

ENVS 304: Sustainability Governance: The Politics of Environmental Solutions

Northern Illinois University

Fall 2025

Tuesday/Thursday 1230-145- DuSable 176

Instructor: Dr. Colin Kuehl
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OH: Tuesday 1-3 PM
(Zulauf 410 and [Online](#))
& by appointment

TA: Ethel Atubrah
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OH: Thursday 930-1130
(Montgomery 325) & by
appointment

Course Description:

This course introduces students to how underlying social and political dynamics interact to shape environmental problems and their solutions. Students will be exposed to the broad theoretical understandings of how society and its governance contribute to issues of sustainability. Specifics of the environmental policy-making process in the United States and examples of specific policies will be a focus. The final part of the course will introduce students to the role of the United States in a global context. Throughout the semester students will apply social science perspectives to contemporary environmental problems and propose policy solutions.

Student Learning Outcomes:

By the end of this course you will

- understand the economic, political and social factors that drive environmental degradation and protection.
- identify and evaluate the rules and structures, both formal and informal, that drive sustainable behavior and policy.
- understand the American environmental policy making and adjudication processes.
- improve critical analysis and written communication through discussion, exams, and research papers.

Requirements and Grading:

Grade Breakdown

Midterm	20%
Explanatory Paper	20%
Policy Paper	20%
Final	20%

Participation	10%
Reading Quizzes	10%

Midterm (Oct 9th) and Final (Dec. 9th): The midterm and final will consist of content covered in lecture, readings and current events (see below). The exam will have be taken in class and will be composed of essay, short answer, and multiple-choice questions.

Papers (Due Oct. 18th and Dec. 1st): You will write two papers in this class on an environmental issue of your choosing. In the first, you will apply social science theories to explain the current state of an environmental problem. In the second, you will write a policy memo providing specific recommendations on how a policy solution could be successfully implemented in the American political system. The second paper can be completed as a video presentation. A detailed assignment sheet will be provided in week 3.

Participation: Students are expected to attend and actively participate in class.. Please come to class prepared, having done the reading, and ready to engage in a lively discussion of that day's topic. Attendance will be taken at random. Students can also earn participation points by attending office hours or emailing relevant current events.

Reading Quizzes: Each week, you have a reading quiz connected to that week's content. Quizzes will be taken during class, but the timing will change at the whim of your instructor. Your lowest quiz grade will be dropped.

Extra Credit: Limited extra credit opportunities will be provided throughout the semester. For example, watching and writing a response to the environmental documentaries or attending on campus events.

Your Responsibilities

Attend Lectures: Students are expected to attend all course meetings. Class will be combination of formal lectures, small group activities, and individual writing. PDFs of lecture slides will be posted to the course blackboard site after each class. I highly recommend taking notes during the lectures by hand. Research suggests it too. Lecture slides are not a substitute for attending and listening to the course lecture.

Complete the Readings: Students are expected to complete all required course readings prior to the Tuesday lecture class. Doing the reading does not mean reading every single word, it means being able to summarize the main points of the article, have given its contribution critical thought, and, probably, have taken some notes. If you have questions about how to "read smart" please ask. Recommended readings are intended to provide additional, further depth or an alternative perspective on the week's topics.

Pay Attention to Current Events: Consequential events in environmental politics will be happening throughout this semester. Accordingly, this course will rely on discussions that transcend reading material and beckon engagement with contemporary issues. It is therefore required that students stay up to date with current global affairs by following a major newspaper (e.g. New York Times, BBC, or the Economist). I highly recommend getting in the habit of reading the news every day and, if you can, purchasing a subscription (quality journalism does not come cheaply) to an outlet of your choice for the duration of the semester. I also suggest signing up for Climate Nexus Newsletter for a quick almost daily dose of what is happening in the world of climate change.

If a natural curiosity about the world or performing your civic duty is not enough to motivate a reading habit, current events will be discussed every week in discussion section (i.e. participation points) and be a component of the midterm and final.

