

**PLSC 497, Public Policy and Agenda-Setting**  
**Penn State University**  
**Spring Term, 2006, MW 4:15-5:30**  
**Room 169 Willard Building**

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Office hours: M, W 3:00-4:15 and by appointment

This course will focus on the politics of public policy and agenda-setting. We will discuss the major policy activities of the US federal government with particular attention to how issues have risen and fallen on the national political agenda over time. Students will make extensive use of the resources available at [www.policyagendas.org](http://www.policyagendas.org) which allows users to trace attention to hundreds of different topics from 1947 to present. Lectures and discussions will also be largely based on these resources. Readings will include general treatments of public policy as well as specialized readings focusing on agenda-setting. Students will do significant writing and each will engage in an original research project using the resources available through the policy agendas project web site.

The class will consist of some lectures and computer-based presentations, but it is designed to allow for significant student questioning and discussion. So come to class ready to discuss things; if things are confusing, come with questions. Be prepared to be called on in class. Avoid that by coming prepared to say things on your own initiative. In any case, there will be a lot of discussion in class, not so many straight lectures.

Assignments and grading:

Short assignments leading to your term paper project:	5 x 5 =	25 %
In class quizzes related to the readings:	2 x 10 =	20 %
Final paper:		40 %
Class participation:		15 %
Total:		100%

(Note: Class participation counts 15 percent. That's a full grade-and-a-half. Class participation means showing up, doing the readings before class, asking relevant questions, and participating in discussions. It is important; don't take it lightly. Attendance counts. Don't skip. Also, see my note below about late assignments; these are marked down seriously for each day they are late.)

Readings for purchase, available at campus bookstore:

- Kraft, Michael E., and Scott Furlong. 2004. *Public Policy: Politics, Analysis, and Alternatives*. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press.

- Bosso, Christopher J. 2005. *Environment, Inc. From Grassroots to Beltway*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.
- Jones, Bryan D., and Frank R. Baumgartner. 2005. *The Politics of Attention: How Government Prioritizes Problems*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Note: I am the co-author of one of the required books. This borders on the obnoxious, I know; sorry about that. However, I don't mind criticism and feel free to rip it apart if you don't like it. By the nature of the course, however, you'll see that the book links closely with the web site you are going to become familiar with. I do receive (modest) royalties on the book, and I will refund that to each student registered in the class at the midterm. Unfortunately, this is only fifty cents per student... You'll get your fifty cents if you are still registered at the midterm.

Term paper assignment: During the semester you will learn how to use the data from the agendas project web site. This will provide the background you need to do your own independent research project concerning any of a great number of possible term paper projects. Most of you will likely choose to analyze the development of a given policy, such as energy, education, health care, or defense over time, from 1947 to present, using the Agendas Project datasets as the main data source for your analysis. (You will need to supplement this with bibliographic material and relevant statistical indicators specific to your case.) Five short assignments will work your through the steps of writing a good term paper. Papers should be at least 15 pages, double spaced, not counting figures and tables, which should be presented in an appendix. The final paper should incorporate revisions based on my comments on your short assignments.

Short assignments. Five times throughout the semester, I will require you to hand in what amount to progress reports on your term paper. I will comment on these, make suggestions, and hand them back within one week. They are designed to force you to keep on track and to make steady progress on your term paper. Some of you may revise your term paper projects in light of my comments on your assignments—that is, you may change your topic because you find that your first paper idea can't be done well for one reason or another, such as for a lack of information in the library. For most of you, however, the assignments will put you through the resources available on the web site, force you to seek additional quantitative materials, make you show me your bibliography ahead of time, etc. They are explained below.

Quizzes. You will be reading two texts and we will have one in-class quiz at the end of each section. There is no final exam, and there is no exam on the book that I co-authored.

