The Politics of Public Policy
Module Outline, 2013–14

School of Politics, Economics, and International Relations
University of Reading

Module Code: PIM49
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Introduction

Welcome to the MA module on The Politics of Public Policy. This is one of the core modules in the Master’s in Public Policy programme and it is designed to introduce students to the nature of the processes through which policy decisions are made and implemented. It considers how these vary across policy areas and policy-making venues. It provides a basis upon which analysis of policy-making in particular policy areas can be pursued during the second term.

In particular, the aims of the module are to:

- develop students’ understanding of the nature of policy-making, including the roles of actors, institutions, ideas, and interests in policy-making, in the stages of the policy process, and in the determination of policy outcomes;
- develop students’ critical engagement with policy-making processes, for example, through consideration of theories of power and the challenges created by democracy;
- give students a foundation in the practicalities of policy-making that will help their engagement with other parts of the programme.

Structure of Teaching

The module is taught through ten two-hour seminars, which take place during the Autumn Term. It is essential that all students read ahead of every seminar: what you get out of the seminar depends crucially upon what you and your fellow students put in. You will receive guidance ahead of each seminar on what you should read.

The first six seminars are led by the module convenor, Dr Alan Renwick. Thereafter, two seminars are led by Dr Jonathan Golub, and then the final two seminars are led by Dr Daphne Halikiopoulou. The seminars take place this year on Mondays from 11am to 1pm in Palmer G01.

In addition, you are always welcome to come to the module tutors’ office hours in order to discuss aspects of the module in more detail. Their office hours will be posted outside HumSS 408 and on Blackboard.

Assessment

The module has five assessed components:

1. Students will give one individual presentation on a seminar topic, which will be between 5 and 7 minutes in length. This presentation will count for 10% of the overall module mark, of which 75% will be based on the visual aids used (PowerPoint or handouts) and 25% on the oral presentation itself. The deadline for the submission of visual aids (on Blackboard) will be 1 hour before the start of the seminar. Students who cannot give their oral presentation and are granted extenuating circumstances will have the full presentation mark based on the visual aids.
2. Students will contribute to one group presentation on a seminar topic. The group presentation as a whole will be between 8 and 10 minutes in length. Groups will comprise three or four students. This presentation will count for 10% of the overall module mark. 75% of this mark will be based on the visual aids used (PowerPoint or handouts) and will be the same for all participants in the group how have submitted the visual aids as directed below. 25% of the mark will be based on each participating student’s contribution to the oral presentation. The deadline for the submission of visual aids (on Blackboard) will be 1 hour before the start of the seminar: each participating student should submit the same visual aids. Students who cannot give their oral presentation and are granted extenuating circumstances will have the full presentation mark based on the visual aids.

3. Students will write one essay of 3,000 words (+/- 10%) on one of the seminar topics. The deadline for submission of the essay on Blackboard will be two weeks after the seminar in which the topic is discussed. The essay will count for 20% of the overall module mark.

4. Students will write one case report of 3,000 words (+/- 10%), which will analyse a particular case or set of cases of policy-making in light of the material covered in the module. The deadline for submission of this report on Blackboard will be the first day of the Spring Term. The report will count for 20% of the overall module mark.

5. One two-hour examination in the Summer Term, counting for 40% of the overall module mark.

We will discuss these in further detail during the first half of the first seminar and assign topics for presentations and essays. Please therefore think about which topics you would like to present or write on in advance of that seminar.

Core Texts

The following texts are useful for many topics. The first two are included in the introductory readings for most topics, and we advise you to buy copies.


