

Harvard University
Graduate School of Design

SES-5441 • API-505

Policy Analysis: A Tool for Evidence-Based Decision Making

Spring 2025

Meeting time: Thursdays 9:00 - 11:45am

Location: Gund 517

Faculty: Dr. Rachel Meltzer, rmeltzer@gsd.harvard.edu

Teaching Assistant: Avny Lavasa, avnylavasa@gsd.harvard.edu

Office hours: Weds. 3:30-5:30pm and by appointment, please email me ahead of time for both options.

This syllabus is subject to change based on the needs and circumstances of the class. I will always include a version number (e.g., "v1") in the name of the syllabus document to keep track of updated versions.

Overview of the course

Policy analysis is problem solving. It involves making systematic comparisons across a set of alternatives to address a particular policy or planning problem, usually in the face of time and resource constraints. Typically, policy analysis is done to provide advice to a client, organization, or another decision-maker in the face of a public problem or crisis. It involves rapid response, quickly orienting yourself to new and changing topics that are often complex and controversial. How can we develop doable solutions that target the core problem at hand? How can we weigh the many competing trade-offs among diverse stakeholders? How can we balance innovation with pragmatism? In this class we will develop strategies to address these, and other, challenges.

While the course will emphasize the development of a stage-based analytical approach, we will also discuss alternative models of policy analysis and consider critical perspectives from political science, behavioral science, and design fields.

Based largely on case discussions, the class will explore the choices facing decision makers in the public and nonprofit sectors in the US and abroad with regard to a wide range of issues, including public health, environmental protection, urban development, transportation, and infrastructure. We will also have a unit on cost benefit analysis and how to incorporate it into your analytical toolbox. We will approach CBA from a critical perspective and consider its limitations in the face of scarce information and equity concerns.

This is a methods course: we will use a variety of cases to practice and become nimble in the logic and techniques behind policy analysis, rather than becoming an expert in any one subject area. The course gives special attention to repeated application. While students will develop rigorous analytic skills, they will also develop a sense of humility about the limits of their tools and the scarcity of information and resources. Further, students will learn how to communicate their findings and recommendations clearly, succinctly, and persuasively in written memos, oral argument, and visual presentations. The course will culminate in a team project in which students conduct a simulated policy analysis exercise on a current issue.

Learning objectives

Upon successful completion of the course, students will be able to:

- Clearly and persuasively identify and contextualize policy and planning problems;
- Collect, distill, and harness massive amounts of information to make the case for or against an option;
- Rely on evidence-based logic and reasonable assumptions when making decisions in the context of incomplete information and resources;
- Target their arguments towards a range of audiences, both supportive and skeptical;
- Communicate their findings and recommendations clearly, succinctly, and persuasively in written memos, oral argument, and visual presentations.
- Given the timeliness and urgency of policy analysis, be nimble and expeditious in all of the above.

How the course will run

Most class sessions will begin with a lecture format where I lay out the main concepts and take-aways from the readings. I typically use the board to outline these ideas but will also make available PowerPoint slides that summarize the main points. These slides will be posted on Canvas; they are not, however, substitutes for attending the class session itself. After the themes have been established for the class's content, we will break out into smaller groups to discuss the case for the day, applying the concepts from the initial lecture/discussion. You will be provided with discussion questions to guide the casework and break-out sessions. Finally, we will reconvene as the entire class to share ideas and reflections that came up in the break-out groups. *Broad participation is key to the success of this class. Please come to class having read, and thought about, the readings and cases, so we can have productive and engaged discussions during the class meetings.*

Since class involves regular break-out discussions, we will use [Miro](#) as a supplemental platform. This online collaboration tool will facilitate in documenting and sharing the exchanges from the discussion breakouts across the larger class. You will receive guidance on how to use this tool from Avny, the TA.

Please refer to the Policy Analysis Course Schedule posted along with this syllabus for more details on how each class meeting will be delivered and what, if any, deliverables are due on that day.

