. This should include a clear explanation of how your study design will identify the causal effect of the policy (or policy-related factor) on your outcome of interest. You may choose experimental, quasi-experimental, or observational approaches, but the design must justify why your proposed method is appropriate given the context and research question.

Your write-up should include:

- A clear definition of your explanatory and outcome variables, including how each will be measured
- A justification for your identification strategy (e.g., randomization, natural experiment, difference-in-differences, etc.)
- Description of your population or sample and how it will be selected
- A plan for collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, if relevant
- Discussion of potential limitations, threats to inference, or ethical considerations

The emphasis should be on conceptual and causal clarity. You do not need to include full statistical specifications, but you need to sketch the basic analytic approach and expected tests.

**This paper will be due week 11 (November 5<sup>th</sup>) and will be worth ~10% of the course grade. Submit through Canvas by midnight (after class) at the latest.**

### 4. *Integrated Draft*

This assignment brings together the major elements of your paper—introduction, theoretical argument, and research design—into a single, coherent academic manuscript. The goal is not merely to collate sections together, but to revise and refine each part so that the paper reads as a unified whole. You should pay close attention to framing, flow, transitions, and tone, aiming for the clarity and coherence expected in a journal-style article.

Although the draft will not include empirical results, it should position you to move forward with data collection or further refinement for future work, such as a dissertation chapter or publication.

**This paper will be due week 15 (December 3<sup>rd</sup>) and will be worth ~10% of the course grade. Submit through Canvas by midnight (after class) at the latest.**

## Tentative Weekly Schedule

### Week 1 (August 27)

#### Introduction: What is policy evaluation? Overview of course and goals

- **Readings:**
  - Callen, Michael (et.al.) 2025. Can Digital Aid Deliver During Humanitarian Crises? *Management Science*.
  - Callen, Michael (et.al.) 2025. *Digital Humanitarian Payments to Vulnerable Afghans*.
  - Lessons from the Green Lanes (**skim this**)
- **Research practicum:** Review the scope of work document
- **Assignments:**
  - *Individual:* N/A
  - *Group:* N/A

### Week 2 (September 3)

#### Information and why it matters

- **Readings (theory):**
  - Herbert A. Simon (1955) A Behavioral Model of Rational Choice. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*.
  - Charles E. Lindblom (1959) The Science of “Muddling Through.” *Public Administration Review*.
  - Michael D. Cohen, James G. March, and John P. Olsen. (1972) A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice. *Administrative Science Quarterly*.
  - Luke Fowler. (2018) Problems, politics, and policy streams in policy implementation. *Governance*.
- **Research practicum:** Meet with stakeholders (tentative); Research design
- **Assignments:**
  - *Individual:* Submit two possible policy evaluation ideas that you think would be ideal for your dissertation or research agenda. At this stage don't constrain yourself—assume that you have the relevant connections, partnerships, and funding. In a paragraph per idea, briefly detail the project, a possible evaluation approach, and how it could contribute to your research agenda.
  - *Group:* (1) Complete IRB training (CITI); (2) Develop a possible research question related to the bike lanes policy evaluation (not currently in the scope of work) and provide a related hypothesis with some justification (max 200 words). (*Tentative*)

### Week 3 (September 10)

#### Impact Evaluation Introduction

- **Readings (textbook):**
  - Gertler (2016) Chapters 1 – 4
- **Research practicum:** Finish research design; Apply to the IRB
- **Assignments:**
  - *Individual:* N/A
  - *Group:* Propose three survey questions and three data indicators for the evaluation. For each, describe the concept they meant to measure, detail the scale (e.g., dichotomous, ordered, etc), and provide a one-sentence justification. (*Tentative*)

