American Public Policy: The Invention of the Possible

[Politics] is a realm akin to art insofar as, like art, it occupies a creatively mediating position between spirit and life, the idea and reality.

Thomas Mann (1945)

Solutions to problems, scientific and practical alike, both reflect and create social constructs…By proposing new programs, the policy analyst suggests new hypotheses and hence new values that codify social relations.

Aaron Wildavsky (1979)

Course Description

This course is designed to provide upper-level undergraduates with an in-depth exploration of the political foundations of public policy in the United States. Public policy has a double meaning in contemporary American politics. First, policy is a political prize. At all levels of government, politicians, interest groups, experts, and citizens fight about how to define and prioritize policy problems, how to implement policies on the ground, and how to evaluate the success of laws already on the books. Policy is also a terrain on which politics itself plays out. Once enacted, policies channel resources—material, institutional, and symbolic—towards some groups or individuals and away from others. In so doing, policies shift the balance of power in society, remaking the rules by which political games are played.

We will begin the course by examining processes that lead to policy enactment, including agenda setting, problem definition, interest formation, and legislative institutions. We will then consider the arteries of the fiscal regime: spending and taxation. Next, we will look closely at post-enactment politics, focusing on processes of policy implementation and evaluation. Finally, we will consider the limits of ‘reformist’ solutions as a means of altering the political landscape. To explore the relationship between policy and politics in greater detail, primary source materials will complement political science analyses of statutory or regulatory activity at the federal, state, and local levels. By the end of the course, students will be able to critically evaluate how and under what conditions real “change agents” can leverage the formal, legal structures of government to produce innovations for (and sometimes against) public welfare.
Requirements for Undergraduates

Note: Graduate students taking this course should see alternative course requirements in the appendix.

Participation and attendance (5%): This course requires an extensive amount of reading and preparation prior to class. To facilitate this, weekly reading questions will be posted to D2L. You are expected to attend each class session having read and digested all assigned material, ready to engage in an informed, lively discussion with the instructor and with other students. If you do not speak at all during the semester or are absent for more than six (6) class sessions, you will receive no points for participation.

Quizzes (5%): During the course of the semester, there will be ten (10) unannounced quizzes. These are designed to ensure that you are doing the reading and will draw on weekly reading questions posted on D2L. There will be no makeups for missed quizzes.

Midterm (30%): There will be one (1) take-home exam in the form of a policy memorandum. This will take place during the class period and will be open book. The goal of this memo is to sharpen your thinking about the issues raised in the readings and to hone your writing skills.

Final group podcast project (30%): In the final half of the semester, you and several group members will record an audio podcast covering three major contemporary policy debates. The goal of the podcast is to apply knowledge from the course to better understand the political dynamics underlying these issues. More information will be provided during the semester.

Issue briefs (30%): Over the course of the semester, you will compose three (3) issue briefs on a single policy topic. These will give you an opportunity to apply the theories and concepts you learn in this class to ‘real world’ data on the politics of the policymaking process in the United States. These will be due via D2L Dropbox prior to the class session on the indicated days. More details on issue briefs will be provided during the course of the semester.

Policies

Academic Misconduct: Information on Marquette’s Academic Misconduct Policy can be found here: http://bulletin.marquette.edu/undergrad/academicregulations/ Academic misconduct includes, but is not limited to, individual violations, helping another student with any form of academic misconduct, failing to report any form of academic misconduct, or intentionally interfering with the educational process in any manner. Academic misconduct of any type is unacceptable and will result in immediate referral to Marquette’s Academic Integrity Director. If you are in doubt as to whether an action or behavior is subject to the academic misconduct policy, you should consult an appropriate member of the Academic Integrity Council, faculty or staff.

Disabilities: If you have a disability for which you are requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact the University's Office of Disability Services within the first week of classes. For more information, contact the Office of Disability Services in Marquette Hall, Suite 005 or at (414) 288-1645. If you require any accommodations for exams or other assignments, you must notify me (along with all required documentation) at least one week in advance of the assignment due date.
**Courtesy:** Your participation is essential to this course. As such, you are expected to behave with courtesy towards your classmates and professor. **Phones should be silenced and out of sight.** Laptops are acceptable for taking notes but please stay attentive to the task at hand. Failure to appropriately use technology will result in a lower participation grade.

**Late Assignments:** I expect all students to complete required assignments when they are due. If you are unable to complete an assignment for a serious or urgent reason you must contact me before the assignment is due. Otherwise, the assignment will be marked down a full letter grade for each day past the deadline.

**Grading Scale:**

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<td>A-</td>
<td>≥ 90</td>
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**Books**

One textbook is available for purchase at the Book Marq or wherever fine books are sold:


All other required readings will be made available on D2L. Additionally, you are advised to read publications with daily coverage of national politics, such as the *New York Times, Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, or *Vox*. The *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* affords excellent coverage of local and state politics.

**Schedule of Course Readings**

**Note:** Graduate students taking this course must complete all undergraduate readings as well as listed graduate readings.

**Introduction**

1/15:  **Peters**, pp. 1–19 (skim)

1/17:  No class – Dr. Rocco is giving a talk in DC
1: Power and Policy


2: Agenda Setting and Policy Formulation

1/29: *Peters*, pp. 57–70.

1/31: *Peters*, pp. 70–80;


3: Legislative Legitimation

2/5: *Peters*, pp. 81–90.


**Issue Brief #1 (Agenda Setting) due 2/7 at beginning of class via D2L Dropbox**

4: Legitimation through Agencies, Courts, and Ballots

2/12: *Peters*, pp. 90–94;


2/14: *Peters*, pp. 94–97;
Sam Wang, Ben Williams, and Rick Ober, “The States Are Now the Best Route to Gerrymandering Reform,” *The American Prospect*, July 16, 2018 [D2L]


### 5: Fiscal Policy I—Budgeting


Tara Golshan, “4 winners and 4 losers from Congress’s massive $1.3 trillion spending package,” *Vox*, March 23, 2018 [D2L]


2/26: No readings: in-class exercise on proposals to reform budget process

**Issue Brief #2 (Notice and Comment) due 2/26 at beginning of class via D2L Dropbox**

### 6: Fiscal Policy II—Taxation

2/28: **Peters**, pp. 211–226


3/7: **Midterm exam (take home)**

**Spring Break—No Class March 12–14**

3/19: No readings -- tutorial on final podcast project

### 7: The Political Drama of Policy Implementation


Perry Bacon, “Republicans Killed Much of Obamacare Without Repealing It,” FiveThirtyEight, December 18, 2018


**Issue Brief #3 (Budgeting) due 3/26 at beginning of class via D2L Dropbox

8: The Challenge of Sustaining Reform


9: Policy Evaluation and Policy Change

4/4: Peters, pp. 159–175.


10: The Politics of Cost-Benefit Analysis


**Easter Break – No Class 4/18


11: Reformism and Its Limits

4/25: Lee Drutman, Political Dynamism (Washington, DC: New America Foundation, 2016) [D2L]
Appendix: Course requirements for graduate students enrolled in POSC 5216

Graduate students taking this course are expected to participate as contributors to the production of new knowledge about the politics of public policy in the United States. Therefore, 60 percent of your grade will be based on the completion of a term paper of 20-25 pages in length (see description below). 25 percent will be based on weekly reading critiques. The remaining 15 percent will depend on your attendance and participation in class (including any in-class assignments) as well weekly meetings during my office hours in which we will discuss supplemental readings on the syllabus as well as your ongoing research.

Term paper:

Your term paper for this class may take one of several forms, given your prior training and current research interests in political science. First, you may choose to write a bibliographic essay with the purpose of synthesizing the research literature on a given topic or question (i.e. the causes of major legislative change, factors influencing policy implementation, etc.). The question should be keyed to a topic that is broad enough to generate a substantial reading list but narrow enough to gain traction in the span of a single semester. I would particularly appreciate bibliographic essays that find gaps, paradoxes, or contradictions in the published literature on US public policy. Second, you may consider writing a short empirical paper. The goal of this paper should be to investigate a hypothesis that draws on at least one theoretical perspective advanced during the course of the class. These may be qualitative or quantitative, US-based or comparative.

By February 21, I expect you to have turned in a short (250 word) description of your paper topic and to have met with me during office hours to discuss the topic (worth 5% of paper grade). You are strongly encouraged to meet with me throughout the semester to discuss your paper and keep me updated on its progress.

By March 19, I expect you to have turned in an outline of your paper (worth 5% of paper grade). This should include the literature you plan on reviewing in your final version of the paper. It should help to highlight the question, puzzle, or the gap in research your paper will address.

Final papers will be due by 5 pm on May 2 either in my office (411 Wehr Physics) or my mailbox, without exception. The paper should be 20-25 pages, double-spaced, using 12 pt. Times New Roman font, and 1-inch margins. For citations, I expect you to use the most recent edition of the Chicago Manual of Style. Footnotes or parenthetical citations are acceptable. For formatting guidelines, consult Barry Weingast, “Caltech Rules for Writing Papers” (2010): https://web.stanford.edu/group/mapss/colloquium/papers/caltech.pdf.
Weekly reading critiques:

Weekly reading critiques will be due via D2L Dropbox to me by midnight on Monday the week before the class session on Tuesday. You will choose one reading for each week and formulate a critique of not more than five hundred words. These weekly critiques should not be more than five hundred words.

Critiques should answer the following questions:

1. What is the point? What are the primary questions the author is attempting to answer? What literature is the author responding to? What is novel or significant about this piece of research? How does it contribute to our knowledge about the politics of quantification?

2. What is the evidence? What empirical data—qualitative or quantitative—does the author bring in to answer the questions posed? Try to reconstruct the research “practice” as best you can. What did the author actually do when conducting research?

3. Is the evidence compelling? Does the evidence provide a satisfactory answer to the question posed by the author? Why or why not? Where, if at all, might additional research help to supplement or extend the research in question?