

# **POLS 4110: Government Failure?: The American Administrative State Spring 2026**

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Office: Baldwin 380B  
Office Hours: Wednesdays 3:00-4:00pm and by appointment  
Course Meeting Time and Room: MW 1:15-2:35 PM, Baldwin 102  
Pre-requisite: POLS 1101 (includes E/H/S)

## **Course Description:**

The size of the American administrative state has grown exponentially in the Post-FDR era. As the scope and complexity of American public policy increases, administrative agencies, such as the Social Security Administration (SSA) or the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), are required to promulgate rules and regulations as dictated by legislation. However, in carrying out their responsibilities, these administrative agencies must be responsive to the conflicting policy mandates of Congress, the President, the courts, and sometimes the public. Federal administrative activity gains the most attention when the federal government has apparently failed to meet the public's expectations of good and effective governance. Some notable examples include the failure to prevent the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) sluggish and ineffective response to Hurricane Katrina, controversies over the State Department's response to terrorist attacks in Benghazi, and the various crises facing the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). **The goal of this class is to gain an understanding of government bureaucracy organizations through the examination of administrative theories and multiple case studies.** This course examines the politics of agency design, delegation, political oversight, and internal agency processes. We will discuss the structure and practices of the federal administrative structure and how federal agencies function. We will also discuss potential reforms and proposals to help government work efficiently and effectively.

## **Learning Goals/Outcomes:**

**First**, students will **gain in-depth knowledge** of the structure of the federal executive branch, the federal executive personnel system, and the responsibilities of federal administration agencies. These responsibilities include rule creation, regulation, disaster response and prevention, education and occupational safety.

**Second**, we will **critically analyze** the concept of government failure. Specifically, what does it mean for a government to fail in its responsibilities? How does failure of government oversight differ from failure of government operation?

**Third**, students will **assess** the tensions that permeate throughout the federal bureaucracy. Specifically, how does the struggle between the president and Congress affect the way in which bureaucracies carry out their responsibilities? How does internal bureaucratic structure contribute to efficient or problematic government performance?

**Fourth**, students **will strengthen their communication skills** through course assignments and engagement of subject matter with their peers and the instructor.

**Fifth**, students will use the knowledge gained in this course to **develop policy recommendations** aimed at improving government performance.

**Sixth**, students will **provide assessment and feedback** to their peers through review and evaluation of peer assignments.

**Topical Outline:**

1. What is Failure?
2. Understanding the Federal Executive Branch Structure
3. Bureaucracy and Efficiency
4. Bureaucratic Incoherence
5. Red Tape and Standard Operating Procedures
6. Agency Environment and Adaptation
7. Agency Drift and Collusion
8. Emergency Response
9. Federal-State Oversight and Government Responsibility
10. President and the Bureaucracy
11. Political Conflict and Government Performance

**Required Texts:**

Clark, Anna. 2018. *The Poisoned City: Flint's Water and the American Urban Tragedy*. New York: Picador.

Cooper, Christopher, and Block, Robert. 2007. *Disaster: Hurricane Katrina and the Failure of Homeland Security*. New York: Times Books.

**Grading Breakdown:**

Exam 1: 20%

Exam 2: 20%

Exam 3: 20% (cumulative)

Failure Analysis Project: 25%

*Proposal Paragraph: 1%*

*Peer Review: 4%*

*Final Draft: 20%*

Participation: 10%

Discussion Posts: 5%

*Grading Scale*

100-94 A	89-87 B+	79-77 C+	69-67 D+	59-0 F
93-90 A-	86-83 B	76-73 C	66-63 D	
	82-80 B-	72-70 C-	62-60 D-	

## Classroom Discussion and Dialogue

While I will periodically lecture throughout the semester, maintaining an open and vigorous class discussion is essential to the success of this seminar. Students are expected to make frequent and informed contributions to classroom discussions and dialogue. Participation grades will be assigned on the basis of knowledge of the readings, before class preparation, in-class discussion, and activities the instructor may define. To come prepared for class you should have done the reading, be able to synthesize the main arguments or findings, and form an opinion about whether it is correct or incorrect. *Is it true? Why or why not? How do you know? How does it relate to other readings or materials from the class? Why is it important?* Although I prefer volunteers, the instructor will call on students to contribute to classroom discussion. I highly recommend that students read national news outlets regularly.

To ensure that students are keeping up with each reading, the instructor may administer “pop” quizzes or short in-class writing assignments. The assignments will count as part of the participation grade.

