Course Overview

The question of how an issue gets on the policymaking agenda—that is, is considered seriously by policymakers—seems simple, but the most obvious explanations are questionable. It is not easy to explain what, how, and when an issue will come to prominence in a political system.

This seminar will explore the notion that individual choices, choices within political institutions and public policy outputs are interconnected, but that the connections are not simple. We will examine the processes of how people and policy-making institutions process information and make choices, and how those choices lead to change in public policy outputs. In doing so, we study how the adaptive but limited nature of the cognitive capacities of individuals and institutions lead to an evolutionary pattern of policy changes.

In addition, we will explore the use of two powerful databases that can be used to study agenda-setting, The (US) Policy Agendas Project (http://www.policyagendas.org/), located in the Government Department at UT, and the Comparative Agendas Projects (http://www.comparativeagendas.org/), a network of country studies modeled on the US project.
Course Requirements

Grades will be based on:

1) Research Paper. A research paper that is related to one of the theoretical perspectives on policy processes discussed in the course. I am flexible about what you address, but it is necessary to get prior approval from me for whatever you decide to study. A prospectus will be due at the middle of the semester. 50%

2) Class Participation. Each student will serve as a class organizer at least once during the term, with responsibility to provide the class an overview of issues and a discussion framework. Class organizers will make available to the class a short paper summarizing the up-coming discussion. 20%

3) Research Presentation. A brief formal presentation to the class on the research project. 10%

4) An examination covering the course material. 20%

Course Materials (available at the Co-Op)


Schedule of Sessions

PART I: Preferences, Information, and Institutions


In rational decision analysis, a decision-maker has preferences for outcomes, and is faced with a set of potential instruments for achieving those outcomes. How does he choose among these outcomes?

B. Jones, The Rational Choice Model. (On Blackboard)

January 24th: Preferences and Choices: Multiple Decision-Makers

If there are numerous decision-makers within a system, then how are the preferences of these decision-makers combined to achieve a social choice?


**Recommended:**

K. Kreighbiel, *Pivotal Politics*


Thomas H. Hammond, Gary J. Miller. The Core of the Constitution

**January 31st: Information and Choice in Rational Systems**

*How do rational individuals use information?*


**Part II: Bounded Rationality and Cognitive Constraints**

**February 7th: Issues in Preferences**

*Some aspects of preferences are bothersome from the perspective of choice and policymaking.*
February 14th: Bounded Rationality as a Foundation

Bendor distinguishes two traditions in the study of decision-making not based on rational choice: the ‘Simon program’ and the Kanheman-Tversky (K-T) program. We focus here on the Simon program, which stresses goal-oriented behavior and ‘adaptive rationality’.


Recommended:

B. Jones, Politics and the Architecture of Choice; especially Chs. 1-4.


February 21st: Cognitive Friction: Psychological Approaches to Choice

The K-T program suggests serious problems in adaptive decision-making and information processing that are often cannot be overcome.

Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*


February 28th: Issue-Attention, Framing and the Media

*Can preferences be affected by one’s focus of attention? If so, what are the consequences?*


Wolfe, Michelle, Bryan D. Jones and Frank R. Baumgartner. 2012. A Failure to Communicate. (On Blackboard)


Max Rose and Frank Baumgartner. 2011. Framing the Poor. (On Blackboard).

***Paper prospectus due***

March 6th: Bounded Rationality and Issue Intrusion

*How do boundedly rational governing institutions process information?*


(It has become clear that the initial ‘incremental’ policy studies relied on a stable environment; what happens when that environment is not stable?)


Read if you are not familiar with punctuated equilibrium:


March 13th SPRING BREAK

Part III: Policy Consequences

March 20th: Bounded Rationality and Political Institutions

Jones and Baumgartner, The Politics of Attention, Parts II and III (Chapters 5-11)


March 27th: The Public As A Source of Policy Ideas?

Is the public a major source of policy ideas in democracies? Or does the public react to the activities of policy elites?


Taber, Charles, Information Processing and Public Opinion, in David O. Sears, Handbook of Political Psychology (On Blackboard)


April 3rd: The Heavy Hand of History


April 10th: Policy Diffusion

Ideas may come from other political systems, a process known as policy diffusion. Three major questions are raised by diffusion studies: 1) Galtung’s problem—whether the process is really diffusion or whether similar internal dynamic are causing similar policy adoptions; 2) Whether the process is rational learning or boundedly rational mimicking; and 3) Whether the diffusion is caused by a central government (for state level diffusion)


April 17th: Comparative Agenda Analysis

Comparative Analyses of agenda setting have indicated a problem-centered issue-attention dynamic, and have downplayed the roles of preferences and political parties.

Read the collection of articles in

The CPS special issue focusing on the Comparative Agendas Project may be accessed at: http://www.unc.edu/~fbaum/books/cps/cps-home.htm

April 24th: Alleviating Collective Action Problems

*Can boundedly rational actors overcome collective action problems?*


Henrich, Joseph. et. al., Economic Man in Cross-Cultural Perspective. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*

May 1st: Paper presentations

May 8th Final paper due