

Energy Policy & Human Behavior – Course Overview

PPHA 39925

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TA: TBD

NOTE: This is not a complete syllabus. This is a course outline to help you decide whether to take the course. I am actively making adjustments to incorporate recently published articles. Typically, there are two articles to read for each class. Email me if you would like to see last year's reading list.

COURSE OVERVIEW

The success of many environmental and energy-related policies depends on the support and cooperation of the public. This course, drawing from multiple fields of behavioral science, will introduce students to the psychological and social aspects of different energy-related behaviors, ranging from household energy conservation and adoption of efficient and renewable energy goods, to public support and opposition for emergent energy technologies and climate mitigation policies. Through a mix of lecture and discussion, we will explore questions such as: what are potential motivations and barriers to the uptake of energy efficient and renewable energy technologies? Why is climate change such a divisive issue and what are the challenges of generating broad support for mitigation policies? Why do people support clean energy broadly but object to developments when proposed in their own communities? By taking a behavioral approach, the course aims to equip students with an enhanced framework for evaluating energy and environmental policies that goes beyond traditional economic and regulatory perspectives.

The course is organized into three sections:

1. Households as Energy Consumers
2. Public (Dis)engagement with Climate Change
3. Public Support for/Opposition to Large Scale Energy Technologies

In each section, we will follow a similar pattern of inquiry: How do people perceive the issue? How is this mental model different than, say, an energy policy expert's (or, in the case of climate change, other members of the public)? What complications do these differing perspectives create for designing effective policies and programs? How can we use insights from behavioral sciences to help overcome those challenges? By the end of the course, students will gain an appreciation not only for the nuance of each of these three topics, but also the principles of human behavior that are common among them. Readings will draw from a mix of disciplines, including environmental psychology, risk communication, and behavioral economics.

COURSE GOALS & LEARNING OBJECTIVES

As a result of taking this class, students should be able to:

1. Describe how the public’s perceptions of energy issues often differ from experts and discuss potential implications for policy design.
2. Explain why traditional policy tools such as providing information and incentives may not always be sufficient to effect change.
3. Use their knowledge of behavioral science to critically examine the design of consumer-facing energy policies and offer recommendations for improvement.
4. Effectively communicate to non-expert audiences how a behavioral perspective can enhance the effectiveness of public-facing energy policies

COURSE FORMAT:

Classes will be a mix of lecture and discussion focused on topics presented in the readings. You are highly encouraged to participate in class. You will get more out of the material the more you try to apply it to the topics of interest to you.

Course topics at a glance (subject to change pending syllabus updates)

Wk	Topic	Topic
Part 1: HOUSEHOLDS AS ENERGY CONSUMERS		
1	Course Overview & Introduction: Why take a behavioral approach to energy policy?	Perceptions of Energy & Implications
2	Limits of Providing Information I: Bounded Rationality & Cognitive Biases	Limits of Providing Information II: Psychological & Social Factors
3	Labels & Information Disclosure	Feedback
4	Social Influence	Incentives & Contextual Factors
PART 2: PUBLIC (DIS)ENGAGEMENT WITH CLIMATE CHANGE		
5	Mid-term	Perceptions of Climate Change
6	Climate change as culture war I: Ideology & Motivated Reasoning	Climate Change as culture war II: Cultural cognition, morals & other worldviews
7	Climate Change Communication 2.0	Climate Change Communication 2.0: Finding Common Ground
PART 3: PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR/OPPOSITION TO ENERGY TECHNOLOGIES		
8	Public Perceptions & Acceptance of Energy Systems	Risk Perceptions Case study: Hydraulic Fracturing
9	“NIMBYism” & Local Opposition Case Study: Wind farms	Trust and Process; Case study: Wind farms Course Wrap-up

Overview of Course Assignments (subject to change pending syllabus updates)

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION

5%

You are encouraged to participate in the course by offering insights, asking questions, and sharing relevant examples from your own experiences. Participation can happen in many forms, including in-class lectures, responding to others' comments and questions on Canvas discussion boards, or coming to office hours. The more you make an effort to engage, the more enjoyable the course will be. If you are unable to attend live class sessions, I will look at video-viewing statistics to determine attendance.

READING REFLECTIONS

5%

To help ensure quality class discussions, you are expected to post **5 reflections** on the readings (300 words max.) over the quarter, out of 16 possible opportunities. Each reading reflection is due **by 11:59 pm the night before class**. A handout with more details will be provided.

REAL LIFE EXAMPLE ANALYSIS

10%

Twice during the quarter, you will be asked to find a policy-relevant example related to one or more of the themes for the week (see schedule on the next page). One example should be submitted in weeks 3 or 4 (before the midterm) and the other sometime during weeks 6 through 9 (after the midterm). For each, you will be asked to submit a short slide deck that summarizes the example and offers a brief reflection/analysis of how course content might be relevant. Examples can come from news or magazine sources, government policies/reports, blogs, social media threads, or your past work experience. Each example will count toward 5% of your total grade. Please submit your slides by **11:59pm Monday for each of the weeks you choose to submit**. I may incorporate your example into our class discussion. See handout for more guidance.

MIDTERM

35%

A midterm exam comprised of multiple choice and short essay questions.

POLICY ISSUE BRIEF – Done individually or with a partner

45%

Using what you have learned in the course, you will write a policy issue brief on an energy or climate change-related topic of your choice. Issue briefs are common tools used to influence the design or evaluation of policies. Compared to policy memos, they go in more depth about the background on an issue and the evidence-base for different recommendations. The purpose of your brief will be to inform decision-makers about relevant dimensions of human behavior that could enhance policy effectiveness for your chosen topic. This assignment is broken into three steps: Topic Selection, Annotated Bibliography, and Final Brief. The final brief is due during exam week.

