POL22: POLITICS AND PUBLIC POLICY

Paper Guide
2024-2025

MICHAELMAS TERM READING LIST

Week 1.
Success and failure in public policy

What is public policy? Why study politics and public policy? In this introductory lecture, we set out the aims and structure of POL22. The paper aims to give you the tools to examine the policy actions of government critically but without cynicism. The opening lecture asks how we conceptualise what we consider as policy success or policy failure and the extent to which politics drives that assessment.

Essential reading


Further reading


Week 2.
Theories of Policymaking

What makes public policy happen? Why do some things change while other issues remain stubbornly unaddressed, even in the face of strong political argument? This lecture takes a look through some of the many different academic theories about policy change that have emerged over the last 70 years. Some conceptualise change as a rational, linear and evidence-based activity, whereas others suggest it happens much more chaotically.

Essential reading

Further reading


**Week 3. Interests, Ideas and Institutions**

We build on last week’s look at policy theory by drawing on the three dominant lenses in the policy literature for understanding the forces that control policy choices and outcomes. These are 'interests', 'ideas', and 'institutions'. All three are powerful contributors to how we shape policy, and this lecture will assess how the three interact as explanations for policymaking.

Essential reading


Further reading

- Lohmann, S. (2003) ’Representative Government and Special Interest Politics (We Have Met the Enemy and He Is Us)’, *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 15, 299-319.
Further Reading

- Iversen, T. and Soskice, D. (2019) Democracy and Prosperity. OUP. (Sections 1.3.5 and 1.8. of the Introduction. These sections set out the core of Iversen and Soskice’s argument about public policy responsiveness to middle class interests).

Week 4.
Wicked Problems

Public policy problems come in all shapes and sizes. Some seem relatively straightforward, allowing for clear goals and workable solutions. But some problems are inherently so complex that even understanding the issue is difficult, let alone arriving at solutions that can garner public support. Problems like crime or poverty, for instance, are so embedded and interlinked with other issues that they seem to defy every effort to solve them. Labelled ‘wicked problems’, this week’s lecture looks at how we can define and understand these complicated issues better, and asks how we might try and actually solve them. The literature offers a wide range of potential approaches, but are any of them capable of dissolving the complexity that seems to prevent policy success on these issues?

Essential Reading

- B.W. Head (2022) Wicked Problems in Public Policy: Understanding and Responding to Complex Challenges, (Open Access, Palgrave Macmillan). Ch. 2

Further Reading

- F. Angeli, S. Camporesi and G. Dal Fabbro (2021) 'The COVID-19 wicked problem in public health ethics: conflicting evidence or incommensurable values?' Humanities and Social Sciences Communications 8: 161.
• B.W. Head (2022) Wicked Problems in Public Policy: Understanding and Responding to Complex Challenges, (Open Access, Palgrave Macmillan). Ch. 3-4

**Week 5.**
Problem Framing and Policy Narratives

Public policy is often complex, and its effects are difficult to evaluate let alone predict. In this week’s lecture we explore how policymaking is shaped by ideas about how the world is and about what the effects of public policy choices will be. We consider how ideas about public policy are contested and how they change over time, paying particular attention to the role of experts, politicians, and the media.

**Essential reading**

• C. Bacchi (2016) 'Problematizations in Health Policy: Questioning how ‘Problems’ are Constituted in Policies'. Sage Open. 6: 1-16.

**Further Reading**


**Week 6.**
Policy Instruments and Implementation

The battle over public policy is not just a debate about ideas and frames, but also about what actions government should take once a problem is identified. Governments can do many things – from taxing, to regulating, to nudging and more. But not all of these actions will be a good fit for every policy challenge that government is confronted with. In this week’s lecture, we look at how difficult it can be to select the right policy instrument to affect change, and how many policies can get bogged down at the implementation stage.

Essential reading


Further Reading


Week 7.
Outcomes and Accountability

Who’s to blame when things go wrong? If the trains don’t run on time, or there aren’t enough hospital beds, or people can’t find jobs – who do we hold accountable for that? This lecture looks at the central role of accountability and blame games in public policy. Through the work of Christopher Hood in particular, the lecture will examine how the complexity of policymaking makes it extraordinarily difficult to actually enforce accountability in practice.

Essential Reading


Further Reading


Week 8.
Taking stock

This week we take stock of what we have learnt, in preparation for the case studies in Lent term.

There is no new reading this week.