

POL 2101 Syllabus

State and Local Government, MP, CRN 87944

Fall 2026

Instructor Information

Instructor: Michael Polak

Email: mpolak7@gatech.edu

Phone: 912-433-4713

Office Hours: By appointment

General Course Information

Description

Apart from the theoretical understanding of political science, it is important students gain a hands-on understanding how the political process of state and local government operates in the United States. The structure of POL2101 is based on problem-based learning principles on the foundation that Georgia Tech students are among the best in the world at solving problems. Therefore, the class empowers students to use those skills and talents to come up with solutions to solve state or local policy problems facing society today, as well as how to implement those solutions through state and local government political processes. **The students at Georgia Tech are the “Best in the world of solving problems, so let’s solve the problems of the world”.**

Course Learning Outcomes

1. Understanding current policy issues at the State and Local level. As a starting point to best experience State and Local Government first-hand, students begin by deciding how they want to impact government policy. Students choose a state or local policy problem of their personal interest they wish to address for the semester. Students from previous classes have chosen a wide range of policy problems including homelessness, child obesity, inner city K-12, water quality, human trafficking, air pollution, teen age pregnancy, campus crime, teen drop-out rates, drug and alcohol abuse, traffic congestion and other problems facing society today. For each class students will also describe to the class a policy issue that has occurred at the State and Local level since the previous class.
2. Building communication skills. Students will partner with a policy leader to work together on issues of common interest. In previous classes, students have partnered with the Governor, Speaker of the House, Lt. Governor, Senators and Representatives in the State of Georgia. At the local level students have also partnered with the City of Atlanta. If a student does not have a policy partner, they learn how to directly impact policy as an advocate or lobbyist. Building communication skills also involve regular discussions on controversial policy issues.
3. Learning how to conduct public policy research. After students select a policy issue of interest, students will go through a six-step policy analysis process to come up submit a policy paper with a recommended state or local solution. After they complete their policy analysis and research policy recommendation, students will test and validate their solution through interviews with a policy expert, an elected official, and someone impacted by the policy issue. The policy paper is built in stages through assignments.
4. Understanding Political Strategy. Students will learn step by step how to implement their policy recommendation to change state law or get money into the state budget through the state and local political process. This will include several committee simulations of how legislation and policy are evaluated and modified.
5. Understanding Political Campaigning.

Required Course Materials

There are no textbooks required.

Grading Philosophy

As a 2000 level class, if a student engages in class discussions, completes assignments on time, conducts quality research, follows carefully assignment instructions and take an interest in their policy issue and class topic, they should be able to receive an “A”. Inability to meet these requirements will result in a “B”, and in the unlikely event, a “C”.

Grading Policy:

- Assignments (25%).
- Policy Paper (25%).
- Political Strategy (approx. 5%)
- Campaign Debates and Campaign Video (10%)
- Final Project (15%).
- Class Attendance (approx. 10%)
- Class participation (approx.10%).

Note: Grade allocation is a close approximation and may be modified by the discretion of the Professor.

Description of Graded Components

- **Assignments:** Assignments build the policy paper over an eight-week period. Assignments must be submitted by the due date. Otherwise, no credit will be given unless with a valid excuse. The date on Canvas for an assignment is the class day the assignment is assigned, NOT when it is due.
- **Policy Paper:** The policy paper is built in parts over the semester which includes defining a problem, conducting secondary and primary research, identifying a solution set, recommending a solution, and testing and validation.
- **Political Strategy:** The political strategy includes a detailed plan to get money into the State Budget and pass legislation as it relates to the student's policy issue.
- **Campaign Debates and Campaign Video:** Campaign exercises at the end of the semester will involve student teams campaigning against each other for the Governor of the State of Georgia and Mayor of Atlanta. This will include a debate and the creation of a short campaign commercial.
- **Final Project:** The final paper culminates what students learn from the class by advocating their solution to a policy leader and initiating steps to move their solution forward within the local and state political process. Students also have the option to help a local non-profit related to their issue. The Final Project for students with a policy partner will be a presentation to that policy partner. The project will be due on the day the class final exam is scheduled. There will not be a final test exam, so students can plan their traveling schedule accordingly.
- **Class participation and class engagement:** Class participation is full engagement in the current policy discussions, debates and exercises.

Course Policies

Attendance and/or Participation

Attendance is mandatory unless the Professor is notified beforehand due to a family, health, job interview, official Georgia Tech activity conflict or academic conflict. If a student shows up to class without an approved excuse ten minutes or later, they will be counted as absent for that day yet still encouraged to attend to gain class participation points. In the case of speakers, students are required to show up on-time to avoid a disruption and out of respect for the speaker.

Collaboration, Group Work, and Use of Generative AI

There will be group assignments where each student is expected to equally participate. Class participation grades will be negatively impacted if the Professor notices a student is not participating in group activities.

In regard to research sources and GenAI, using outside research is required, as long as that research is appropriately cited. The use of GenAI is also permitted as part of the research process, as long as citations are included. Yet, GenAI cannot be used for final assignment submissions or in any way used to write the policy paper.

Extensions, Late Assignments, & Re-Scheduled/Missed Exams

Understanding that core classes at Georgia Tech are demanding, consideration is given to a student to request an extension on any assignment if they have a major exam or project in another class and need extra time.

Inclement Weather and Digital Learning Days

The Professor has the option to conduct the class via Zoom, or require an additional assignment.

Student Use of Mobile Devices in the Classroom

The use of mobile phones, unless for research, is prohibited.

Institute Policies

Student-Faculty Expectations Agreement

At Georgia Tech, we believe that it is important to strive for an atmosphere of mutual respect, acknowledgement, and responsibility between faculty members and the student body. [The Student-Faculty Expectations](#) articulate some basic expectations that you can have of me and that I have of you. In the end, simple respect for knowledge, hard work, and

cordial interactions will help build the environment we seek. Therefore, I encourage you to remain committed to the ideals of Georgia Tech while in this class.

Honor Code

Please read the Georgia Tech Student Honor Code [Academic Honor Code | Policy Library | Georgia Institute of Technology | Atlanta, GA \(gatech.edu\)](#)Links to an external site.

Academic Integrity

Georgia Tech aims to cultivate a community based on trust, academic integrity, and honor. Students are expected to act according to the highest ethical standards. Review [Georgia Tech's Honor Code](#) and the student [Code of Conduct](#).

Any student suspected of cheating or plagiarism on a quiz, exam, or assignment will be reported to the Office of Student Integrity, who will investigate the incident and identify the appropriate penalty for violations.

In this course, the penalty for any violation of the Honor Code is failure in the course. Plagiarism means using someone else's words as though they were yours. You must put direct quotations in quotation marks and indicate the source.

Core IMPACTS

This is a Core IMPACTS course that is part of the [Social Sciences](#) area. Core IMPACTS refers to the core curriculum, which provides students with essential knowledge in foundational academic areas. This course will help students master course content, and support students' broad academic and career goals.

This course should direct students toward a broad [Orienting Question](#):

- How do I understand human experiences and connections?

Completion of this course should enable students to meet the following [Learning Outcome](#):

- Students will effectively analyze the complexity of human behavior, and how historical, economic, political, social, or geographic relationships develop, persist, or change.

Course content, activities and exercises in this course should help students develop the following [Career-Ready Competencies](#):

- Intercultural Competence
- Perspective-Taking Persuasion

Campus Resources for Students

Undergraduate Student Academic Success Resources:

A list of resources for undergraduate students' academic success and information about advising can be found at [Success at Tech](#).

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

If you are a student with learning needs that require special accommodation, [contact the Office of Disability Services](#) (404-894-2563) as soon as possible to make an appointment to discuss your special needs and to obtain an accommodations letter. Please also e-mail me as soon as possible in order to set up a time to discuss your learning needs.

Student Well-Being:

Student mental health and well-being has been a focus of mine, personally, academically, and professionally. Therefore, please take care of yourself, and seek help if needed. I am also available to help. Any assignment not required by time of the next class will be no later than 8pm, as an encouragement to students to get their necessary sleep. Also, no assignments will be required during school breaks to encourage students to use that time to relax.

At Georgia Tech, you are recognized as a human being navigating life's ups and downs. You may experience stressors that can impact both your academic journey and your personal wellness. These may include academic pressure and challenges associated with relationships, mental health, alcohol or other drugs, identities, finances, etc.

If you are experiencing disruptive challenges, seeking help is a courageous thing to do for yourself and those who care about you. A list of student mental health services can be found at <https://mentalhealth.gatech.edu/Links to an external site.>. For immediate support, call 404.894.2575.

A comprehensive list of student well-being services has also been compiled by the Office of Student Engagement and Well-Being. You can find this information at <https://students.gatech.edu/Links to an external site.>

In an emergency, please call the GT Police Department at (404) 894-2500 or call 911. You can also call or text 988 or chat at 988lifeline.org for yourself or if you are worried about a loved one and a friend who may need crisis support.

Professor Background

Mike Polak has taught in the School of Public Policy since 2013. He has an undergraduate degree in Industrial and Systems Engineering from Georgia Tech and a master's degree in marketing from Georgia State. He received the designation as Professor of Practice in 2022. Professor Polak also served ten years in elected office. His political career began in 1993, when he was elected three times to the Georgia House of Representatives, representing DeKalb County in Metro Atlanta. In 1998, he was elected and re-elected to the Georgia State Senate. He retired from the State Senate in 2002.

While in the Georgia State Senate, he was Chairman of the Science and Technology Committee and Senate Sub-Committee Chairman of Appropriations for Science and Technology. His most notable legislative achievement was authoring and passing Georgia's Hope Scholarship. During his ten years as a legislator, he was the recipient of seventeen Legislator of the Year awards.

He has kept engaged at Georgia Tech since graduating by serving on multiple advisory boards including the Georgia Tech School of Public Policy, Georgia Tech Research Institute, Georgia Tech School of Engineering, Georgia Tech Economic Development Institute and serving as Vice Chairman of the Georgia Tech Savannah Campus. He is also a recipient of the Georgia Tech Outstanding Young Alumnus Award from the Georgia Tech School of Engineering.

Professionally, he has been in IT product management and product marketing for more than 20 years. He is currently the founder of Inovar Health, a healthcare IT company focused on wellness, and Inovar Real Estate, a vacation rental real estate company.