Overview of Seminar Topics

1. Questions and Definitions
2. Is Policy-Making Rational?
3. Problem Definition and Agenda-Setting
4. Policy Formulation and Adoption
5. Implementation and Evaluation
6. The Effects of Policy Area
7. The Effects of Democracy
8. The Effects of Arena: Domestic v. International Policy Processes
9. The Effects of Institutions: Executives and Legislatures
10. The Effects of Agency: Leaders, Advocates, Experts

This Module Outline

If you find any mistakes in this outline or if you have suggestions for any further material that might be included, please contact Alan Renwick at a.renwick@reading.ac.uk.
1. Questions and Definitions

This is an introductory seminar. You are therefore not expected to read anything in advance of the seminar. Rather, the readings listed below indicate what you might look at after the seminar in order to follow up our discussions. The first part of the seminar will be taken up with organizational matters; the second part will address the discussion questions and will take as its starting point a presentation by the seminar leader.

Seminar Aims

The seminar will aim to address the following issues:

- the definition and forms of public policy;
- the notions of policy outputs, outcomes, and impacts;
- the stages of the policy process;
- the kinds of question that we ask about the politics of public policy;

Discussion Questions

Key concepts will be introduced and discussed in relation to the following issues:

- How should “public policy” be defined? Is there anything controversial about this definition?
- Does it make sense to talk of stages in the policy process?
- What are the key factors that influence processes of public policy-making and, therefore, policy outcomes?

Readings

As indicated above, you are not expected to read these in advance of the first seminar. It will be useful, however, to follow them up afterwards.

Introductory:


To get into debates about whether it makes sense to think of the policy process in terms of stages, it would be a good idea to look at some point at these:

2. Is Policy-Making Rational?

In the module on the Economics of Public Policy, you will look at the kinds of analytical tools that (economists say) ought to be used in order to make policy decisions. These tools involve a very rational analysis of problems and possible solutions. But are policy-making processes actually like that? In this seminar, we explore some of the basic futures of human nature that shape how policy decisions are actually made. Are political actors really “rational” as economists conceive that term? Or do they think in rather different ways? And can even “rational” actors go down routes that end up producing undesirable outcomes?

Seminar Aims

The seminar will address the following:

- the meaning of “structures” and the variety of structural factors that might influence policy-making;
- the particular impact of globalization upon the politics of public policy;
- the meaning of “institutions” and the variety of forms of institutional theory;
- the nature of rational choice theory, game theory, and bounded rationality.

Discussion and Essay Questions

- Can the assumption of perfect rationality contribute usefully to studies of public policy-making?
- To what extent do “collective action problems” condemn us to policy failure?
- Is policy-making still just a process of “muddling through”?
- To what extent are current policy decisions constrained by decisions made in the past?

Readings

Introductory:

Rational choice and game theory:

Bounded rationality

Incrementalism:

Contemporary theories of gradual change and path dependence:
3. Problem Definition and Agenda-Setting

In this seminar and the following two seminars, we examine stages in the policy-making process. The idea that it is useful at all to think in terms of such stages is contested: it is certainly not the case that real-world policy processes develop from the first stage to the last in a neat and ordered fashion (see the first section of readings below). Nevertheless, many scholars find it helpful to concentrate on one stage or another as a heuristic tool: a means of achieving focus. This week, we focus on the early stages of problem definition and agenda-setting.

Seminar Aims

The seminar will address the following:

- the nature of power and the importance of agenda-setting to it;
- the multiple streams (or garbage can) approach to problem definition and agenda-setting;
- the punctuated equilibrium approach to understanding agenda-setting;
- the meaning of ideational concepts, such as frames, norms, and policy paradigms, and the roles these play in problem definition and agenda-setting.

Discussion and Essay Questions

- “The power to set the agenda is more important than the power to resolve the issues on the agenda.” Discuss.
- To what extent is it accurate to say that agenda-setting is determined by random coincidences rather than skilful leadership?
- “Policy agendas are shaped by ideas, and change in ideas cannot be controlled by any individual.” Discuss.

Readings

Introductory:


Core theories of agenda setting:


Multiple streams/garbage can perspectives on agenda setting:


The punctuated equilibrium framework:

The role of ideas and ideational change:
4. Policy Formulation and Adoption

In this seminar we move beyond broad agenda-setting to consider how particular policy options are formulated and how top-level decisions (such as new laws or regulations) are made. In looking at policy formulation, we focus on various accounts of the sorts of networks of actors that shape decisions: iron triangles, issue networks, policy communities, epistemic communities, and so on. In looking at policy adoption, we focus on political decision-making and the impact of different structures of political institutions. In the next seminar we extend this to include the role of bureaucracy.

