INTRODUCTION TO THE PROSEMINAR

The Proseminar in Public Policy is designed to be a foundational course from the standpoint of acquainting graduate students with approaches to and theories of public policy, including the formation of public policies, the processes by which public policies are made, and the implementation of policies. Consequently, we will be concerned with defining just precisely what a public policy is and, among other things, how we can distinguish intent from practice. We also will want to know whether the absence of articulated policy is itself a policy. Ineluctably, institutions, interest groups, and administration all become a crucial part of how policies get designed and implemented. By virtue of that, it is inevitable that comparisons across institutional setting are necessary. To some extent, therefore, we will find ourselves cross-walking between general theories about policy and institutional as well as other contextual variabilities that are likely to influence policy design, implementation, and outcomes. We will also note that policy domains themselves may be highly variable and may vary markedly within the same institutional setting. Thus, different policy contexts may produce strikingly different policymaking capabilities.

But how do we begin and end? Choices are determined by what is feasible, of course. But what we define as feasible is, in turn, determined by values and priors – what we carry around in our heads. Can we afford to do “X” or “Y”? The answers to such a question are both yes and no depending upon what we are willing to trade off and how much if at all we value doing “X” or “Y”. So, we begin by exploring ideas about “good government” of which it can be said, there is a lot of controversy. We also look at issues of fiscal constraint and try to understand these better – at least in the context of having to make hard choices. Since resources are not infinite, how
should we make decisions about policy priorities? We will also need to look at frames of reference (schema as these are often referred to in political psychology) and the role of policy in strengthening or weakening community. Of course, whether choices are perceived by a decision-maker as hard depends upon how saturated such a decision-maker is by ideological preconceptions. Where the glow of ideological purity burns brightly choices are unlikely to be perceived as hard. They can only be perceived as hard when you are forced to allocate resources between goods or to choose between the lesser of bads.

Thus, the closing bookend to the seminar revolves around the role of certainty and uncertainty and the fact that there are rarely clear-cut decisions but rather complex choices that have to be weighed in terms of the relative value we place upon them and their empirical efficacy. More often than not, our interests and our values tend to outweigh the analytics. All public resources are rationed – some visibly and others less visibly. We need to understand that basic principle. We also need to understand a second point which is that policy analysis rarely, if ever, provides pinpoint answers. The political process, however, wants finite answers. “Give me an answer not a range of options” is what decision makers want. Lately, in fact, politics pervades analysis. Policy analysis is filled with ambiguities and the analytics are based more on interval estimates rather than point estimates though that is not always (or perhaps even often) how findings are popularly reported. So, how can we know whether or not a policy is working as intended? We are rarely dispassionate about policy even if we are often confused about the details. Where we have strong priors or powerful frames of reference and values, the struggle over how policy evaluation is used becomes intense. In political debates as in US courts of law, advocates often cherry pick the evidence to support their case, whether intentionally or not. Although uncertainty often clouds choices and projected outcomes, we usually have certainty about our passions and preferences.

ASSIGNMENTS

There will be one major written assignment. The only catch is that you will be expected to win the Nobel Prize for it. Aside from that minor inconvenience, the major written assignment will be in the form of a take home examination. You will have close to two weeks to complete it. Your mastery of the literature and ability to synthesize and analyze it will be evaluated, especially as it relates to applied policy issues. This final paper will account for 80% of your seminar grade. In
addition, after the first 2-3 weeks, one or two students (working as a team) will be responsible for preparing an analytic guide to the literature of that week (a short paper of about 5-8 pps. provided 24 hours in advance of the seminar to me and to your classmates) and presenting that (DO NOT read from your paper) in class. The idea is that the paper presenter(s) will be a discussion leader pointing out issues for the class to discuss. I also will appoint a responder whose job it will be to make constructive criticisms and to move the discussion forward. We will likely begin these around February 3. I have decided to have the student discussion during the first part of the seminar session. I will pick up some threads or add some issues in the second half. In either case, please be prepared to discuss and add to the complications. Unlike the Miranda Rule, you do not have the right to remain silent! The presentations and responses will constitute 15% of your grade. The remaining 5% of your grade will be determined by your level and quality of class participation.

PLAGIARISM

I hate to talk about this but I must so that it is fully understood. Plagiarism is the appropriation of someone else’s intellectual work without attribution. It is a form of intellectual property theft and cheating. It is neither tolerated by the University nor by me. If you have any doubts as to whether you may be crossing the borderline, please consult me and also examine the university’s and department’s guidelines on this. Sanctions for plagiarism violations are severe.

BOOKS TO BE PURCHASED:


**READING AND TOPICAL ASSIGNMENTS**

**January 13 – Introduction to the Course**

**January 20 – The Debate About “Good Government”**

**Reading:**


Read also brief blogs in The Governance Blog (online exclusively) in response to Fukuyama by Bo Rothstein, Thomas Risse. David Levi-Faur, Christopher Pollett, John Luiz, Peter Nardulli, Thomas Hale, Matthew Flinders, and Shiv Visranath

January 27 – Financial Constraints and Management Imperatives
Reading:


February 3 – Frames of Reference, Values, Rationality, Community, and Politics
Reading:


February 10 – Policy Paradigms
Reading:


Reading:


February 24 – Theories of the Policy Process – Part 2 – Garbage Can and Multiple Streams Theories
Reading:
March 3 – Theories of the Policy Process – Part 3 – Social Construction and Advocacy Theories

Reading:


March 10 – Theories of the Policy Process – Part 4 – Innovation and Diffusion Models

Reading:


**March 17 – No Class – Spring Break**

**March 24 – Theories of the Policy Process – Part 5 -- Policy Feedback Theory**

Reading:


Miriam J. Laugesen, “Policy Complexity and Professional Capture in Federal Rulemaking” Paper presented at the 2013 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, IL. *(will provide via scanned attachment).*


**March 31 – Policy Narratives, Comparing Theories, and the Way(s) Forward**

Reading:


**April 7 – Comparative Policy: Explanations and Cases**

Reading:


**April 14 – Reducing or Inducing Uncertainty? – Part 1 – The Sky Is Not the Limit – Welcome to the Gray Zone**

Reading:


**April 21 – Reducing or Inducing Uncertainty? – Part 2 – Priors and Analytics**

Reading:


**FINAL EXAM HANDED OUT IN CLASS APRIL 21. DUE BACK BY 5:00 P.M., MAY 4.**