COURSE MATERIALS

All course materials will be available on Canvas. I use the **Pages** section to create a **mini-Wiki for each day of the course**. It includes introductory text to orient you to the readings, occasional pre-reading activities, and links to relevant websites or videos. (As a backup, all documents are also saved to the Files section, which organizes content by categories, e.g.: “assignments,” “readings,” etc.) The **Assignments section** includes all handouts and deadlines.

I will provide a printed version of the slides to take notes on in class. This version may be missing answers to discussion questions I pose to the class. **Complete lecture slides** will be posted *after* class in the **Files** section of Canvas.

COURSE POLICIES

Communication: Announcements to the class will be sent via Canvas. If you have substantive questions that will require more than a few sentences in response, please come to office hours, set up an appointment, or post a question to one of the appropriate Canvas Discussion boards. If you need to e-mail me about other matters, please allow up to 24 hours for a response. I may be less responsive over the weekend.

Turning in Assignments: With the exception of the in-class presentation and debate, we grade all assignments anonymously. When submitting Word docs to Canvas, please include only your Student ID number in the header of the document. See individual assignment instructions for due dates and times.

Deadlines are firm. Assignments will be docked 5% for each 24-hour period that they are late (Exception: Reading reflections are not accepted after the start of class). **I will not accept assignments that are more than 72 hours late** unless you have contacted me in advance about extenuating circumstances.

Grading: Each assignment handout includes a rubric to help direct your efforts. When determining final grades, I have generally not found it necessary to use a curve. I look for natural breaks in the distribution to help me decide e.g. what constitutes a **B** vs. **B+** vs. **A-** etc. These breaks tend to fall close to the traditional cutoffs: $A \geq 94$, $A^- = 90$ to < 94 , $B^+ = 87$ to < 90 , $B = 84$ to < 87 , $B^- = 80$ to < 84 , and so forth. I will never grade down (e.g., if you earn a 90, there is no risk of that becoming a B+). **If you choose to take the class pass/fail, you must complete all assignments and earn a final grade of C or higher.**

Academic Integrity: Cheating and plagiarism are serious forms of academic misconduct and will result in a failing grade. All written submissions must be your own original work. As described in the university student handbook, “Proper acknowledgment of another’s ideas, whether by direct quotation or paraphrase, is expected. In particular, if any written or electronic source is consulted and material is used from that source, directly or indirectly, the source should be identified by author, title, and page number, or by website and date accessed. Any doubts about what constitutes ‘use’ should be addressed to the instructor.” **Be aware, plagiarism goes beyond copying text word-for-word and can include poor paraphrasing.** See the examples here: <https://integrity.mit.edu/handbook/academic-writing/avoiding-plagiarism-paraphrasing>.

Note: I have a keen eye for plagiarized text, and I am obligated to report all instances of suspected academic dishonesty to the Harris Dean of Students for investigation and adjudication. Please see the Harris Student Handbook for more details of that process.

Laptops, Tablets & Cell Phones: Please keep laptops and electronic devices silenced, put away, and out of sight. The research is pretty clear: distractions and (attempted) multi-tasking can be detrimental to your ability to pay attention and retain information. Plan to take notes longhand on paper or on a flat tablet. I will provide printouts of the lecture slides. Empirical research has also shown that laptop multitasking creates a distracting classroom environment for others:

- Gingerich, A.C., & Lineweaver, T.T. (2014). OMG! Texting in Class = U Fail ☹ Empirical evidence that text messaging during class disrupts comprehension. *Teaching of Psychology*, 41, 44-51.
- Mueller, P.A., & Oppenheimer, D.M. (2014). The pen is mightier than the keyboard: Advantages of longhand over laptop note taking. *Psychological Science*, 25, 1159-1168. See also: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/a-learning-secret-don-t-take-notes-with-a-laptop/>
- Sana, F., Weston, T., & Cepeda, N.J. (2013). Laptop multitasking hinders classroom learning for both users and nearby peers. *Computers and Education*, 62, 24-31.

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

I am committed to creating a learning environment that welcomes diverse viewpoints and where each of you feels seen, heard, and respected no matter your race, ethnicity, national origin, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, religion, socio-economic background, or social and political beliefs.

As I note on the first day of class, there is a known problem in energy social science research that many of the populations studied are WEIRD (i.e., from Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and/or democratic countries). I am doing my best to incorporate more representative examples and readings as I learn of them. I may not always be able to source a study that speaks to the specific population or geographic region of interest to you, but I encourage you to share your experiences and perspectives. We all stand to learn from trying to understand how course concepts may or may not apply in different contexts.

ACCOMMODATIONS FOR DISABILITIES

If you require any disability accommodations for this course, please inform the Harris Dean of Students Office by the end of the first week of class. The Harris Dean of Students Office will coordinate with me to implement your accommodations.

ACCOMMODATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES

Students must inform me in writing of their need to observe a religious holiday reasonably well in advance of the absence, preferably at the beginning of the quarter. As with any absence, it is your responsibility to catch up on any material discussed and assignments given during the missed class period.

STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING

If you or someone you know is feeling overwhelmed, depressed, and/or in need of support, counseling services are available. UChicago Student Wellness urges you to attend to your mental wellbeing and to reach out to them for support during these challenging times. All services are covered by the Student Services Fee (i.e., there is no additional cost to you). See <https://wellness.uchicago.edu/mental-health/>. Students seeking new services/resources can call 773.702.9800 during business hours (Monday–Friday 8:30 a.m.–5 p.m.) to set up an appointment. **Students needing urgent mental health care can speak with clinicians over the phone 24/7 by calling 773.702.3625.**