Seminar Aims

The seminar will address the following issues:

- the definition of concepts such as iron triangles, issue networks, policy communities, and epistemic communities, and the value of theories that use such concepts;
- the nature of political institutional systems and the ways in which these systems can influence policy choices.

Discussion and Essay Questions

- To what extent can variation in the nature of policy networks be shown to explain variation in policy outcomes?
- “The number of political veto players determines the ease with which policy change can be passed.” Discuss.

Readings

Introductory:


Issue networks, policy networks, policy communities, and epistemic communities:


Political institutions:

5. Implementation and Evaluation

In this seminar we turn to the issues of how top-level policy decisions are implemented and how the success or failure of policies is evaluated. We shall concentrate primarily on the first of these. Core questions concern the degree to which political control over implementation processes is possible or desirable and the factors that explain variation in such control.

Seminar Aims

The seminar will address the following issues:

- the meaning and value of concepts such as policy implementation and street-level bureaucracy;
- the nature of bureaucracy and its relationship with the world of politics;
- new public management and its impact on processes of policy implementation;
- types and processes of policy evaluation.

Discussion and Essay Questions

- To what extent and for what reasons should we expect variation in the degree of “bureaucratic drift” from case to case?
- Does the New Public Management provide more effective mechanisms for ensuring the political accountability of bureaucracy than did traditional models of public administration?

Readings

Introductory:


Studies of implementation:


The challenge of achieving political control over bureaucracy:


Steering v. rowing: the new public management:


Policy evaluation:

6. The Effects of Policy Area

Having looked during the first half of the term at some of the key concepts in policy-making and general theories of the policy process, in this seminar we begin to look at some more specific factors and the impact that they have on policy processes and policy outcomes. This week we look at the relationship between the area of policy being debated and the nature of the policy process. For example, are processes of economic policy-making different from processes of constitutional policy-making? Within economic policy, are there differences between redistributive policies and, say, trade policy? We will also explore whether and how variations between policy areas should shape the questions you ask for your own case report.

Seminar Aims

The seminar will address the following issues:

- the key classifications of policy areas;
- whether such classifications map in any meaningful way on to aspects of the policy process or the nature of policy outcomes.

Discussion and Essay Questions

- To what extent was Theodore Lowi right to argue that “policies determine politics” (Lowi 1972: 299)? By what methods of empirical enquiry might we test hypothesized answers to this question?
- Compare and contrast the politics of public policy in relation to two specific policy decisions or debates. To what extent can differences between these be explained by differences in the nature of the policy problems or by other factors.

Readings

Introductory:


Three particularly influential classifications of public policies have been proposed, by Lowi, Wilson, and Hood:


More recent literature has continued the debates about these:


  See especially the article by Christopher Hood, which reflects on his 1983 contribution.


7. The Effects of Democracy

This seminar examines the relationship between different types of regime (e.g. democracy, autocracy) and public policy. We start by considering what we mean by “democracy”, and the various ways scholars have measured it to classify regimes. We then examine theoretical arguments and empirical evidence about whether democracy produces either positive or negative effects on policymaking and policy outcomes, especially national economic performance, corruption, and the likelihood of war. Finally, we consider a fairly new perspective known as ‘selectorate theory’, which claims that certain regime characteristics other than democracy affect policy.

Seminar Aims

The seminar will address the following issues:

- the meaning and measurement of democracy;
- traditional theories of how regime type (e.g. democracy) affects public policy;
- empirical findings about the relationship between democracy and property rights, economic growth, fighting and winning wars, and corruption;
- introduction to selectorate theory, including its novel arguments about democracy and public policy

Discussion and Essay Questions

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of the available measures of regime type?
- To what extent can variation in the nature of regime type be shown to explain variation in policy outcomes?

