Theory and Practice in Public Policy

Prof. Katharine Destler
Assistant Professor
Founders Hall 668
Mondays 7:20-10:00 pm
Office Hours: Tuesdays 4:30-6:30
Or by appointment

Course Objectives
Theory and Practice in Public Policy, the gateway course for the Master's Program in Public Policy, introduces you to tools and concepts that will help you navigate in the world of public policy in two ways. First, we explore several types of theories and assess their strengths, weaknesses and applicability to public policy in order to understand different varieties of theory, their uses and application. Second, you will be introduced to several perspectives on the practice of policy analysis and be given an opportunity to engage in an analytical policy project that allows you to practice working in a team. Strong ethical and international components are built into the course.

The objective of this course is to help you become a more sophisticated policy professional with an ability to operate effectively and ethically in a political environment. While many of the applications will be U.S.-based, the theories apply more broadly to policymaking elsewhere. You will be presented with a variety of ways of looking at political phenomena, conceiving of relationships, and understanding outcomes. The course seeks to heighten your sensitivity to economic and political context and your appreciation of theoretical rigor, disinterested analysis, and empirical evidence for assertions.

You will hone your skills in recognizing values, seeing multiple sides of issues, casting alternative frames to problems, understanding underlying interests, identifying stakeholders, and devising strategies for action. Finally, the course aims to enhance your proficiency in identifying and using appropriate, authoritative source material and in writing and speaking articulately, succinctly, logically, and convincingly. Upon completion of this course, you should be well underway toward becoming a policy analyst and well prepared for the remainder of the MPP program.

Assessment
You will be asked to work individually and in teams in order to demonstrate your facility with the theories and their appropriate use, as well as to hone your research, public presentation and writing skills. Papers and examinations are treated as pedagogical exercises to augment your learning in the course. Grades will be apportioned in the following manner:

* Individual Policy Analysis 20%
* Midterm Paper 20%
* Group policy analysis project 40%
  • Written Proposal (20%)
  • Oral Presentation (10%)
  • Individual Contributions and Group Process (10%)

• Class participation, attendance and (possibly) pop quizzes 20%
If you are working a schedule that requires you to miss more than 3 classes, you should consider taking this course in a different semester. Class participation is an important part of your grade; participation does not mean talking a lot. It means preparing carefully by completing the assigned reading before each day’s class. Good participation can mean one deft comment that moves the discussion forward.

Writing Emphasis

One of the key goals of this course is to make sure that every MPP student is able to write for a policy audience at a minimal level of competency. The course, usually taken in the first or second semester at GMU, is used to identify students who need assistance in achieving that level. The instructor may advise you to take other courses that will further build your writing skills.

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

1. Knowledge and understanding
   - Acquire a basic knowledge of the origins of public policy
   - Acquire a basic understanding of the policy formulation process
   - Acquire a basic understanding of the market economy’s interaction with public policy
   - Acquire a basic understanding of how complex social questions can be addressed in an analytical fashion.

2. Develop quantitative and qualitative skills
   - Be able to conduct graduate level research
   - Be able to read economic analyses with policy relevance

3. Professional development and leadership
   - Work together in small groups, with shifting leadership
   - Professional presentation skills
   - Be able to write clearly and persuasively at the professional level

Participation:
This is a class premised in discussion. Your learning—and that of your classmates—depends on your advance preparation for class and your willingness to share questions, insights and confusion openly. Toward that end, please come each week with readings in hand—hard copies of the books, book chapters and articles and/or electronic versions on full-sized flat tablets or e-readers (not laptops or phones). We will refer frequently to the readings in class, and it is vital that everyone have those readings at hand in a common format that minimizes distractions.

Given that this class only meets once a week, we will use on-line discussion forums to foster and robust dialogue in class and facilitate an understanding of themes that bridge different weeks. I expect each student to read the Blackboard discussion page regularly and to post reflections each week; these can be reflections on (or questions about) new readings, follow-up questions or reflections to the prior week’s discussion, or substantive responses to comments or questions made by peers. I will not assign specific roles each week, but I do expect that, over the course of the quarter, each student will contribute a range of responses.
I expect you to attend class each week. In the event that an unavoidable professional or personal conflict prevents your attendance, provide as much advance notice as possible so that we can meet together to devise an alternate assignment for you to keep up with the class. This may include a 500 summary/analysis of the readings posted to blackboard and/or a one-on-one meeting with me.

Academic Integrity

I assume that you approach all of your work with academic integrity--that you take pride in your work, use it to learn from mistakes, and give credit to ideas that stem from other sources (be they fellow students, published books or articles, websites, teaching cases or family members).

There are two points that I want to emphasize. First, paraphrasing an author’s argument entails more than changing a word or a phrase. Your sentences’ grammatical structure and vocabulary much be substantively different from the source text--or else you are better off using a direct quote. For paraphrasing help, see https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/619/1/. In general, I advise you to put a source text out of sight when you write your own paper to avoid unintentional plagiarism.

Second, you should cite a source even if you paraphrase the author’s argument or alter his/her visual diagram. We all build on others’ ideas in our writing and thinking—source citation is one way to communicate the genealogy of our argument to our readers and a broader policy/scholarly community.

Acts of academic dishonesty may result in your failing the course, and can lead to dismissal from the University. If you have any questions about whether or how you should cite your sources, let me know.

You may also find the following summary resource to be helpful: http://www.virginia.edu/honor/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/PlagiarismSupplement2011.pdf

Here follows the official SPP Policy on Plagiarism:

The profession of scholarship and the intellectual life of a university as well as the field of public policy inquiry depend fundamentally on a foundation of trust. Thus any act of plagiarism strikes at the heart of the meaning of the university and the purpose of the School of Public Policy. It constitutes a serious breach of professional ethics and it is unacceptable. Plagiarism is the use of another’s words or ideas presented as one’s own. It includes, among other things, the use of specific words, ideas, or frameworks that are the product of another’s work. Honesty and thoroughness in citing sources is essential to professional accountability and personal responsibility. Appropriate citation is necessary so that arguments, evidence, and claims can be critically examined.

Plagiarism is wrong because of the injustice it does to the person whose ideas are stolen. But it
is also wrong because it constitutes lying to one’s professional colleagues. From a prudential perspective, it is shortsighted and self-defeating, and it can ruin a professional career.

The faculty of the School of Public Policy takes plagiarism seriously and has adopted a zero tolerance policy. Any plagiarized assignment will receive an automatic grade of “F.” This may lead to failure for the course, resulting in dismissal from the University. This dismissal will be noted on the student’s transcript. For foreign students who are on a university-sponsored visa (eg. F-1, J-1 or J-2), dismissal also results in the revocation of their visa.

To help enforce the SPP policy on plagiarism, all written work submitted in partial fulfillment of course or degree requirements must be available in electronic form so that it can be compared with electronic databases, as well as submitted to commercial services to which the School subscribes. Faculty may at any time submit student’s work without prior permission from the student. Individual instructors may require that written work be submitted in electronic as well as printed form. The SPP policy on plagiarism is supplementary to the George Mason University Honor Code; it is not intended to replace it or substitute for it.

(http://www.gmu.edu/facstaff/handbook/aD.html)

**Academic Accommodation for a Disability**

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please email and then make an appointment to see me and contact the Disability Resource Center (DRC) at 703-993-2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through the DRC.

**Required Texts and Readings**


Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. (Farrar 2013)


In addition to the books above, you will need to purchase a coursepack of teaching cases published by Harvard University Press. The link for purchasing these cases will be available on Blackboard.
Schedule of Readings and Course Topics

August 31:  Policymaking in the American System


“Why Obamacare is Here to Stay”- CNBC Commentary

“No, Obamacare isn’t... Here to Stay”—Forbes Commentary

Case:  Health Care Reform in the Clinton and Obama Administrations (Epilogue, *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*)

We will open this week with a synthesis of John Kingdon’s “Multiple Streams” framework, examining, in his words “How does a [policy] idea’s time come?” Focusing on efforts to pass health care reform in the Clinton and Obama Administrations (and efforts to repeal it thereafter), we will consider how public perceptions of problems, solutions and political winds bring attention to some policy debates over others.

Part I:  Policy Analysis: The Rational Perspective

Sept 14:  Thinking Economically—Markets, Failures and Public Policy Problems

Reading:  *Practical Guide for Policy Analysis*, Bardach, Pt 1

Oliver, “Formal Models of Collective Action”

Zerbe & McCurdy: “The Failure of Market Failure”

Case: “A Heritage Worth Saving? The Case Of The Acheen Street Malay Mosque Village

In this week we look primarily at classical liberal economics, which frames government policy as a rational response to market failures and the challenges of collective action. As you go through this week’s readings, pay particular attention to each author’s assumptions about information, institutions and individual behavior.

Sept 21:  Thinking Analytically-- Moving from Problems to Policy Solutions

Reading:  Bardach, II, Appendix A & B

Case: Malay Mosque Village, cont.