Late assignments: One of my goals in teaching is to make sure you understand how easy it is to do things if you do them in small bits, on time, according to a schedule. Therefore I take deadlines seriously. Just like I consider class participation to be an important element of your performance, I will also mark you down for handing assignments in late. If you know you are going to miss class for some reason when an assignment is due, email me the assignment as an attachment before class time. Assignments will be marked down at the rate of 5 points per 24 hours they are late, including weekends, holidays, spring break, etc. (I'll accept late assignments if you are sick or have an emergency. If you know ahead of time you will be absent, including for a university-excused reason, you must send me the assignment before class time by email.)

Please note the following announcements concerning University policies.

### **Academic Dishonesty**<sup>1</sup>

The Department of Political Science, along with the College of the Liberal Arts and the University, takes violations of academic dishonesty seriously. Observing basic honesty in one's work, words, ideas, and actions is a principle to which all members of the community are required to subscribe.

All course work by students is to be done on an individual basis unless an instructor clearly states that an alternative is acceptable. Any reference materials used in the preparation of any assignment must be explicitly cited. In an examination setting, unless the instructor gives explicit prior instructions to the contrary, whether the examination is in-class or take-home, violations of academic integrity shall consist of any attempt to receive assistance from written or printed aids, or from any person or papers or electronic devices, or of any attempt to give assistance, whether the one so doing has completed his or her own work or not.

Other violations include, but are not limited to, any attempt to gain an unfair advantage in regard to an examination, such as tampering with a graded exam or claiming another's work to be one's own. Violations shall also consist of obtaining or attempting to obtain, previous to any examinations, copies of the examination papers or the questions to appear thereon, or to obtain any illegal knowledge of these questions. Lying to the instructor or purposely misleading any Penn State administrator shall also constitute a violation of academic integrity.

In cases of a violation of academic integrity it is the policy of the Department of Political Science to impose appropriate penalties that are consistent with University guidelines.

### **Disabilities**

The Pennsylvania State University encourages qualified people with disabilities to participate in its programs and activities and is committed to the policy that all people shall have equal access to programs, facilities, and admissions without regard to personal characteristics not related to ability, performance, or qualifications as determined by University policy or by state or federal authorities. If you anticipate needing any type of accommodation in this course or have questions about physical access, please tell the instructor as soon as possible. Reasonable accommodations will be made for all students with disabilities, but it is the student's responsibility to inform the instructor early in the term. Do not wait until just before an exam to decide you want to inform the instructor of a learning disability; any accommodations for disabilities must be arranged well in advance.

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the text above has been directly obtained from the sections of the Princeton University website (<http://www.princeton.edu/pr/pub/rrr/99/pages/Ol.htm>) concerning academic integrity (Rights, Rules, Responsibilities introductory text as well as pages 55-69) as well as from the website of the Department of Economics at The Pennsylvania State University.

## Weekly assignments and topics

You should do all the readings before the Monday course. I'll keep on schedule during the semester week to week, but some discussions may go over from Monday to Wednesdays. Each week we'll start a new topic, however. For each week, the list below indicates the topic and the reading or other assignments. Everything is required.

Week 1. Jan 9, 11. Introduction.

Kraft and Furlong, Ch. 1, 2

Introduction to the Policy Agendas Project

Week 2. Jan 16, 18. Introduction to the Policy Agendas Project.

NOTE: No class this week. Baumgartner out of town. Use this time to become familiar with [www.policyagendas.org](http://www.policyagendas.org). Do the tutorial and make some graphs on-line (you don't need to bring them to class). Look in particular at the budget data and the hearings dataset. Familiarize yourself with the topics system, for both the main datasets as well as the budget, which is different. Work on assignments 1 and 2 this week.

Assignment #1, for Jan 25: Choose a policy topic that you may want to explore for your term paper. In one single-spaced page, explain the topic and what you would like to study. Prepare relevant graphs from the web site relating to its development over time, since 1947. Include at least one budgetary graph and one congressional hearings graph among your selection of relevant graphs. Total assignment: 1 page of writing and 3-5 graphs. Mention other relevant data that would be relevant to studying the topic, such as indicators of how serious the underlying problem is.

Week 3. Jan 23, 25. The politics of public policy: Theories of who gets what.

NOTE: MLK Day on Jan 23. No class on Monday this week.

Kraft and Furlong, Ch. 3.

Week 4. Jan 30, Feb 1. Analyzing and producing public policy: Choosing the best policy.

Kraft and Furlong, Ch. 4, 5, 6

Week 5. Feb 6, 8. Review of Kraft and Furlong and first exam

Review on Monday Feb 6

Quiz on Wednesday Feb 8. The quiz covers everything in the readings so far.

Week 6. Feb 13, 15. The politics of the environment and the creation of "Environment, Inc."

Bosso, Ch. 1, 2, 3

Assignment #2, due on Feb 15. Provide an annotated bibliography of the most relevant references related to your topic. This requires that you go to the library and identify the most relevant academic books about the history of your topic. You should have at least three major books or five articles from academic journals (or an equivalent combination). Give a one-paragraph description of each. Also mention reference sources, such as

relevant Congressional Quarterly articles on your topic. If you can't find any sources on your topic, change your topic!!! Total length: 3-5 pages, double spaced.

Week 7. Feb 20, 22. How an interest-group domain works: Specialization, niches, roles.  
Bosso, Ch. 4, 5, 6

Week 8. Feb 27, Mar 1. Understanding and analyzing policy areas: The environment, education.  
Kraft and Furlong, Ch. 11 (Monday), ch. 10 (Wednesday)

Assignment #3, due on March 1. Give a chronology of your policy, indicating the major laws, areas of congressional interest, breaking the policy into relevant periods, and explaining why these are the relevant breaks and what the thrust of the policy was during the periods you identify. Provide a written chronology and also any relevant graphs that make the same point. Identify data sources beyond the Policy Agendas Project that are relevant to your topic and include graphs of those as well. Look especially for official government statistics.

Spring Break, March 6-8. Have a good break!

Week 9. March 13, 15. More examples of particular policy areas: Economics and the federal budget, health care.

Kraft and Furlong, ch. 7, 8

Note: We may go long on Monday this week if possible and have no class on Wed.

Week 10. Mar 20, 22. Finishing up on policy, a review, and an exam.

Monday: Kraft and Furlong, ch. 9 on social welfare and social security; review.

Wednesday: Exam #2. Covers everything since the first exam. Similar format.

Week 11. Mar 27, 29. A theory of attention, incrementalism, and punctuated equilibrium.

Jones and Baumgartner, Ch. 1, 2, 3

Assignment # 4, due on March 29. Describe the trends in federal spending associated with your policy. Give graphs and also explain which budget categories you used and how well those correspond to your other data used in the chronology of your policy.

Week 12. Apr 3, 5. An actual prediction and a test.

Jones and Baumgartner, Ch. 4, 5, 6

Week 13. Apr 10, 12. Lots of evidence, examples, and data to test the theory more.

Jones and Baumgartner, Ch. 7, 8, 9

Assignment #5, due on April 12. Describe the various issue-definitions associated with your policy. First, explain all the relevant ones that have been prominently used over the entire period. How has the problem been understood, and how have various policies been justified? Are these related to liberal and conservative ideologies, or are they more

complicated than that? How have they changed over time? Describe how these issue-definitions correspond with changes in government policy over time.

Week 14. Apr 17, 19. Public opinion, and government response.

Jones and Baumgartner Ch. 10, 11

This is the last class meeting of the semester.

Week 15. Apr 24, 26. No class this week.

Note: Term papers are due in Baumgartner's office by Monday April 24 at 3pm. Leave a paper copy in the box outside my door. In addition, you must email me an electronic copy of the paper, in a single file, in PDF format. This is due also by 3pm on April 24.

Note that your term paper should not simply be a combination of your five shorter assignments, but it may be close! Make all the corrections and revise your paper sections based on my written comments to your five assignments. Organize the entire paper into a single narrative structure that combines all the information you used in your assignments with additions relevant to your particular topic. Make it look professional, with the graphs revised and inserted in the Appendix, a complete bibliography, etc. Be prepared to use this paper as a writing sample to graduate school or a job application.

There is no final exam. Good luck with your other classes!