Texts and readings:

There is only one required book, although we will pull chapters from the optional books. All books are made available via library reserves and in online formats.

Any other reading will be posted as a document or via a direct link on Canvas. Always read, if assigned, the chapters in the textbook before diving into the articles. Readings are expected to be completed for the class under which they are listed.

I may reference optional readings in my lectures, but you will not be tested or graded on their content. Consider the readings in their entirety as a comprehensive reference for you, in this class and through the rest of your studies (and career!).

Required Book

Meltzer, Rachel and Alex Schwartz. *Policy Analysis as Problem Solving: A Flexible and Evidence Based Framework*, 1st Edition. New York: Routledge, 2018.

Optional Books

Stone, Deborah, *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making*, 3rd Edition. New York: WW Norton, 2012.

Hammond, John S., Ralph L. Keeney, and Howard Raiffa, *Smart Choices: A Practical Guide to Making Better Decisions*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2015.

Bardach, Eugene and Eric M. Patashnik, *A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis: The Eightfold Path to More Effective Problem Solving*, 6th edition. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2019.

Patton, Carl V. and David S. Sawicki, *Basic Methods of Policy Analysis and Planning* (Third Edition). New York: Routledge, 2012.

Reich, Robert B. (Ed.), *The Power of Public Ideas*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.

Sabatier, Paul A. and Christopher M. Weible (Eds.), *Theories of the Policy Process* (3rd Edition), Westview Press, 2014.

Stokey, Edith and Richard Zeckhauser, *A Primer for Policy Analysis*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1979.

Method of evaluation and requirements

To get the most out of this course, you will need to actively engage with the assigned readings, cases, exercises, and class discussions. I've curated a set of assignments with a range of modalities, so you have several different ways to learn and show your mastery. You will receive more detailed information on the memos and final project and briefing later in the semester.

In addition to class attendance and active participation, students will be expected to analyze and present cases weekly, to prepare two pieces of policy analysis in the form of policy memos to decision-makers, and to work on a simulated policy analysis project as part of a team. In addition, there will be some exercises on discounting for cost-benefit analysis, which will require doing quantitative analysis using a spreadsheet. The final team project will culminate in a policy memo and a live briefing to a panel and "client." The grading on the project will be a team grade and effectiveness in group dynamics will be included in the grade. More on the rubric for grading the final project will be provided later in the semester.

I am happy to work out reasonable arrangements for deadline adjustments with at least 2 weeks' notice; I understand unforeseen circumstances sometimes arise and those will be addressed on a case-by-case basis. Missed deadlines or assignments without any notice or accommodation will result in grade penalties.

All assignments will be submitted via Canvas and all grades and feedback will be sent back to you via Canvas.

Grading

Your final grade will be determined by the following distribution:

Assignment/deliverable	Percentage of final grade
Class Participation and Preparation (including CBA exercises and discussion questions/Miro)	20 %
Policy Analysis Memo #1 **	20 %
Policy Analysis Memo #2	30 %
Final Team Project	30 %
Total	100 %

Everyone will be given the option to rewrite this first memo and the revised grade will be used for the final grade determination.

Your performance in this class will be graded following the GSD's established rubric. Please refer to information from the [registrar](#) for more details on the grading scale and qualifications.

The grade of "Pass" is the standard mark for recognizing satisfactory work and most students in any class receive a pass—around 80%. "Distinction" and "High Pass" are reserved for work of

clearly exceptional merit. "Low Pass" indicates a performance that, although deficient in some respects, meets minimal course standards.