Note: In addition to traditional news sources, I highly recommend these academic blogs for actual expert analysis on current events: The Conversation, Duck of Minerva, and Project Syndicate for general interest and political science and Grist, Climate Central, and Yale Climate Connections for environment. For those that commute, NIU's WNII(89.5) has excellent political coverage and daily reports on climate change. Please let me know if you find relevant articles of relevance to the course elsewhere (for extra participation points).

Course Materials

There are no required books for this course, however we will use one open access title as a supplement.

Krutz, Glen. (2019) American Government 2e OpenStax

This book is free to access online and will be used to supplement existing knowledge of American politics. As such, readings will optional for those with a strong grasp of American political institutions.

All additional required readings will be provided on the course blackboard site. In addition, optional readings, podcasts, and other multi-media will be listed on blackboard. These are highly recommended and will aid in understanding of core concepts.

Course Policies

Disability Accommodations: If you need an accommodation for this class, please contact the Disability Resource Center as soon as possible. The DRC coordinates accommodations for students with disabilities. It is located on the 4th floor of the Health Services Building, and can be reached at 815-753-1303 or drc@niu.edu. Also, please contact me privately as soon as possible so we can discuss your accommodations.

Health Precautions: Please be considerate of your fellow students if you aren't feeling. If you are feeling sick stay home or wear a mask. At all times, please do your part to keep everyone healthy. Please email prior to class if you are not feeling well.

Email: All course announcements will be given over email. I will expect you to check your email at least daily during the week. I will check my email from the hours of 9 am - 5 pm, but am not available on weekends. If possible, please come see me in office hours or at another scheduled time. Communication is key to getting through the challenges any challenges that might come up so please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions you might have. Please don't surprise me with reasons you are struggling at the end of the semester. Communicate early and often.

Office Hours: Office hours will be simultaneously in Zulauf 410 and on Zoom (If I forget to login, please send a quick email). Please visit the version that you are comfortable with. These are drop-in times, and all students are always welcome to attend to discuss anything related to the course, or anything else you feel that I could potentially help with. No RSVP is required. Talking allows me to get to know you and is much more efficient than emails. Please take advantage of the access office hours affords.

Technology: I assume that you have regular access to a computer and high-speed internet. If this is not the case please contact me ASAP and we will see what we can do. Technology "challenges" will inevitably arise during the semester. Please be patient with each other and your instructor. I highly recommend backing up your coursework to the cloud (like NIU's onedrive or dropbox) and/or an external hard drive.

Academic Integrity - I take academic misconduct very seriously. All work submitted must be a students' own in full. Any student in this course found to have plagiarized (accidentally or otherwise) the work of another individual (including, but not limited to, other students, existing scholarship) at minimum will receive a zero on the assignment and may be subject to additional sanctions by the University. Students are expected to have read and to abide by NIU's Student Code of Conduct. This is your responsibility and a requirement of this course. Please take NIU's Online Tutorial on Academic Integrity to re-familiarize yourself if you have doubts or concerns and/or speak to your Instructor in office hours. If you have any questions throughout the course relating to academic practices, academic integrity, and issues of plagiarism and/or citation please speak to the Instructor and/or consult the links noted above. Failure to understand these requirements does not constitute an excuse to deviate from them.

A Note on AI: The use of AI, such as ChatGPT, is not explicitly prohibited in this course. However, please understand that outputs are often inaccurate or flawed in ways that you won't understand unless you do the real work anyway. I understand that the use of these technologies will likely be a valuable tool for all of us in the future (I'm trying to figure them out too). AI tools can be beneficial for various tasks, including research, idea generation, overcoming writer's block, and grammar editing, but solely relying on AI-generated content without proper attribution is still plagiarism. Do not rely on AI to do your thinking. If using these tools you must cite them appropriately. Furthermore, papers and exams will

ask that you explicitly apply concepts discussed in this course and use current events. Not doing so, or reporting falsehoods generated by AI, will be penalized severely.

Grade Appeals: If you wish to appeal a grade you must wait 48 hours after you receive the grade and send the instructor a 1-page email specifying why you believe your grade is incorrect.