Readings

Defining and Measuring Democracy:


Democracy and Economic Performance:


Democracy and Corruption:


Democracy and Peace:


Selectorate theory:


8. The Effects of Arena: Domestic v. International Policy Processes

Policymaking increasingly occurs beyond the level of the individual state, whether through international institutions (e.g. WTO, IMF, UN), treaties (e.g. environmental, human rights), or Transnational networks of public and private actors. Yet the two levels are intimately connected: interests and incentives of actors at the national level both shape, and are shaped by, the international level. The European Union represents the most extreme example of international institutionalisation, and of this two-level interplay. In this seminar we first examine theories about the factors that influence both the demand for and supply of international policy, paying particular attention to interest constellations, formal and informal decisionmaking rules, and bargaining dynamics that involve simultaneous attention to the domestic and international level. in The second half of the seminar we utilise these theories to analyse policymaking in the European Union.

Seminar Aims

The seminar will address the following issues:

- The demand for and supply of international policy
- The application of Bargaining and decisionmaking theories to international policymaking
- Policymaking in the European Union

Discussion and Essay Questions

- Which factors typically determine whether a state will support or oppose international policy?
- Do institutions primarily serve the policy interests of the rich and powerful states?
- Under what conditions would you expect European Union policies to deviate from lowest common denominator outcomes?

Readings

Introductory:


Linking the domestic and international arenas:


The European Union:


GATT/WTO:


F. Jawara & A. Kwa, *Behind the Scenes at the WTO* (2003), ch. 1


9. The Effects of Institutions: Executives and Legislatures

Previous seminars have briefly touched upon the variety of institutionalisms and upon the ways in which institutions can structure policy-making processes. This seminar takes the analysis of political institutions further by focusing the effects of different arrangements in the core institutions of the executive and the legislature. Political scientists commonly distinguish between presidential, parliamentary, and semi-presidential systems. The seminar considers whether these distinctions tell us anything useful about policy processes or whether other forms of analysis, such as analysis of veto players, is more useful.

Seminar Aims

The seminar will address the following issues:

- the meaning and importance of concepts such as vote cycles, structurally induced equilibrium, and veto players (revisiting themes introduced in week 4);
- the meaning of presidentialism, parliamentarism, and semi-presidentialism and the significance of differences between these for understanding policy-making processes;
- the impact of different legislative institutions such as committee structures;
- the implications of different institutional structures for patterns of accountability within the governing system;
- the impact of institutional structures upon policy outcomes.

Discussion and Essay Questions

- Do the distinctions between presidential, parliamentary, and semi-presidential systems matter for students of public policy?
- Which is the better mechanism for overcoming vote cycles: strong political parties or strong legislative committees?

Readings

Introductory:


The presidential/parliamentary distinction:


Semi-presidentialism:


Veto players:


Vote cycles, structure-induced equilibrium, and legislative institutions:


10. The Effects of Agency: Entrepreneurs, Leaders, Advocates, Experts

This seminar examines in more detail the question of how far individual actors can shape policy-making processes. Previous sessions have touched upon the notion of political ‘entrepreneurship’, but here we examine the various relevant literatures in more detail. We consider how ideas of agency fit into the various theories of policy-making that have already been introduced earlier in the term and whether different approaches to agency—drawing on concepts such as entrepreneurship, leadership, and heresthetics—offer differing or fundamentally similar accounts.

Seminar Aims

The seminar will address the following issues:

- the roles played by agency in the various core theories of agenda-setting;
- the meaning and value of the concept of ‘heresthetics’;
- the nature of leadership and its impact upon public policy.

Discussion and Essay Questions

- To what extent can the skilful exercise of individual agency make a difference to policy outcomes?
- Is the concept of ‘heresthetics’ any different from any of the other concepts used to describe the mechanisms by which individuals can seek to shape policy?

Readings

Introductory:

Agency in the core theories of agenda-setting (please refer also to the readings for week 3):
Heresthetics:


Leadership: