Climate Politics: When Policy meets Reality

Fall 2020

Instructor Information

- Gernot Wagner
- Email: gwagner@nyu.edu
- Office Address: Department of Environmental Studies, 285 Mercer Street.
- (Currently Virtual) Office Hours: Wednesdays, 2:30-4:30 p.m. Please sign up here. Alternatively, join me on a ~40-minute morning run (6 feet apart). If none of these times work, please email me.

Course Information

- Class Meeting Times: Tuesdays & Thursdays, 8:00-9:15 a.m.
- Class Location: Class meets via Zoom and other online tools (e.g. spatial.chat for small-group discussions).

Course Description

What’s the optimal way to curb carbon emissions? Should we price fossil or subsidize low-carbon energy? What’s the role of solar geoengineering? What should it be? What will it be?

It is precisely the will that is the topic of this course. It’s one thing to develop the ideal policy, it’s quite another to place that ideal policy in a political context.

We will discuss a number of different climate policy objectives and policies throughout the semester, and then place them in a political context.

Many questions discussed don’t have a clear answer. Come prepared to argue both sides of each issue in class. Student-led debates, semi-regular 800-word essays, and the research paper will reinforce class discussions. They will also ask you to pick a side.
Think *Economist* leader: crisp, logical, and always with a point of view. By the end of the course, you will be well prepared to apply fundamental economic and political economy tools to a host of climate questions, and to do so without fear, favor, or jargon.

This course fulfills the Environmental Studies major's Governance requirement.

**Readings**

There is no textbook. All readings are available online or via the course website except (ironically) my own book, *Climate Shock*. The whole book isn’t required reading, though the preface is on the reading list for week 1, the ‘fat tails’ chapter is on the list for week 6, and chapters 5 and 6 are on the syllabus for the discussion on solar geoengineering. The book is available at NYU Bookstore and on reserve at NYU libraries.

This is not a drill. It’s not a class taught in a vacuum, to give you abstract tools. It’s about real-world questions, using real-world tools. That implies that there is no one-size-fits all approach. Reading amounts vary by topic, week, and type of material. Use your judgment.

If the report is 150 pages long, skim it.

If it’s a non-technical, 5-page article, study it.

If it’s a dense, technical economics paper, focus on the main results presented in abstract, introduction, and conclusion. Don’t internalize footnote 18 from the technical appendix.

In short, come prepared to discuss the gist of the reading materials and be able to submit brief reflections prior to class. A good portion of your grade depends on it. Equally important, where appropriate, incorporate the readings into your short essays, peer reviews, and the research paper.

There are many good general surveys that aren’t just interesting but also fun to read. One is Daniel Yergin’s *The Quest: Energy, Security, and the Remaking of the Modern World*. Another is David MacKay’s *Sustainable Energy – without the hot air*. Both will not just make you a better climate policy analyst, they will also make you a better writer.

All this also implies that the readings will (likely) change throughout the semester—in part driven by your interests and research papers. I will announce any changes to the syllabus via NYU Classes.
# Assessment Assignments and Evaluation

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<th>Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Participation and engagement</td>
<td>Actively engage in class discussions, debating the merits and demerits of any one particular policy or its politics.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading reflections</td>
<td>Write brief (80-150 word) reflections and/or questions on the readings, posted by 10:00 p.m. the evening before each class on the course website, beginning with week 2. Readings typically span two classes. Complete the readings before the first class. Your reflections before the first class (Monday 10:00 p.m.) would typically been short reflections, followed by further reflections and/or questions ahead arising from both readings and class discussions ahead of the second class (Wednesday 10:00 p.m.). Bonus points for anyone able to point to recent news stories relevant to the topic at hand. (Please also post them, by 10:00 p.m. the night before each class, on the course website.)</td>
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<td>Short essays</td>
<td>You might call them “policy memos.” You might call them “op-eds.” Either way, these three short essays have a point of view, they are well argued, and they come in at just around 800 words (sans bibliography). Make sure to use proper citations of materials, including those from the syllabus. Essays will be graded on a 10-point scale, and each counts for 10% of your final grade. Please add a word count and make sure it comes within 50 words of 800 to avoid point deductions. You are free to write your essays in any three of weeks 2 through 10 of the semester. Your essays will be based on the topic and class discussions of that week and are due by 10:00 p.m. Thursday via the course website. If you submit more than three 800-word essays, your overall essay grade will be based on the best three of the first four submitted. Please make sure your essays are submitted anonymously—no name, NetID, or other identifying information on the essay itself, to allow for anonymous peer review and grading.</td>
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<td>Peer reviews</td>
<td>Write three short (100-200 word) constructive critiques of</td>
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your colleagues’ essay submissions. You will be randomly assigned to review essays from your peers in weeks when you do not submit an essay yourself.

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<th>Assignment</th>
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<td>Research paper</td>
<td>The research paper is generally between 3,000 and 4,000 words long. Please discuss and get approval for the paper topic before you begin writing, no later than Wednesday, October 14th (3 percentage point of your 40% total for the paper). Detailed outlines, including a preliminary literature review, are due by 10:00 p.m. on Monday, October 26th (7%). A first draft of at least half the paper (1,500 words) is due by 10:00 p.m. on Monday, November 9th (10%). The paper is due by 10:00 p.m. on November 24th (remaining 20%), the Tuesday before Thanksgiving.</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<td>Final short essay</td>
<td>Your final short essay is due on Thursday, December 4th. All of the same rules apply as for the short essays, with one difference: the topic is to summarize your research paper in one succinct, 800-word essay. (You will have received feedback on your research paper by Monday, November 30th. We will discuss the papers in class that day as well.)</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>In the last three class meetings, you will present your main thesis and lead a brief class discussion on your topic.</td>
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| Total                 |                                                                                           | 100%       |

All written assessments are individual. Discuss the topic with each other; join up in reading groups; come to office hours alone or in groups to discuss details; but submit your own, individual essays.

If you need more time, you will need to optimize in light of the following time-grade tradeoff: You will lose 15% (not percentage points) of the total grade for each assignment immediately, and another 15% for each additional 24 hours.

To request a regrade on any assignment, send me an email with your full assignment attached, explaining your request within 1 week of receiving the graded assignment. I will re-grade the entire assignment—grades may increase or decrease as a result.
Class schedule

WEEK 1: Intro—The Three Horsemen of the Climate Policy Apocalypse

First class meeting: Thursday, September 3rd

Readings
2. This syllabus(!)

WEEK 2: Rebound Effect: Can CAFE standards lead to more driving?

Tuesday, September 8th, and Thursday, September 10th

Readings
2. Revkin, Andrew C. "Another Round on Energy Rebound," *New York Times* DotEarth blog, 24 October 2014. [online only; accessible via the link from the title]

WEEK 3: Energy Paradox: Why don’t we all use CFLs and drive hybrids?

Tuesday, September 15th, and Thursday, September 17th

Readings

Recommended Reading
WEEK 4: Green Paradox aka Temporal Leakage: Can environmental policy lead to more pollution?

Tuesday, September 22\textsuperscript{nd}, and Thursday, September 24\textsuperscript{th}

Readings


WEEK 5: How far how fast? aka What’s the ‘optimal’ carbon price?

Tuesday, September 29\textsuperscript{th}, and Thursday, October 1\textsuperscript{st}

Readings


Recommended Reading


WEEK 6: How far how fast? aka It’s not over ‘til the fat tail zings.

Tuesday, October 6\textsuperscript{th}, and Thursday, October 8\textsuperscript{th}

Readings


WEEK 7: Tax pollution or subsidize renewables?

Tuesday, October 13th, and Thursday, October 15th

Read


Skim (abstract, introduction, and conclusion):


WEEK 8: Spatial leakage: What if companies just move abroad?

Tuesday, October 20th, and Thursday, October 22nd

Readings

WEEK 9: Global problem, global solution: Kyoto, Copenhagen, Paris, etc?

