

FALL 2026: POLS 4110: Government Failure?: The American Administrative State

Instructor: Dr. Gbemende Johnson

Contact: gbemende.johnson@uga.edu or gj87340@uga.edu

Office: Baldwin 305B

Office Hours: Tuesday 2:00pm-3:30pm (in-person/virtual) and by appointment

Course Meeting Time and Room: -T-TH 11:35AM-12:55 PM, Baldwin 102

Pre-Requisites: POLS 1101 (includes E/H/S)

Course Overview

The size of the American administrative state has grown significantly 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.

The goal of this course is to gain an understanding of government bureaucratic organizations through the examination of administrative organization theories, empirical research, 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.

Student Learning 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 administrative 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.

Disclaimer

The course syllabus is a general plan for the course: deviations announced to the class by the instructor may be necessary.

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 1/3rd of a letter grade. Excused absences include a doctor’s appointment, 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 3rd 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 in 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 the 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. 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](https://honesty.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

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" (adapted from Sarah Shannon).

Important: Written assignments will be assessed using Turnitin. A Turnitin report of at least **40% AI will require a meeting with the instructor and author.**

Late Assignments and Exams

Writing Assignments

Late writing assignments will be penalized by a full letter grade for every 12-hour period that they are late (i.e., a B becomes a C).

Exams

You are expected to take exams on the day/time they are assigned. Make-up exams will only be considered in cases of jury duty and documented emergencies. If you have a conflict with an athletic/school event and exam day, please let me know as soon as possible in advance of the exam.

Recording

In the absence of written authorization from the UGA Disability Resource Center, students may not make a visual or audio recording of any aspect of this course. Students who have a recording accommodation agree in writing that they:

- Will use the records only for personal academic use during the specific course.
- Understand that faculty members have copyright interest in their class lectures and that they agree not to infringe on this right in any way.
- Understand that the faculty member and students in the class have privacy rights and agree not to violate those rights by using recordings for any reason other than their own personal study.
- Will not release, digitally upload, broadcast, transcribe, or otherwise share all or any part of the recordings. They also agree that they will not profit financially and will not allow others to benefit personally or financially from lecture recordings or other course materials.

- Will erase/delete all recordings at the end of the semester.
- Understand that violation of these terms may subject them to discipline under the Student Code of Conduct or subject them to liability under copyright laws.

Student Accommodations

If you plan to request accommodations for a disability, please register with the Accessibility and Testing 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 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. 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
- Student Care and Outreach: sco.uga.edu
- University Health Center: healthcenter.uga.edu
- Counseling and Psychiatric Services: caps.uga.edu or CAPS 24/7 crisis support at 706-542-2273
- Health Promotion/ Fontaine Center: healthpromotion.uga.edu
- Accessibility & Testing: accessibility.uga.edu Additional information, including free digital well-being resources, can be accessed through the UGA app or by visiting well-being.uga.edu.

IMPORTANT DATES (See full Course Schedule Below)

Exam Dates

Exam 1: 9-17-2026

Exam 2: 10-22-2026

Exam 3: 12-08-2026

Semester Dates

Drop/Add Deadline: 08-21-2026

Fall Break: 10-30-2026

Withdrawal Deadline: 11-11-2026

Thanksgiving Break: 11-23-2026-11-27-2026

Classes End: 12-01-2026

Course Schedule

WEEK	Topic	Readings
WEEK 1	Introduction: Syllabus Overview and Understanding Government Failure	08-18-2026 Review Syllabus in Detail 08-20-2026 Light, Paul C. 2014. "A Cascade of Failures: Why Government Fails, and How to Stop It." (on eLC) Executive Branch in the News (articles on eLC)
WEEK 2	Understanding the Federal Executive Branch: Structure and Personnel	08-25-2026 Carpenter, Dan. 2005. The Evolution of the National Bureaucracy in the United States, (excerpt on eLC) <i>Recommended:</i> Brunjes, Benjamin. 2026. There and back again: New patronage and the U.S. Civil service system (on eLC) 08-27-2026 Lewis, David E. 2008. The Politics of Presidential Appointments. (1-43)
WEEK 3	Understanding the Federal Executive Branch: Structure and Personnel	09-01-2026 Lewis, David. 2026. President Trump and the Federal Personnel System: Theory and Practice (on eLC) Appointee Hiring, Firing, and Classification Controversies (articles on eLC) 09-03-2026 Congressional Oversight Manual. 2026. Congressional Research Service (excerpts on eLC)
WEEK 4 Note: Labor Day Monday	Bureaucratic Efficiency/Bureaucracy and Burden	09-08-2026 Wilson, James Q. 1989. <i>Bureaucracy</i>. Ch 2. (p.25-26), Ch. 7(p. 112-122), Ch. 19 (346-353) (excerpts on eLC) 09-10-2026 Herd, Pamela and Donald P. Moynihan. 2018. <i>Administrative Burden: "Understanding Administration Burden"</i> (excerpt)
WEEK 5	Catch up/Review and Exam	09-15-2026

