

PUBPOL 3210 Catastrophe, Crisis, and Emergencies: Making Policy in the Middle of Disaster

Spring 2025

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Course: Many policy decisions are made in the middle of crisis and disaster, at short notice and under severe pressure. There are a variety of kinds of crises, from natural disasters to human-made ones, from international catastrophes to local ones, from slow-motion crises to split-second ones, and they all require different kinds of policy preparations and responses. To understand this kind of policy, this course will examine a variety of different kinds of crises, how they shaped the responses and the policy-making that came afterwards, and what kind of preparation was put in place for future crises. It will look at crisis leadership, emergency preparations, and disaster responses by examining a number of cases studies of catastrophes both modern and historical.

Learning Outcomes: By the end of the semester, students will be able to (1) describe and discuss the various kinds of disasters and categorize them by type; (2) analyze how policymakers have reacted to the various kinds of disasters; (3) evaluate how successful various policy approaches have been in preparing for future disasters.

Structure: 4 credits. In-person. Can be taken for a letter grade only. There are no prerequisites. Attendance is mandatory — missing class will affect your participation grade. The class meets Tuesdays 6:30 - 9:50 and uses both lecture and discussion to engage with the material. For class, you should bring your laptop and be ready to use it. Laptops may be open and in use for note-taking during lectures. For discussion periods & guest speakers, they should be put away. Readings (except for the two books) are available on Canvas. Assignment extensions are possible but must be cleared with me ahead of time. Late assignments are penalized one grade increment (A to A-, eg) per day of lateness. I reserve the right to change this syllabus but will make reasonable attempts to warn you if I have to do so.

My **office hours** are Tuesdays, 5:00 - 6:15 pm and Fridays 4:00 - 5:00 pm. Email (at the top) will reach me fastest.

Readings and Other Resources: Non-book readings and other resources are in Canvas. You should make sure that you have access to the class on Canvas as soon as possible. The books required are:

Drezner, Daniel W. *The System Worked: How the World Stopped Another Great Depression*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

Solnit, Rebecca. *A Paradise Built in Hell : the Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disasters*. New York: Viking, 2009.

Both of these are readily available online (I recommend the Kindle versions as particularly inexpensive)

The books will also be on reserve at the front office during business hours.

Assignments:

1. *Participation* — regular attendance, engagement with class discussions, thoughtful answers to the reading questions.
2. *Prelim and Final* — tests on the class & reading material. Each cover half the course. Online.
3. *Presentations* — Presentation on the catastrophe of student choice — what happened during the catastrophe and what was the short-term and long-term policy response. Cannot be something covered in class. 15 minutes plus Q&A
4. *Disaster Preparedness Paper* — choose a region or social area prone to a specific kind of disaster and analyze how policy-makers & individuals have prepared for those kind of disasters. 7-10 pages plus citations & bibliography.

Assignment	Grade %	Due Date	How to Hand in
<i>Participation</i>	20%	In-class discussion; weekly reading questions	Reading questions in Canvas
<i>Prelim and Final</i>	15% each	Prelim March 16 Final May 12	Online via Canvas
<i>Presentation</i>	25%	To be scheduled	In-class
<i>Disaster Preparedness Paper</i>	25%	End of semester	Canvas

Integrity: Each student in this course is expected to abide by the Cornell University Code of Academic Integrity. Any work submitted by a student in this course for academic credit must be the student's own work. All required papers may be subject to review for the detection of plagiarism or the use of AI.

Grade Scale	Range	Value
A+	98-100	98
A	93-97	95
A-	90-92	92
B+	88-89	88
B	83-87	85
B-	80-82	82
C+	78-79	78
C	73-77	75
C-	70-72	72
D	60-69	65
F	<59	50

Access: Your access in this course is important to me. If the type you need requires an accommodation letter, please request it early in the semester, or as soon as you become registered with SDS, so that we have adequate time to arrange your approved academic accommodations.

- Once SDS approves your accommodation letter, it will be emailed to both you and me. Please follow up with me to discuss the necessary logistics of your accommodations.
- If you are approved for exam accommodations, please consult with me at least two weeks before the scheduled exam date to confirm the testing arrangements.
- If you experience any access barriers in this course, such as with printed content, graphics, online materials, or any communication barriers; reach out to me or SDS right away.
- If you need an immediate accommodation, please speak with me after class or send an email message to me and SDS at sds_cu@cornell.edu.

If you have, or think you may have a disability, please contact Student Disability Services for a confidential discussion: sds_cu@cornell.edu, 607-254-4545, sds.cornell.edu.

For more informal kinds of access, please talk to me about handling things. I want to make sure that you have every chance to thrive in this course and am happy to figure out with you how to do that best. This will always be an ongoing conversation — things can change over the course of the semester and I'm happy to help with issues of stress, physical and mental health, and other concerns.

Class Schedule:

Each week will look at a case study of a particular crisis, what happened, and the policy responses. The readings (except for the Solnit and Drezner books) are linked in Canvas.

January 21: INTRODUCTION: Disasters, Catastrophes, and Crises...and the Policies That Deal With Them

Reading: Solnit, *Paradise*, prelude (ON CANVAS).

Unit 1: Geophysical Disasters

January 28: Fire — *Wildfires and the perils of over-development*

Reading: Goldman, "Living on the Edge: Wildfires Pose a Growing Risk to Homes Built near Wilderness Areas"; Labossiere, "Innovative Wildfire Mitigation by Municipal Governments: Two Case Studies in Western Canada"; Jordan, "Native Approaches to Fire Management Could Revitalize Communities," Dvorak, "Six Fires that Reshaped American Cities."

February 4: Volcanoes — *Krakatau and globe-spanning impact of eruptions*

Reading: Simkins, *Krakatau 1883, The Volcanic Eruption and Its Effects* chs 1-2, 4; Video of Mt St. Helens explosion.

February 11: Earthquakes — *The Mexico City Earthquake, infrastructure, and fragility.*

Reading: Solnit, *Paradise*, ch. 3; Nichols, "A major urban earthquake: planning for Armageddon."

February 18: NO CLASS, FEBRUARY BREAK

February 25: Wind & Water — *Hurricane Katrina and the failure of preparedness and response.*

Reading: Solnit, *Paradise*, ch. 5; Honore, *Survival*, chs. 1, 6-10, 13 (in Canvas)

Unit 2: Medical & Health Crises

March 4: Diseases & Pandemics — *COVID, the Spanish Flu, and the localization & globalization of disease.*

Reading: McNeill, *Plagues & People*, ch. 6; Crosby, *America's Forgotten Pandemic*, chs. 1-3; Githler, "Ithaca and the 1918 Epidemic;" Pollack, "Cornell Announces Proactive Measures to Prevent Spread of Coronavirus."

March 11: Famine — *The Irish famine and the colonization of disaster.*

Reading: Fraser, "Social Vulnerability and Ecological Fragility: Building Bridges between Social and Natural Sciences Using the Irish Potato Famine as a Case Study"; Braa, "The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society."

PRELIM DUE ONLINE MARCH 16

March 18: Addictions — *Fentanyl and the overdosing of Appalachia*.

Reading: Kutsch, "Our Compassion Is Being Challenged': A West Virginia Doctor's War Against Opioids," Katz, "Why a City at the Center of the Opioid Crisis Gave Up a Tool to Fight It."

Unit 3: Human-Caused Catastrophes

March 25: Nuclear Weapons — *Hiroshima, Nagasaki and the existential threat of nuclear war*.

Reading: Hersey, *Fire*, parts I & II; Lee, *Nuclear Weapons and War*.

April 1: NO CLASS, SPRING BREAK

April 8: Climate Change — *Climate change in Urban Areas: the Case of Washington, DC*.

Reading: Wuebbels et al, "How Will Climate Change Affect the United States in Decades to Come?" Environmental Protection Agency, "Causes of Climate Change"; EPA, "What Climate Change Means for the District of Columbia."

April 15: Pollution — *Microplastics and the atomization of pollution*.

Reading: Ziani et al, "Microplastics: A Real Global Threat for Environment and Food Safety"; Zhu, "Tissue accumulation of microplastics and potential health risks in human."

Unit 4: Societal Crises

April 22: Industrial Crises — *The Halifax explosion and the dangers of industry*.

Reading: Solnit, *Paradise*, ch. 2; Halifax Photo Album from 1917.

April 29 Terrorism & Civil Unrest— *9/11, January 6, and the live-streaming of catastrophe*

Reading: Solnit, *Paradise*, ch. 4; McGreevey, "The History of Violent Attacks on the U.S. Capitol"; Politico, "An Oral History of January 6, 2021."

May 6: Financial — *The system holds: the 2008 meltdown*

Reading: Drezner, *System*, entire.

FINAL DUE ONLINE MAY 12