To make it easier for students to track their progress I will assign numerical grades to assignments that can then be converted to the GSD rubric. The specific conversion will be provided upon grading the memos, but will generally follow this rubric (the exact cut-offs are subject to change):

- High pass 92%+
- Pass 70%+
- Low pass 60%+

Academic Integrity and Conduct

While group collaboration and peer-to-peer support are welcome in this class, you are expected to submit your own final work products (the final group project, however, will be produced and graded as a team). While all of the assignments can be completed using only the readings and resources assigned in the class, you are welcome to use outside sources (but will not be penalized for not doing so). Anything submitted must be your original content, produced individually *without the aid of AI/ChatGPT tools*. Violations of this policy will be considered academic misconduct. Different classes at Harvard could implement different AI policies, and it is the student's responsibility to conform to expectations for each course. In all cases, please cite your sources; I do not have a preference about the citation format, but please just be consistent. Plagiarism will not be tolerated, and I will not accept papers completed for other courses. Please also review the [GSD's Academic Conduct Policy](#).

The work you submitted is expected to be of professional quality. Please leave enough time for thorough proofreading (both in terms of content and writing style/grammar). In my feedback I will not be able to do any copyediting on writing style/grammar, and you will be penalized for work that includes excessive writing mistakes and a general lack of clarity in presentation.

Attendance, etiquette, and recordings

Unless otherwise notified, your attendance is expected for every class session. I understand that conflicts can come up unexpectedly, but please communicate as soon as you know whether it will be difficult for you to participate in any class meeting. Lectures will not be regularly recorded.

The success of the class discussions depends on respectful exchanges. When you participate in class discussions (either orally or in writing) please be mindful of others' perspectives and experiences, which may differ from your own. Indeed, diversity of ideas and experiences is something we can all benefit and learn from. I look forward to robust debates that can involve a range of ideas, but I expect those ideas to be shared in a discerning way.

If/when we do meet online, those sessions will be recorded and posted on Canvas (conditional on the approval of any guest speakers). Any Miro boards will also be saved and made available for

the entirety of the semester. You are reminded to *not* make your own recordings of the Zoom sessions as you need all of the participants' consent to do so.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) and speak with me by the end of the second week of the class. All discussions will remain confidential, although faculty members are invited to contact AEO to discuss appropriate implementation.

Student Services, Resources, and Wellbeing

Your personal well-being is paramount. Please pay attention to your physical and mental health and make yourself familiar with the resources available to you through the [GSD's Office of Student Services](#). I encourage you to reach out to Student Services if you are experiencing personal challenges or hardship, and rest assured that I will work with you to make accommodations for your course requirements.

Class Schedule and Readings

WEEK 1: INTRODUCTION TO POLICY ANALYSIS AND PROBLEM DEFINITION

- A. The Policy Analytic Framework and Solving Wicked Problems
- B. Stage 1: Problem Definition

Case: “Air Pollution and Democracy: The Mexico City School Calendar Change Proposal,” Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Case C16-92-1164.0

Required Reading

Meltzer and Schwartz, Introduction, Chapters 1, 2 and 8

Behn, Robert. “Policy Analysts, Clients, and Social Scientists.” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 4(3): 428-432, 1985.

Gomez-Ibanez, Jose. “Learning by the Case Method,” Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Case N15-86-1136.0.

Optional Reading

Hammond et al., Chptrs. 1 & 2 (“Making Smart Choices” and “Problem”), pp. 1-29.

Jenkins Smith, Hank C. “Professional Roles for Policy Analysts: A Critical Assessment” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 2(1): 88-97, 1982.

Majone, Giandomenico, Chapter 7 (“Policy Analysis and Public Deliberation”), In *The Power of Public Ideas*, Harvard University Press, 1988.

Meltzer, Rachel, “Practice Makes Perfect: Teaching Policy Analysis Through Integrated Client-Based Projects,” *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 19(3): 405-431, 2013

WEEK 2: GENERATING ALTERNATIVES AND CRITERIA

Case: “Garbage Arguments: Battle Over Transfer Station Underscores City Trash Dilemma.”

Required Reading

Meltzer and Schwartz, Chapters 3 and 4

Sunstein, Cass R. and Richard H. Thaler. “Introduction” in *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (New Haven: Yale University Press).

Myers Jr., Samuel L. “Analysis of Race as Policy Analysis,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, Vol. 21(2): 169-190, 2002.

Optional Reading

Bardach, "Appendix B: Things Governments Do."

Hammond et al., Chptr. 3 ("Objectives"), pp. 31-45. and Chptr. 4 ("Alternatives"), pp. 47-64.

Patton and Sawicki, Chptr. 5 ("Establishing Evaluative Criteria") and Chptr. 6 ("Identifying Alternatives") in *Basic Methods of Policy Analysis and Planning*.

WEEK 3: CRITERIA (CON.) AND ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATION

Case: "Bicycling and Coast City," Parts A and B. Electronic Hallway.

Required Reading

Meltzer and Schwartz, Chapters 6 and 7

Optional Reading

Bardach, pp. 83-111, "Assembling Evidence"; and pp. 125-139, "Smart (Best) Practices' Research."

Hammond et al., Chptrs. 5 and 6 ("Consequences" and "Tradeoffs"), pp. 65-108 and Chptrs. 10 and 11 ("Psychological Traps" and "The Wise Decision Maker"), pp. 189-234.

Patton and Sawicki, *Basic Methods of Policy Analysis and Planning*, pp. 77-109.

Weimer, David and Aidan Vining, Chptr. 10 ("Landing On Your Feet: How to Confront Policy Problems") in *Policy Analysis, Concepts and Practice* (Upper Saddle River, NJ), 1999.

WEEK 4: IMPLEMENTATION AND ALTERNATIVE DECISION-MAKING FRAMEWORKS & INTRODUCTION TO TIME VALUE OF MONEY AND COST BENEFIT ANALYSIS

Required Reading

Lipsky, Michael, Chapters 1 and 2, in *Street Level Bureaucracy*, Russell Sage Foundation, 1980.

Lindblom, Charles E. "The Science of Muddling Through," *Public Administration Review*, Volume 19 (Spring): 79-88, 1959.

Trippe, Helena Polati. "Policy Instrumentation: The Object of Service Design in Policy Making." *Design Issues*, 37(3): 89-100, 2021.

James L. True, Bryan D. Jones, and Frank R. Baumgartner, Chapter 6 (“Punctuated Equilibrium Theory: Explaining Stability and Change in American Policymaking”) in Paul A. Sabatier and Christopher M. Weible (Eds.), *Theories of the Policy Process*, Westview Press, 2014.

Stone, *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making*, Chptrs. 1, 2, 7 and 8.

Optional Reading

Cairney, Paul. “The politics of policy analysis: Theoretical insights on real world problems,” *Journal of European Public Policy*: 1-19, 2023.

Elmore, Richard F. “Backward Mapping: Implementation Research and Policy Decisions,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 94(4): 601-616, 1979-80.

Mettler, Suzanne, “Bringing the State Back in to Civic Engagement: Policy Feedback Effects of the G.I. Bill for World War II Veterans,” *The American Political Science Review*, 96(2): 351-65, 2002.

Piven, Frances Fox and Richard A. Cloward. 1977. *Poor People’s Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*. New York: Vintage Books.

Pressman, Jeffrey L. and Aaron Wildavsky, Chapter 5 (“The Complexity of Joint Action”), in *Implementation*, University of California Press, 1984.

Schneider, Anne L., Helen Ingram and Peter DeLeon. Chapter 4 (“Democratic Policy Design: Social Construction of Target Populations”) in Paul A. Sabatier and Christopher M. Weible (Eds.), *Theories of the Policy Process*, Westview Press, 2014.

Zahariadis, Nikolaos, Chapters 3 (“The Multiple Streams Framework: Structure, Limitations, Prospects”) in Paul A. Sabatier and Christopher M. Weible (Eds.), *Theories of the Policy Process*, Westview Press, 2014.

WEEK 5: GUEST SPEAKER & INTRODUCTION TO TIME VALUE OF MONEY AND COST BENEFIT ANALYSIS (CON.)

GUEST SPEAKER: Chrystal Kornegay, CEO, MassHousing

A. Time Value of Money

B. Introduction to Cost Effectiveness and Cost Benefit Analysis

Case: Leicester Polytechnic Institute (included at end of Herzinger & Nittenhouse Chapter on Canvas, pg. 510).