In this week we will move from problems to potential solutions. If a problem exists, what can government (at any level) do about it, and what are the relative costs of action and inaction? This is the main substance of what traditional scholars and practitioners think of when they hear the phrase *policy analysis*—and the steps that we discuss today are fundamental to your final project in this course and future work in the profession.
Part II: Policy Analysis: The Contextual Perspective

Oct 5: Thinking Historically

Readings: Neustadt and May, *Thinking in Time*
Recommended: Pierson, “When Effect Becomes Cause”

Case: TBD

Many in the rational school consider individual choice at a single time and place, discounting sunk costs and the impact of decisions made in the past. In this week we will turn to Neustadt and May’s canonical text to examine how an understanding of history informs and can potentially distort analysts and policymakers decision-making.

** Policy Mini-Analysis Due. **

Oct 13: Thinking amidst Complexity: Goals, Problems, Solutions

Reading: Deborah Stone, *Policy Paradox*
Radin, *Beyond Machiavelli* (excerpt)

Case: “Values in Conflict: The Furor over Admissions Policy at a Popular Virginia Magnet School.”

As the rational perspective made clear, much policy analysis has been grounded in a theory of markets and market failures. This week to an alternate, *polis*-based approach. How do appropriate policy decisions change when one confronts the ambiguities of joint community decision-making and irreconcilable goals?

Oct 13: Thinking Irrationally—Making Snap Judgments

Reading: Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*

Designing effective policies— and understanding why and how those policies may run awry—requires a nuanced understanding of human behavior. Complementing the political science perspective offered last week, behavioral economics draws from human psychology to provide an alternate perspective on decisions that may appear counter-intuitive from a purely rational perspective.

October 20: Thinking Ethically

Reading: Sandel, *Justice*

Case: “Hero or Traitor? Edward Snowden and the NSA”

Public policymaking involves more than questions of economic efficiency and political viability. At their heart, certain policy debates are about questions of right and wrong, even as our understandings of those concepts are personally and politically contested. This week we read
the work of a renowned political ethicist Michael Sandel and consider its lessons in light of a recent ethical controversy: The federal government’s collection of its citizens’ personal information to protect their security.

**October 27: Thinking Organizationally**

**Reading:** Hirschman, *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*

**Case:** Columbia Space Shuttle

In this week, we will discuss both the behavior of individuals within organizations or firms and how firms themselves develop distinct behaviors. As part of this discussion, we will focus in on two levers that both clients and participants have to foster organizational change: exit and voice. Bringing this discussion to life will be a multimedia role play of the events that led up to the Columbia Space Shuttle explosion.

**Part III: Working through the Policy Process**

**Nov 2: Thinking Politically**

**Readings:** *Narrative Politics* (excerpts)

“Policy Maps and Political Feasibility,” Peter May


**Case:** Renewal of the Assault Weapons Ban

This week we turn from policy analysis to the policy process—examining the politics whereby policies emerge on the public agenda and are passed and/or passed by. We will examine competing theories of policy development and policy change and apply them to gun control, a salient public issues subject to intense political dispute.

**MIDTERM PAPER DUE FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 6**

**Nov 9: Thinking, Puzzling, and Learning**

**Readings:** May, “Policy Learning and Change”

Shipan and Volan, “Understanding the Mechanisms of Policy Diffusion”

**Case:** Disaster Preparedness (excerpt from *Lessons from Disaster*)

It’s easy to leave week 9 thinking that policymaking is simply a matter of who has power and who is control. But as Hugh Heclo has argued, “Governments not only Power, they also puzzle… Policymaking is a form of collective puzzlement on society’s behalf” (1974). This week we will focus on policy diffusion and policy change as a function of learning.
Nov 16: Thinking it all the way through: Politics and the Challenges of Implementation

Readings: Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy* (excerpts)
          Sandfort & Moulton *Effective Implementation in Practice* (excerpt)

Case: The Common Core State Standards Initiative

Passing a bill or enacting a new regulation is only part of the story. A key lesson from research on implementation is that the politics continue once a new rule is put into practice. We will examine the challenges of implementation by focusing on street-level bureaucrats, government employees who possess substantial discretion over their work but often face competing (and frequently overwhelming) demands for their services.

**Policy Analysis Outline due in class**

Nov 23: Thinking Globally

Readings: TBD

Case: Climate Change Policy

Guest Speaker: Andrew Light, GMU University Professor and Director, Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy

Increasingly pressing policy problems—climate change, immigration, income inequalities—demand the coordination of actors beyond a single country. In this session, we will look at the challenges of collective action that crosses border. What are the hopes for global cooperation to address the world’s most pressing problems? For this conversation we will be joined by Andrew Light, a GMU/SPGIA faculty member currently on leave to serve as Senior Climate Adviser to the U.S. Secretary of State. He will share insights as he prepares for the United Nations International Conference on Climate Change to be held in Paris in December.

Week 13: TBD

Week 14: Group Presentations