		Catch up and Review Session 09-17-2026 EXAM 1 (in class)
WEEK 6	Bureaucracy and National Crisis. Case Study: 9/11	09-22-2026 National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. 2004. <i>9/11 Commission Report</i>. Pages 1-46 09-24-2026 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
WEEK 7	Red Tape and Standard Operating Procedures Case Study: Veterans Affairs	09-29-2026 Madsen, Jonas, Kim S. Mikkelsen, and Donald P. Moynihan. 2020. "Burdens, Sludge, Ordeals, Red Tape, Oh My!: A User's Guide to the Study of Frictions." Obama Administration VA (articles on eLC) 10-01-2026 Hatte, Hensel, Kalcuza. 2019. "Emotional Responses to Bureaucratic Red Tape." (on eLC) Assignment Due by 10-02-2026 11:59pm Research Proposal (on eLC)
WEEK 8	Agency Drift and Collusion Case Study: Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill	10-06-2026 Rex, Justin. 2020. "Anatomy of Agency Capture," pages 1-10 (on eLC) Wilson, James. 1989. <i>Bureaucracy</i>. Ch. 5-6 10-08-2026 "Deep Water: The Gulf Oil Disaster and the Future of Offshore Drilling." (excerpts on eLC)
WEEK 9	Congress, Political Conflict, and the Federal Executive Branch	10-13-2026 Lewis, David E., and Terry M. Moe. 2013. "Struggling Over Bureaucracy: The Levers of Control," (on eLC) (excerpt) 10-15-2026 Understanding Government Shutdowns (articles on eLC)
WEEK 10	Catch-up/Review and Exam 2	10-20-2026 Catch-up/Review

		10-22-2026 EXAM 2 (in class)
WEEK 11	Agency Environment and Situational Imperatives	10-27-2026 Wilson, James. 1989. <i>Bureaucracy</i> . Ch. 3 (excerpt on eLC) Benghazi Report (on eLC) 10-29-2026 Benghazi Report ctd. (on eLC)
WEEK 12	Emergency Response: Hurricane Katrina	11-03-2026 Cooper, Christopher and Robert Block. 2007. <i>Disaster: Hurricane Katrina and the Failure of Homeland Security</i> . (see eLC for reading schedule) 11-05-2026 Cooper, Christopher and Robert Block. 2007. <i>Disaster: Hurricane Katrina and the Failure of Homeland Security</i> . (see eLC for reading schedule) Documentary: The Storm Assignment Due by 11-06-2026 11:59pm Peer Review Draft
WEEK 13	Research Week	11-10-2026 Peer Review (In-Class) 11-12-2026 Research Day
WEEK 14	Federal-State Oversight and Government Responsibility Case Study: Flint Michigan Water Crisis	11-17-2026 Clark, Anna. 2018. <i>The Poisoned City</i> (see eLC for reading schedule) 11-19-2026 Clark, Anna. 2018. <i>The Poisoned City</i> (see eLC for reading schedule)
Thanksgiving Week 11-23-2026	No Class this Week	HAVE A NICE BREAK!
Final "Week" 11-30-2026	No Class this Week	
FINAL PAPER DUE	FINAL PAPER DUE	FINAL PAPER DUE

	12-03-2026	12-03-2026
FINAL EXAM WEEK	FINAL EXAM 12-08-2026	FINAL EXAM 12-08-2026 (12:00pm-2:00pm)

ASSIGNMENTS

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 an 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 an 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 author 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 discussing their comments and feedback in class. Students will provide a review memo to their reviewee.

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.