Tuesday, October 27th, and Thursday, October 29th

Read


Skim


WEEK 10: Domestic policy choice: Climate after Trump

Tuesday, November 3rd, and Thursday, November 5th

Readings

2. Vice President Joe Biden’s latest climate plans; e.g. joebiden.com/climate, joebiden.com/clean-energy, joebiden.com/environmental-justice, joebiden.com/infrastructure, and also joebiden.com/americanleadership, joebiden.com/governmentreform and others.

WEEK 11: Solar geoengineering is ‘nuts’, but ‘nuts’ compared to what?

Tuesday, November 10th, and Thursday, November 12th

Readings


Recommended Reading


WEEKS 12 and 13: Research paper due Tuesday, November 24th(!)

Tuesday, November 17th, Thursday, November 19th, and Tuesday, November 24th
(We will focus on your research paper topics, discuss any burning questions, etc.)

WEEKS 14 and 15: Student research paper presentations

December 1st class readings:


Readings for week 15 (no readings for December 3rd)

Your colleagues’ final short essays

NYU Classes

All announcements, resources, and assignments will be delivered through the NYU Classes site.

This is the first time I’m offering this specific class, and, as we all know, climate politics is a fast-moving target. I may modify specific class topics and readings, and other aspects of the course as we go through the term with advance notice provided as soon as possible through the course website.

Diversity

I intend that students from diverse backgrounds and perspectives are well served by this course, that your learning needs are addressed, and that the diversity that you bring to class is viewed as a resource, strength, and benefit. I aim to present materials and activities that respect
diversity. I encourage your suggestions around course materials and approaches that will better serve this goal. I am continuously learning about diverse perspectives and identities. If something communicated in class (by anyone) made you feel uncomfortable, please reach out to me (either in person or electronically) or provide anonymous feedback. Also reach out to me and let me know ways to improve the effectiveness of the course for you or for other students or student groups.

Academic Integrity

Plagiarism results in failure in the class and referral to your academic dean. It includes: copying sentences or fragments from any source without quotes and references; not citing a source used in your papers; citing internet information without proper citation; presenting someone else’s work as your own; or inadvertently copying verbatim from any source. More detail can be found at http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity. NYU offers academic support and tutoring at the University Learning Center: http://www.nyu.edu/cas/ulc; (212) 998-8085.

Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at NYU

New York University is committed to providing equal educational opportunity and participation for students of all abilities. If you have a disability, or think you have a disability, please visit the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD) website and click on the Reasonable Accommodations and How to Register tab, or call or email CSD at (212) 998-4980 or mosecsd@nyu.edu for information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are strongly advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance. If you have already been approved for accommodations through the Moses Center, please meet with me so we can develop an implementation plan together.

NYU’s Calendar Policy on Religious Holidays

NYU’s Calendar Policy on Religious Holidays states that members of any religious group may, without penalty, absent themselves from classes when required in compliance with their religious obligations. Please notify me in advance of religious holidays that might coincide with exams to schedule mutually acceptable alternatives.

Acknowledgments

This syllabus has evolved from climate and energy policy classes I have taught at various institutions, including NYU, Columbia, and Harvard. Its first incarnation was largely based on Snorre Kverndokk and Knut Einar Rosendahl’s Energy Economics class taught at Johns Hopkins in Spring 2009. This current syllabus has benefited greatly from Richard Zeckhauser’s Analytic Frameworks for Policy class at Harvard, as well as from his mentorship and guidance over the years. Prior iterations have also taken some cues from Bill Hogan’s Energy Policy Analysis class at Harvard, Paul Joskow’s former Energy Economics class at MIT, Rob Stavins’s Fundamentals of Environmental Economics and Policy class at Harvard, Erin Mansur’s former
Energy Economics & the Environment class at Yale, Jim Stock’s U.S. Energy Revolution and its Implications seminar at Harvard, and valuable feedback from, among others, Joe Aldy, Rajeev Dehejia, Ken Gillingham, Matt Kahn, Katherine Rittenhouse, Steve Salant, Rob Stavins, Thomas Sterner, Martin Weitzman, Matthew Zaragoza-Watkins, participants in an OurEnergyPolicy.org discussion forum, and students at Columbia, NYU Stern, and Harvard who have taken versions of this course in the past. Thank you to all.

Anything seems off? Please let me know.