### Week 4 (September 17)

#### Theories of the policy process II

- Readings (theory):
  - Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan Jones. (1991) Agenda Dynamics and Policy Subsystems. *The Journal of Politics*.
  - Bryan D. Jones and Frank R. Baumgartner. (2012) From There to Here: Punctuated Equilibrium to the General Punctuation Thesis to a Theory of Government Information Processing. *Policy Studies Journal*.
  - Bryan D. Jones, Derek A. Epp, and Frank R. Baumgartner. (2019) Democracy, Authoritarianism, and Policy Punctuations. *International Review of Public Policy*.
- **Readings (textbook):**
  - Gertler (2016) Chapters 11 & 12
- **Research practicum:** Begin designing mailer
- **Assignments:**
  - *Individual:* Introduction and research question
  - *Group:* Propose 3 possible treatments for the mailer (e.g., design, text). (*Tentative*)

### Week 5 (September 24)

#### Sources of information

- **Readings (theory):**

- Philip G. Joyce. *The Congressional Budget Office: Honest Numbers, Power, and Policymaking*.
- Ayse Eldes, Cristian Fong, and Kenneth Lowande. Information and Confrontation in Legislative Oversight. *Legislative Studies Quarterly*.
- **Research practicum:** Finalize mailer
- **Assignments:**
  - *Individual:* N/A
  - *Group:* Make edits to the design/pre-analysis plan document in preparation for pre-registration. (Details TBA) (*Tentative*)

## Week 6 (October 1)

### Zombie ideas and policy bubbles

- **Readings (theory):**
  - Bryan D. Jones, Herschel F. Thomas, and Michelle Wolfe. (2014) Policy Bubbles. *Policy Studies Journal*.
- **Readings (textbook):**
  - Gertler (2016) Chapters 15 & 16
- **Research practicum:** Prepare for intercept surveys
- **Assignments:**
  - *Individual:* N/A
  - *Group:* Make edits to the Qualtrics instrument. (Details TBA) (*Tentative*)

## Week 7 (October 8)

### Field work 1

## Week 8 (October 15)

### Impact evaluation approaches I

- **Readings (textbook):**
  - Gertler (2016) Chapters 5 & 6
- **Research practicum:** Deploy mailer
- **Assignments:**
  - *Individual:* Theoretical argument
  - *Group:* Come to class with three interesting findings from the observational data provided by COA; Monitor mailer deployment (Details TBA) (*Tentative*)

## Week 9 (October 22)

### Impact evaluation approaches 2

- **Readings (textbook):**
  - Gertler (2016) Chapters 7 & 8
- **Research practicum:** Start outlining final report
- **Assignments:**
  - *Individual:* N/A
  - *Group:* Submit two ideas for the structure/content of the report. *(Tentative)*

## Week 10 (October 29)

### Impact evaluation challenges and complexity

- **Readings (textbook):**
  - Gertler (2016) Chapters 9 & 10
- **Research practicum:** Continue outlining final report
- **Assignments:**
  - *Individual:* N/A
  - *Group:* Submit two ideas for analyzing the data. *(Tentative)*

## Week 11 (November 5)

### Dissemination and impact

- **Readings (textbook):**
  - Gertler (2016) Chapters 13 & 14
- **Research practicum:** Analyze results of mailer
- **Assignments:**
  - *Individual:* Research design
  - *Group:* Make edits to the analysis code. (Details TBA) *(Tentative)*

## Week 12 (November 12)

### Conclusions

- **Readings (textbook):**
  - Gertler (2016) Chapter 17
- **Research practicum:** Prepare for intercept surveys
- **Assignments:**
  - *Individual:* N/A
  - *Group:* Make edits to the report. (Details TBA) *(Tentative)*

### **Week 13 (November 19)**

**Field work 2**

### **Week 14 (November 26)**

**No class - Fall break / Thanksgiving**

### **Week 15 (December 3)**

**Presentations to the class on your individual research**

- Readings: N/A
- Research practicum: Work plan for December and January
- Assignments:
  - *Individual*: Integrated draft
  - *Group*: Update the draft report. (Details TBA) (*Tentative*)