### Participation Grade Scale

- A Repeated excellent comments, demonstrated engagement with the literature
- B Good, solid participation
- C Some comments but shows lack of preparation
- D Attends but does not participate

## Attendance

Students are granted four free absences. No explanation is required for use of free absences; however, I recommend notifying the instructor in advance if possible. Unexcused absences will reduce your overall participation grade by a 1/3 of a letter grade. Excused absences include doctor’s visit, religious observance, death in the family, etc. Students are also expected to arrive to class on time. Tardiness will also negatively affect your overall course grade. **A 3<sup>rd</sup> tardy (and subsequent tardies) will count as an unexcused absence.**

## Classroom Decorum

My goal as the instructor is to cultivate an active and respectful learning environment where participants feel that their presence and input are valued. With this mind, I ask that we “treat others how we want to be treated” as we discuss and share our perspectives in class. Also to reduce distractions, I ask that students minimize travel in and out of room during class time. In addition, please use technology responsibly during class. Ensure that your cell phones are on silent before coming to class. Students are expected to refrain from texting and/or surfing the internet on their phones while in class. Students can use laptops to take notes and are expected to remain attentive and active participants in class.

## Academic Honesty

*"I will be academically honest in all of my academic work and will not tolerate academic dishonesty of others."* A Culture of Honesty, the University's policy and procedures for handling cases of suspected dishonesty, can be found at [honesty.uga.edu](http://honesty.uga.edu). You are responsible for knowing and complying with the policy and procedures relating to academic honesty. I expect all students to abide by the University of Georgia Academic Honesty policy.

Academic dishonesty can include plagiarism, unauthorized assistance on assignments, and falsifying academic work. For more detail about what constitutes academic honesty, and consequences for engaging in dishonest conduct be sure to revisit [Academic Honesty Policy | Home \(uga.edu\)](#).

### *Assignment Authorship and Generative AI*

Unauthorized use of artificial intelligence software, such as ChatGPT or word mixing software to write your paper, portions of your paper, or disguise plagiarized work is considered unauthorized assistance in this course. Proofreading Tools and AI (Adapted from Sarah Shannon)

Students are allowed to use proofreading tools to aid in improving the clarity of their original work. However, proofreading tools should not be used to generate “original content on your behalf.”

Written assignments will be assessed using Turnitin. A Turnitin reporting of at 40% AI will require a meeting with the professor and author.

### **Recording**

Prohibition on Class Recordings and Distribution of Course Materials: Please do not take audio or video recordings of course lectures or discussions (live or Zoom) or repost any course materials (recorded, links, written) without my express permission. Doing so violates my and the University of Georgia’s intellectual property and the privacy of your fellow classmates as protected under federal and state law.

### **Student Accommodations**

If you plan to request accommodations for a disability, please register with the Testing and Accessibility Center. They can be reached by visiting Clark Howell Hall, calling 706-542-8719 (voice) or 706-542-8778 (TTY), or by visiting <https://accessibility.uga.edu/>.

### **Mental Health and Wellness Resources:**

UGA Well-Being Resources:

UGA Well-being Resources promote student success by cultivating a culture that supports a more active, healthy, and engaged student community.

Anyone needing assistance is encouraged to contact Student Care & Outreach (SCO) in the Division of Student Affairs at 706-542-8479 or visit [sco.uga.edu](http://sco.uga.edu). Student Care & Outreach helps students navigate difficult circumstances by connecting them with the most appropriate resources or services. They also administer the Embark@UGA program which supports students experiencing, or who have experienced, homelessness, foster care, or housing insecurity.

UGA provides both clinical and non-clinical options to support student well-being and mental health, any time, any place. Whether on campus, or studying from home or abroad, UGA Well-being Resources are here to help.

- Well-being Resources: [well-being.uga.edu](http://well-being.uga.edu)
- Student Care and Outreach: [sco.uga.edu](http://sco.uga.edu)
- University Health Center: [healthcenter.uga.edu](http://healthcenter.uga.edu)
- Counseling and Psychiatric Services: [caps.uga.edu](http://caps.uga.edu) or CAPS 24/7 crisis support at 706-542-2273
- Health Promotion/ Fontaine Center: [healthpromotion.uga.edu](http://healthpromotion.uga.edu)
- Accessibility and Testing: [accessibility.uga.edu](http://accessibility.uga.edu)

Additional information, including free digital well-being resources, can be accessed through the UGA app or by visiting <https://well-being.uga.edu>.