Assignment Submission: Your papers will be submitted on blackboard. For every 24 hours the assignment is late you will receive a 10% reduction in the grade (starting at the beginning of class). After 72 hours late the maximum you can earn on the assignment is 50%. Late papers will not receive feedback. If your assignment is going to be late, please email before the original due date and we will set a new one.

Extensions I understand that “life happens” and accommodations are possible for documented medical or family emergencies and this will be particularly the case this semester. If you think you need to delay taking an exam or submitting a written assignment please talk to me as soon as possible. Extensions are never guaranteed, but are much more likely if you talk to me before the issue arises, not after. They will be based on University policy, exigency of the circumstances, and timeliness of the request (i.e. the earlier the better).

Recordings: Please do not record lectures or discussions without first getting permission from the instructor.

Our Academic Environment -Together, we will foster a comfortable, engaging, and accessible scholarly environment. All students should feel welcome to attend and speak freely in class and in office hours. Issues of politics can be controversial, and debates can become heated. However, we will approach this course as colleagues, and we will treat each other with respect and dignity at all times.

Mental Health: These are challenging and anxiety inducing times outside of this course. I understand this and have my own battles. We all will handle this uncertainty and stress in different ways. Please take the time for self-care and if you need extensions for mental health reasons do not hesitate to ask. If you or somebody you know is struggling with anxiety or other issues, do not hesitate to reach out. Resources available include the DRC, Student Counseling Services or call 815-306-2777.

Gender Identity: As a faculty member, I am committed to using your proper name and pronouns. We will take time during our first class together to do introductions, at which point you can share with all members of our learning community what name and pronouns you use, as you are comfortable. Additionally, if these change at any point during the semester, please let me know and we can develop a plan to share this information with others in a way that is safe for you.

Land Acknowledgement Statement: Northern Illinois University operates and is built on the traditional lands of the Oceti Sakowin (Sioux), Miami, Bodewadmiakiwen

(Potawatomi), Sauk and Meskwaki, and Peoria. These lands are subject to Cession 50 and 148, though their terms have been consistently violated. We seek to acknowledge this land and these peoples in order to honor the legacies, struggles and current existence of Indigenous peoples; situate ourselves within settler-colonial projects; disrupt the erasure of Indigenous peoples; and begin/continue the work of collectively learning and fulfilling our obligations, for those of us who are uninvited guests on Indigenous peoples' lands.

Schedule:

This syllabus is a living document and is designed to guide our learning. In the spirit of reflexivity, I reserve the right to adjust the schedule, readings and assignments as appropriate or necessary. All changes will be announced through NIU email. Dates below indicate the Monday of each week. If you have trouble accessing any materials please email Prof Kuehl.

Week 1(Aug. 26th) – Introduction and History

Readings:

- Gelles, David and Joselow, Maxine (2025) “Inside the ‘Radical Transformation’ of America’s Environmental Role. *The New York Times*
- Desombre, Elizabeth R. (2020) Ch 1: Defining Environmental Politics. In *What is Environmental Politics*
- Robinson Meyer. (2017, March 29). A Curious Person’s Guide to the EPA and U.S. Environmental Law. *The Atlantic*.
- Paris, F., Parlapiano, A., Sanger-Katz, M., & Washington, E. (2022, August 13). A Detailed Picture of What’s in the Democrats’ Climate and Health Bill. *The New York Times*.

Lectures:

- Introduction and Syllabus
- A Brief History of Environmental Problems

Suggested Readings/Media:

- Kashwan, P. (2020, September 2). American environmentalism’s racist roots have shaped global thinking about conservation. *The Conversation*.
- Podcast: *The Carbon Copy* (2023, August 15th) America’s historic climate law, one year on.
- Rich, N. (2018, August 1). Losing Earth: The Decade We Almost Stopped Climate Change. *The New York Times Magazine*.
- Mildemberger, M., & Stokes, L. (2018, August 6). No, we didn’t almost solve the climate crisis in the 1980s. *Vox*.