****This session includes a workshop on Discounting and Time Value of Money using Excel—BRING YOUR LAPTOPS****

Required Reading

Meltzer and Schwartz, Chapter 5

Herzlinger, Regina and Denise Nitterhouse, *Financial Accounting and Managerial Control for Nonprofit Organizations* (Cincinnati: South Western Publishing Co), Chptr. 14, “Techniques for Financial Decision-Making,” pp. 491-512.

Stokey, Edith and Richard Zeckhauser, *A Primer for Policy Analysis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), Chptr. 10 (“The Valuation of Future Consequences: Discounting”), pp. 159-176.

Optional Reading

Wheelan, Charles, *Introduction to Public Policy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), Chptr. 12, “Cost-Benefit Analysis”, pp. 405-443.

WEEK 6: COST BENEFIT ANALYSIS I

- A. CBA Decision Criteria and Efficiency
- B. The Social Welfare Function: Distributional Equity
- C. The Challenge of Valuing all the Relevant Impacts

Case: Inclusive CBA in Policing

Supplementary material for case: Vera Institute of Justice, Cost Benefit Analysis and Justice Policy Toolkit (Dec. 2014).

Required Readings

Meltzer and Schwartz, Chapter 5

Ackerman, Frank and Lisa Heinzerling. Chptr. 1 in *Priceless: On Knowing the Price of Everything and the Value of Nothing* (New York: The New Press).

Thomson-DeVeaux, Amelia, "What Should The Government Spend To Save A Life?," *FiveThirtyEight*, Mar. 2020.

Optional Reading

Boardman et al., Chptrs. 1, 2, 6 and 17 in *Cost Benefit Analysis: Concepts and*

Practice (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall), 1996.

Stokey, Edith and Richard Zeckhauser, *A Primer for Policy Analysis* (New York: W. W. Norton), Chptr. 9 (“Project Evaluation: Benefit Cost Analysis”), pp. 134-158, 1978.

Haab, Timothy, “What’s the Value of a Clean Beach? Here’s How Economists Do the Numbers,” *The Conversation*, July 24 2018.

WEEK 7: COST BENEFIT ANALYSIS II & GUEST SPEAKER

Case: “Crossrail (A): The Business Case,” Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Case CR14-08-1898.1

GUEST SPEAKER: Richard Revesz, AnBryce Professor of Law at the New York University School of Law and former Administrator, Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs

Required Reading

Boardman et. al, Chptr. 19 in *Cost Benefit Analysis: Concepts and Practice* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall), 1996.

Trumbell, William H. “Who has Standing in Cost-Benefit Analysis?,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 9(3): 201-218, 1990.

Optional Reading

Kelman, Steven. “Cost-Benefit Analysis, an Ethical Critique,” In John Martin Gilroy and Maurice Wade Eds., *The Moral Dimension of Public Policy Choice* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press), pp. 153-164, 1992.

WEEK 8: NO CLASS—SPRING BREAK

Required Reading

Levi, Daniel, Chptr. 3 (“Team Beginnings”) in *Group Dynamics for Teams* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage), pp. 37-56, 2007.

Druskat, Vanessa Urch and Steven B. Wolff, “Building the Emotional Intelligence of Groups,” *Harvard Business Review*, pp. 81-90, March 2001.

“Guidelines for Team Formation”.

WEEK 9: GROUP WORK ON POLICY ANALYSIS SIMULATION PROJECT

MEETING TIMES/TEAMS TBD

WEEK 10: GROUP WORK ON POLICY ANALYSIS SIMULATION PROJECT

MEETING TIMES/TEAMS TBD

WEEK 11: GROUP WORK ON POLICY ANALYSIS SIMULATION PROJECT

MEETING TIMES/TEAMS TBD

WEEK 12: TEAM BRIEFINGS

WEEK 13: TEAM BRIEFINGS

ORDER/TIME OF PRESENTATIONS TBD