OVERVIEW

Public policy – what government does – is ultimately what political conflict centers upon. This course delves into the politics behind the policymaking process. It is broadly divided into two parts. First, we will consider some concepts to help us understand how politics impacts policymaking and vice versa. These concepts include types of policies, agenda setting, preferences, path dependence, policy feedback, and power. Second, we will examine some contemporary challenges in policymaking, including political polarization, non-legislative policymaking, rights and policymaking, inequality, and the visibility of the state. The last week will sum up these challenges by considering the developmental problem of reconciling policy’s adaptability and pragmatism with the America’s written constitutional system.

More broadly, the lectures, discussions, primary source readings, and scholarly readings will help us achieve a few course goals. First, we will gain an improved ability to make sense of how American policymaking process works (or doesn’t work!). Second, we will compare arguments and theories offered by various authors, critically evaluating their usefulness for describing American politics and policymaking. Third, we will place the ideas from the readings into the context of present-day current events in politics. Finally, as a more general goal for the course, I hope that we all can take a step forward toward becoming more politically critical, informed, and engaged citizens. Politics can be maddening, but it becomes more interesting and fun when you can make some sense of what is going on.

Our activities in class may take a number of formats. While we will often have lectures, depending on the topic there may also be discussions, debates, and/or small group work. Political concepts and topics often may reveal differences of opinion – this is particular true around election years! So even as some of us may have strong views and potentially disagree, I ask that we listen to each other’s viewpoints while working to ensure that civility and respect for each other are always present in our conversations.

ASSIGNMENTS & GRADING

Students are expected to complete the readings, come to lecture, and participate in class. Two times during the semester, students will be expected to complete short papers critically analyzing one or more weeks of readings. The papers should be 5 pages double-spaced. Be sure to have a clear argument and use evidence to support your claims. In addition, there will be a final exam for the course. The grade breakdown is as follows:

* In drafting this syllabus, I have partly drawn upon Jacob Hacker’s syllabus for “The Politics of Public Policy” at Yale from Spring 2014.
• Participation – 20%
• 2 Response Papers – 40%
• Final Exam – 40%

**COURSE OUTLINE**

I. CONCEPTS

Week 1: *Why Focus on Policy?*


Week 2: *Types of Policies*

R. Douglas Arnold, *The Logic of Congressional Action* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), Ch. 1, 4

Week 3: *Agenda Setting*


Week 4: *Policy Preferences*


**Week 5: Path Dependence**


**Week 6: Policy Feedback**


**Week 7: Power and Preferences**


Terry M. Moe, “Power and Political Institutions,” *Perspectives on Politics* 3, no. 2 (June 2005): 215-233


**II. CHALLENGES**

**Week 8: Polarization and Policymaking**


**Week 9: Provisionality and Non-Legislative Policymaking**


Sidney M. Milkis and Nicholas Jacobs, “‘I Alone Can Fix It’: Donald Trump, the Administrative Presidency, and Hazards of Executive-Centered Partisanship,” *The Forum* 15, no. 3 (2017): 583-613

**Week 10: Rights and Policy**


Week 11: Inequality and Representation


Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page, “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens,” *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 3 (September 2014): 564-581


Week 12: Visibility


Week 13: The Policy State in a Constitutional System


FINAL EXAM

- Identifications – Choose 10 of 15 – 40%
- Short Essay – 20%
  - What is one thing about current political events today that this course has made you understand and how?
- Long Essay – Choice from two questions – 40%