Week 2(Sep 2nd) – Communication and Information Deficits

Readings:

- Gardner, G. T., & Stern, P. C. (2002). Educational Interventions. In *Environmental problems and human behavior* (2nd ed., pp. 71–94).
- Hungerford, H. R., & Volk, T. L. (1990). Changing Learner Behavior Through Environmental Education. *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 21(3), 257–269.
- Corner, A., & Groves, C. (2014). Breaking the climate change communication deadlock. *Nature Climate Change*, 4(9), 743–745
- Cook, J. (2019). Understanding and Countering Misinformation About Climate Change. *Handbook of Research on Deception, Fake News, and Misinformation Online* 281–306.

Lectures:

- Thinking Theoretically about the Social Sources of Environmental Problems
- Information Deficit theory of Environmental Change
- Science, Education, and Increasing Information

Suggested Readings/Media

- Podcast: The United States of Anxiety. (2017). “The Birth of Climate Denial”
- Podcast: Life Kit. (2020). “How to Read Food Labels, From Free-Range to Fair Trade.”
- Requarth, T. (2020). Scientists, Stop Thinking Explaining Science Will Fix Things. It Won’t. *Slate*
- Play: The Cranky Uncle game

Week 2(Sep 9th) – Politics and Collective Action Problems

Readings:

- Hardin, G. (1968). The Tragedy of the Commons. *Science*, 162(3859), 1243–1248
- The Free Rider Problem *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
- Mildenberger, M. (2019). The Tragedy of the Tragedy of the Commons *Scientific American*
- Rosenbaum, W. A. (2019). Command and Control in Action. *Environmental politics and policy* (pp. 167–197)

Lectures:

- Common Pool Resources & Collective Action Problems
- Command and Control Solutions

Suggested Readings/Media

- Ostrom, E. (1999). Revisiting the Commons: Local Lessons, Global Challenges. *Science*, 284(5412), 278–282.

- Meyer, R. (2021). An Outdated Idea is Still Shaping Climate Policy. *The Atlantic*
- Podcast: Matter of Degrees. (2021). "Let's Go Get Us a Clean Electricity Standard"

Week 4(Sep 16th) – Economics and Market Failures

Readings:

- Scorse, J. (2019, September 10). Market-based policies work to fight climate change, from India to Jamaica *The Conversation*
- Olmstead, M. (2019). Using Markets to Shape Environmental Policy. In *Environmental Policy*.
- The Economist. (2018). Sin Taxes
- Meyer, R. (2015, August 12). The Devastating Cost of Coal. *The Atlantic*.
- Krugman, P. (2022, August 17). Why We Don't Have a Carbon Tax. *New York Times*

Lectures:

- Externalities and Market Failure
- Market Solutions

Suggested Readings/Media

- Ruff, L. E. (1970). The economic common sense of pollution. *National Affairs*
- Podcast: Fresh Air Cap and Trade and The New Carbon Economy

Week 5(Sep 23rd) – Psychology and Motivation

Readings:

- Van der Linden, S., Maibach, E., & Leiserowitz, A. (2015). Improving Public Engagement with Climate Change. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10(6), 758–763.
- Griskevicius, V., Tybur, J. M., & Van den Bergh, B. (2010). Going green to be seen Status, reputation, and conspicuous conservation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 98(3), 392–404.
- Sunstein, C. R. (2014). Nudging: A Very Short Guide. *Journal of Consumer Policy*
- Ehret, P. J., Hodges, H. E., Kuehl, C., Brick, C., Mueller, S., & Anderson, S. E. (2020). Systematic Review of Household Water Conservation Interventions Using the Information–Motivation–Behavioral Skills Model. *Environment and Behavior*.