**COURSE SCHEDULE**

<b>Date</b>		<b>Topic</b>	<b>Readings</b>
Monday (Week 1)	01/12/2026	Introduction	
Wednesday (Week 1)	01/14/2026	Understanding Government Failure	Light, Paul C. 2014. "A Cascade of Failures: Why Government Fails, and How to Stop It." Fast and Furious (Obama) and Fed Employee Dismissals (Trump) (articles on eLC)
Monday (Week 2)	01/19/2026	NO CLASS- MLK JR. Holiday	NO CLASS
Wednesday (Week 2)	01/21/2026	Understanding the Federal Executive Branch: Structure and Personnel	Carpenter, Dan. 2005. The Evolution of the National Bureaucracy in the United States, pg. 41-66 (excerpt on eLC)
Monday (Week 3)	01/26/2026	Understanding the Federal Executive Branch: Structure and Personnel	Lewis, David E. 2008. The Politics of Presidential Appointments. Chapter 1, and Chapter 2(1-43)
Wednesday (Week 3)	01/28/2026	Understanding the Federal Executive Branch: Structure and Personnel	Lewis, David E., and Terry M. Moe. 2010. "Struggling Over Bureaucracy: The Levers of Control," (on eLC) (excerpt) Attorney Firing Scandal (Bush II), Bureaucratic Management Challenges (Obama) (readings on eLC)
Monday (Week 4)	02/02/2026	Bureaucracy and Efficiency	Wilson, James Q. 1989. <i>Bureaucracy</i> . Ch 2. (p.25-26), Ch. 7(p. 112-122), Ch. 19 (346-353) (excerpts on eLC)
Wednesday (Week 4)	02/04/2026	Bureaucracy and Burden	Herd, Pamela and Moynihan. 2018. <i>Administrative Burden: "Understanding Administration Burden"</i> (excerpt on eLC)
Monday (Week 5)	02/09/2026	Catch up and Review	Catch up and Review
<b>Wednesday (Week 5)</b>	<b>02/11/2026</b>	<b>EXAM 1</b>	<b>EXAM 1</b>
Monday (Week 6)	02/16/2026	Bureaucracy and National Crisis Case Study: 9/11	National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. 2004. <i>9/11 Commission Report</i> . Pages 1-46 Documentary: On Native Soil excerpt
Wednesday (Week 6)	02/18/2026	Bureaucracy and National Crisis Case Study: 9/11	National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. 2004. <i>9/11 Commission Report</i> . Chapter 3 (p. 71-93), Chapter 8 Documentary: On Native Soil excerpt
Monday (Week 7)	02/23/2026	Red Tape and Standard Operating Procedures Case Study: Veterans Affairs	Wilson, James Q. 1989. <i>Bureaucracy</i> . Ch.7 (p.129-136) (excerpt on eLC) VA Articles (on eLC)
Wednesday (Week 7)	02/25/2026	Red Tape and Standard Operating Procedures Case Study: Veterans Affairs	Hatte, Hensel, Kalcuza. 2019. "Emotional Responses to Bureaucratic Red Tape." (on eLC)
<b>Friday</b>	<b>02/27/2026</b>	<b>Assignment Due</b>	<b>Research Proposal Due by 11:59pm</b>
Monday (Week 8)	03/02/2026	Agency Drift and Collusion	Rex, Justin. 2020. "Anatomy of Agency Capture," pages 1-10 (on eLC) Wilson, James. 1989. <i>Bureaucracy</i> . Ch. 5-6
Wednesday (Week 8)	03/04/2026	Agency Drift and Collusion Case Study: Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill	"Deep Water: The Gulf Oil Disaster and the Future of Offshore Drilling." (excerpts on eLC)
SPRING BREAK	03/09/2026-03/13/2026	SPRING BREAK	SPRING BREAK
Monday (Week 9)	03/16/2026	Emergency Response: Case Study: Hurricane Katrina	Cooper, Christopher and Robert Block. 2007. <i>Disaster: Hurricane Katrina and the Failure of Homeland Security</i> . Documentary: The Storm
Wednesday (Week 9)	03/18/2026	Emergency Response: Case Study Hurricane Katrina	Cooper, Christopher and Robert Block. 2007. <i>Disaster: Hurricane Katrina and the Failure of Homeland Security</i> . Documentary: The Storm

Monday (Week 10)	03/23/2026	Catch up and Review	Catch up and Review
<b>Wednesday (Week 10)</b>	<b>03/25/2026</b>	<b>EXAM 2</b>	<b>EXAM 2</b>
Monday (Week 11)	03/30/2026	Agency Environment and Adaptation Case Study: Benghazi	Wilson, James. 1989. Bureaucracy. Ch. 3 (excerpt on eLC) Benghazi Report (on eLC)
Wednesday (Week 11)	04/01/2026	Agency Environment and Adaptation Case Study: Benghazi	Benghazi Report (on eLC)
Monday (Week 12)	04/06/2026	Congress and the Bureaucracy	Congress, Polarization, and Bureaucratic Congress (articles on eLC)
Wednesday (Week 12)	04/08/2026	Political Conflict and Government Performance	Understanding Government Shutdowns (articles on eLC) Documentary and Discussion: Cliffhanger
<b>Friday (Week 12)</b>	<b>04/10/2026</b>	<b>Assignment Due</b>	<b>Peer Review Due by Draft by 11:59pm</b>
Monday (Week 13)	04/13/2026	Catch up & Peer Review	Peer Review of Draft of Failure Analysis Paper
Wednesday (Week 13)	04/15/2026	Research Day	Research Day
Monday (Week 14)	04/20/2026	Federal-State Oversight and Government Responsibility Case Study: Flint Michigan Water Crisis	Clark, Anna. 2018. <i>The Poisoned City</i>
Wednesday (Week 14)	04/22/2026	Federal-State Oversight and Government Responsibility Case Study: Flint Michigan Water Crisis	Clark, Anna. 2018. <i>The Poisoned City</i>
Monday (Week 15)	04/27/2026	Semester Wrap Up and Review	Semester Wrap Up and Review
<b>FINAL EXAM</b>	<b>04/29/2026</b>	<b>EXAM 3 (at 12:00pm)</b>	<b>EXAM 3 (at 12:00pm)</b>
<b>FINAL PAPER DUE</b>	<b>05/01/2026</b>	<b>Final Paper Due</b>	<b>Final Paper due by 11:59pm</b>

**This Schedule is TENTATIVE and subject to change with notice**

## ASSIGNMENTS

### Notes on Assignments

#### *Writing Format*

I prefer that students use Chicago Style or MLA citations. IMPORTANT: I will not grade papers with missing or improper citations. Students should also use Times New Roman or Garamond 12-point font. All writing assignments should have 1-inch margins. All writing assignments must be submitted via Word Document.

#### *Late Assignments and Exams*

Late papers and assignments will be penalized by 1/3 of a letter grade for every 12-hour period that they are late (i.e. a B becomes a B-). You are expected to take exams on the day/time they are assigned. Make-up exams will be considered in cases of jury duty and emergency.

#### *Assignment Authorship*

Unauthorized use of artificial intelligence software, such as ChatGPT or word mixing software to write your paper or disguise plagiarized work is considered unauthorized assistance in this course.

### Exams

The course will include 3 in-class exams. The exams are closed book; however, students are allowed a note sheet for each exam.

### Discussion Posts

Twice during the semester students will post a detailed question and critique of the weekly reading. Each question and critique will be scored on a scale of 0 to 3. 0=missing, 1=unsatisfactory, 2=satisfactory, 3=excellent.

### Failure Analysis Paper

Students will complete a 8-to-10-page research paper (excluding citations) that examines one of the instances of government failure described by Paul Light in his article “A Cascade of Failures: Why Government Fails, and How to Stop It.” The broad question that each student will explore is “How do we understand why failure X occurred and what policies can prevent such occurrence in the future?” With their project, students will examine one of Light’s cases based upon 2 of the 5 contributors to failure (page 11). In addition to analyzing a specific instance of failure, students will provide policy recommendations to prevent or reduce the occurrence of future failures (similar to their specific case). For example, if I am interested in examining the Postal Service Financial crisis, I could explore how policies and resources contributed to the financial difficulties experienced by the USPS. In their paper, students should have a clear thesis that provides their proposed policy recommendations. For example, with the USPS example, my policy recommendation could stipulate changes to the way in which the USPS is funded. With their project, Students are expected to use existing facts, data, and evidence for this project. Students are also expected to draw from course materials, scholarly sources, and if necessary, journalistic sources. Below is an example structure for the final paper.

### I. INTRODUCTION

- a. What is my case?
- b. Which contributors to failure am I exploring?
- c. How did these contributors contribute to the specific failure in this case?
- d. What are my policy recommendations for these specific contributors? (Thesis)
- e. Roadmap of my paper

II. **AGENCY BACKGROUND** where the authors provides background on the creation, structure and mission of agency. The author can also briefly note controversies involving the agency not related to their specific failure analysis.

III. An **ANALYSIS/RECOMMENDATIONS** section where the author provides an in-depth examination of their case using 2 contributors specified by Light. Students must also provide policy recommendations in response to their analysis of their failure case.

IV. A **CONCLUSION** that summarizes the findings and explains the implications of your work.

Additional components of the Failure Analysis Project

*Research Paragraph Proposal*

Approximately two paragraph statement of proposed failure case and 2 contributors. If possible, an example policy recommendation.

*Peer Review Assignment*

Students will read, review, and assess a draft paper of one of their peers. In order to receive full credit, each student must submit a draft of their paper that follows the specifications of the final paper assignment (i.e. page length, format). In addition to discussion their comments and feedback in class. Students will provide a review memo to their reviewee.