Lectures:

- Psychological Barriers to Changing Behavior
- Motivating Pro-Environmental Behavior

Suggested Readings/Media

- Hagmann, D., Ho, E. H., & Loewenstein, G. (2019). Nudging out support for a carbon tax. *Nature Climate Change*, 9(6), 484–489.
- Maki, A. (2019). The Potential Cost of Nudges. *Nature Climate Change*
- Podcast: Hidden Brain. (2016). Why our brains weren't meant to deal with climate change
- Gifford, R. (2011). The dragons of inaction: Psychological barriers that limit climate change mitigation and adaptation. *American Psychologist*, 66(4), 290–302.
- Cseke, B. (2022, June 23). Don't call it a carp: Illinois dresses up the reviled invasive species and hopes customers will bite. *WBEZ Chicago*.

Week 6(Sept 30th) – Justice and Environmental Racism

Readings:

- Selections: Pellow, D. N. (2004). *Garbage wars: The struggle for environmental justice in Chicago*.
- Podcast: *The City* (2017) Six Stories and Life in the Shadow of the Mountain (First two episodes)
- Mohai, P., Pellow, D., & Roberts, J. T. (2009). Environmental Justice. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 34(1), 405–430.
- Brune, M. (2020). Pulling Down our Monuments. *The Sierra Club*
- Provost and Gerber. (2018). In the U.S., black, brown, and poor people suffer the most from environmental contamination. *The Washington Post*

Lectures:

- Environmental Injustice
- Environmental Justice Solutions

Suggested Readings/Media:

- Tessum, C. W., Paoletta, D. A., Chambliss, S. E., Apte, J. S., Hill, J. D., & Marshall, J. D. (2021). PM2.5 polluters disproportionately and systemically affect people of color in the United States. *Science Advances*, 7(18).
- How to Save a Planet. 2020. "Black Lives Matter and the Climate"(podcast)

Week 7(Oct 7th) – Individuals vs Institutions (and midterm)

Readings:

- Steinberg, P. F. (2015). *Who rules the earth? How social rules shape our planet and our lives*. Oxford University
- Maniates, M. F. (2001). Individualization: Plant a Tree, buy a Bike, Save the World? *Global Environmental Politics*, 1(3), 31–52.

- Kuehl. (2022). Acting Sustainably: Public and Private Environmental Behaviors. *Pathways to Research to Sustainability*

Lectures:

- Individuation vs Institutions

Suggested Readings/Media:

- Schreiber, M. (2020, April 27). The Coronavirus and the Limits of Individual Climate Action. *The New Republic*.
- Podcast: A Matter of Degrees. (2020). "Give up Your Climate Guilt"
- Podcast: How to Save a Planet. (2021). "Is Your Carbon Footprint BS?"

Week 8(Oct 14th) – The People, Political Parties, and the Policy Process

Readings:

- Rosenbaum, W. A. (2020). The Policy Process. In *Environmental Politics and Policy* (11th ed., pp. 30–60). Sage.
- Shultz, G., & Halstead, T. (2020, January 16). The Winning Conservative Climate Solution. *Climate Leadership Council*.
- Egan, P. J., & Mullin, M. (2017). Climate change: US public opinion. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 20(1), 209-227.
- Warner, A. (2018, May 2). Unpersuasive: Why arguing about climate change often doesn't work. *Annual Reviews*

Lectures:

- Overview: The American Policy Making Process
- Public Opinion and Partisanship

Suggested Readings/Media:

- OpenStax Chap 6 - "Public Opinion"
- Ansolabehere, S., & Konisky, D. M. (2014). *Cheap and clean*.
- Podcast: *Hidden Brain*. (2019). Partisanship in American Politics

Week 9(Oct 21st) – The Legislative Branch and Interest Groups

Readings:

- Stokes, L. (2020, April 19). Upend the political power of carbon polluters. *The Boston Globe*
- Kormann, C. (2015, February 17). Greening the Tea Party. *The New Yorker*
- Anderegg et al. (2021, June 5) Opinion: Why Republicans need to engage in climate politics — and where to begin. *Deseret News*

Lectures:

- Interest Groups

- Congress and Party Politics

Suggested Readings/Media:

- OpenStax Chapt 10 "Interest Groups and Lobbying"
- OpenStax Chap. 11 "Congress"
- Supran, G., & Oreskes, N. (2017). Assessing ExxonMobil's climate change communications (1977–2014). *Environmental Research Letters*, 12(8), 084019.
- Podcast: A Matter of Degrees. (2020) "The Darth Vader of Electric Utilities"

Week 10(Oct 28th) – The Executive Branch

Readings:

- Rosenbaum, W. A. (2020). The Presidency. In *Environmental Politics and Policy* (11th ed., pp. 73–78). Sage.
- Joe Biden (January 20, 2021)" Executive Order on Protecting Public Health and the Environment and Restoring Science to Tackle the Climate Crisis"

Lectures:

- The Presidency
- Bureaucracy and Implementation

Suggested Readings/Media

- OpenStax Chap. 12 "The Presidency"
- OpenStax Chapt 15 "The Bureaucracy"
- Podcast: NYT The Daily (2019) "The White House Plan to Change Climate Science"
- Podcast: How to Save a Planet. (2020). "How Much Does the President Matter for the Climate?"
- NYT. 2021. "The Trump Administration Rolled Back More Than 100 Environmental Rules."

Week 11(Nov 4th) –Federalism (Election Week)

Readings:

- Cohen, S.(2018) "The State and Local Role in Protecting America's Environment" *Columbia Climate School*
- *Skim*: Samuel A. Markoff, Inés M.L. Azevedo, Mark Muro & David Victor. (2020). "Pledges and Progress: Steps Toward Greenhouse Gas Emissions Reductions in the 100 Largest Cities Across the United States," *Brookings Institution*
- Osorio, A., & O'Leary, R. (2020). "Chapter 6: American courts and U.S. environmental policy". In *Handbook of U.S. Environmental Policy*.

- Polk, Amber (2023) Montana kids win historic climate lawsuit – here’s why it could set a powerful precedent. *The Conversation*

Lectures:

- Federalism and Local Politics
- An Introduction to the Judiciary

Suggested Readings/Media

- Podcast: How to Save a Planet. (2020) "The Witch of Wind"

Week 12(Nov 11th) – The Judiciary and Environmental Law

Readings:

- Hill, R. (2017) “Environmental Laws” in *Environmental Protection: What Everyone Needs to Know* (24-34) Oxford.
- Additional TBD

Lecture (Prof. Stephen Miller)

- Introduction to Environmental Law
- Environmental Law of Water Pollution and Climate Change

Suggested Readings/Media

- Transcript in Juliana case
- Podcast: Trump on Earth. (2020)“Losing RBG”

Week 13(Nov 18th) – The US in Global Context

Readings:

- Urlaub, P. (2016, October 17). Why is the US Green Party so irrelevant? *The Conversation*.
- Beeson, M. (2017). Coming to terms with the authoritarian alternative: The implications and motivations of China's environmental policies. *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*, 5(1), 34-46.
- Shankar, V. (2021) What Developing Countries Need to Reach Net Zero *Project Syndicate*
- Climate Reality Project (2021) [How the Climate Crisis is Impacting Bangladesh](#)

Lectures:

- Comparative Environmental Politics
- Environmental Policy in the Developing World
- US Climate Policy Overview

Suggested Readings/Media:

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Week 14(Nov 25th) – Thanksgiving Week

Optional Paper Workshop Tuesday, Nov. 25th

Week 15(Dec 2nd) – The Global Environment and Conclusion

Readings:

- DeSombre, E. R. (2020). *“International Environmental Politics.” In What is Environmental Politics?*
- Buiter, W. H. (2020, February 10). Is global climate solidarity impossible? *Project Syndicate*.
- Solnit, R. (2018, October 14). Don’t despair: the climate fight is only over if you think it is. *The Guardian*.

Lectures:

- Global Environmental Cooperation
- Conclusion

Suggested Readings/Media

- Podcast: The United States of Anxiety (2021) “Nothing You do Alone Will Save the Climate”

Final Exam – December 9th (12-150 PM)