PPM 504: Institutional Perspectives

Wednesdays, 2:30 – 5:20 pm, Parrington 120

Instructor
Stephen Kosack
Office: Parrington 207B
Office hours: Mondays, 3:00 – 5:00
(sign-up link on Evans faculty page)

Course Description

The goal of this course is to introduce you to foundational scholarship on the major institutional forces that influence the policy process. All parts of the policy process, from initial development to implementation and effectiveness, are affected by, and in turn affect, a complex system of citizen preferences and actions, organizations, and ultimately institutions. Understanding this system and the role of institutions in it is crucial to all realistic research on policy, as well as to effective teaching and communication about public policy and management. And understanding these forces and how they operate is the goal of myriad sub-disciplines from across the social sciences. This course therefore involves a highly interdisciplinary survey of scholarship on institutions: their nature, their interaction with citizens and organizations, their origins and development, and their influence on political leaders, public servants, and public policy.

Much of this scholarship is highly theoretical and the accuracy of it is vigorously contested. Why? Because the institutions that affect the policy process are unusual and unstable: not many of them exist and those that do are slow-developing and difficult to reform. Thus unlike in, say, research on the effectiveness of a social program or, more broadly, the study of medicine or atoms, accurate observation of institutions is difficult and experimentation on them is nearly impossible. Yet because they influence so much about what government is and does, evidence of them is all around. For several generations, scholars from political science, sociology, anthropology, and economics have set out to make sense of this evidence, so as to better understand how institutions originate, operate, and change. In this class we will survey many of the foundational products of that collective scholarly enterprise.

We will also assess the ability of these scholarly works to explain institutions. We will seek to understand as much as we can about what they get right and what they do not. We will try to gain an ability to see their perspectives and biases and their theoretical orientations and assumptions, and to critically appraise, integrate, and use them in research and teaching. One goal of PhD training in
public policy, whether you intend to use it to become a scholar, researcher, teacher, analyst, or high-level practitioner, is to equip you to communicate an accurate understanding of how policymaking works and how to make it work better, as well as to improve policymaking and our understanding of it through your research or practice. This class is one step toward that goal. At the conclusion of the course, you should be able to:

- understand the classic lines of scholarship on institutions and distinguish how scholars from different disciplines study core challenges in public policy and management;
- recognize the theoretical orientation(s) in the institutional perspectives of scholarly work on public policy and management;
- identify and articulate key theoretical, descriptive, and normative overlaps and distinctions among the different schools of institutional theory;
- critique, integrate, and apply the theories to particular problems of policy and management; and
- use these theories in your teaching and practice, and apply them in your research—ultimately improving our collective understanding of public policy and management.

Course Expectations and Readings

Expectations: This class is largely based on discussion. I will lecture very little. Instead we will spend much of the time discussing the readings so as to understand and critique them. This requires you to go beyond simply reading the assigned work; it requires you to have thought enough about these works to develop, prior to each class, an initial appraisal of their strengths and weaknesses. This is not a simple task, particularly as there is a lot of ground to cover in 10 weeks. I have tried my best to limit your other work for this class and to pare the page count each week—assigning mostly articles and chapters or sections of books instead of whole volumes. In turn I need you to devote enough time outside of class to fully digest these pages. I know you are all busy with many other commitments, so it will be important for you to plan time each week for reading and thinking through the material for this class.

Readings: I suggest that you buy the following books, from which we will read more than two chapters:


These books are available in the University Bookstore as well as Amazon and most other bookstores. The remaining readings are available on the course Canvas website.
Assignments

This course has assignments of three types:
1. a weekly case and set of discussion questions (25 percent of your course grade)
2. a session during which you lead discussion (25 percent)
3. a final research proposal or paper (40 percent)

The final 10 percent of your course grade is class attendance.

Weekly Case and Discussion Questions

To focus your thinking around the class readings, each week you will prepare:

1. At least two integrating questions that cut across the week’s readings and can help shape our discussion in class. For each class session below, I have provided a set of very basic questions. Your questions should go well beyond these, digging into your sense of the strengths and weaknesses of the week’s readings. Here are three forms of discussion questions you might consider:
   a. you can raise concerns about the weaknesses or limitations in one or several authors’ arguments or evidence;
   b. you can consider implications of one or several authors’ findings; or
   c. you can compare and contrast two or more authors’ arguments.

2. A case, which you might use in teaching, that reveals either the explanatory power or the flaws of a particular (set of) concept(s) or argument(s). Public policy is an applied field, and the ability to effectively teach and research in it requires an ability to relate academic theories and concepts to specific, concrete situations in the real world. In fact, even though much of the teaching in public policy is based in academic theories and concepts, it is usually taught with cases, not theory. The case assignment for this class is intended to get you thinking in this way right from the start, as well, perhaps, as providing you with the chance to gather cases that you might use later on in your teaching careers.

Please submit these by 9:00am on the day of class.

A Class Session During Which You Lead Discussion

Beginning in week 3, each of you will be responsible for leading an early part of the class discussion each week. Your preparation for this session should involve you taking the two discussion questions and teaching case that you prepare for that week and developing them into a discussion plan, such as you might use before teaching the concept to undergraduate or masters-level students.

Your plan should include, at a minimum,
1. an introduction or explanation of the key concept(s) and argument(s), and
2. a discussion around their strengths and weaknesses in explaining the reality of public policy and management that incorporates a real-world case.

But while your discussion plan should include these basic ingredients, it does not have to be organized in this way or this order. Be creative. Try to draw on your knowledge and experience of effective teaching and to place yourself in the shoes of students interested in understanding and improving public policymaking and/or public management. Think of the way of explaining and illustrating the concepts and their usefulness that you, if you were in their shoes, would find most helpful.

Those leading discussions should meet with me during office hours that week to review the discussion plan and prepare for class.

**A Final Paper or Research Proposal**

Your final assignment will take one of two forms: a final paper or a Graduate Research Plan Statement for an NSF Graduate Research Fellowship.

*Option 1: Final Paper*

Your first option is to write a paper on a policy or management dilemma that is either understandable (even fixable) by applying one or more of the institutional perspectives from class, or for which our current understanding of institutions is insufficient, necessitating further research. In 10-15 double-spaced pages (12-point font, 1-inch margins):

1. Identify a management or policy dilemma you want to study. Explain why it interests you empirically and/or theoretically.
2. Drawing on readings from this course or from other sources, situate your dilemma in relevant literature on institutions. How do different schools of institutional theory understand your dilemma? What are the connections and distinctions among the different theories’ understandings?
3. Frame a research question or questions to explore your dilemma and contribute to the theoretical debate in the literature you’ve reviewed.
4. Explain which institutional perspective(s) you find most persuasive or promising to explore your dilemma or to answer your research question(s), and why.
5. Develop a set of hypotheses for empirical testing and/or a set of conclusions or generalizations that your research might uncover about institutions or about management or policy.

*Option 2: “Graduate Research Plan Statement” for an NSF Graduate Research Fellowship application*

The NSF Graduate Research Fellowship is a prestigious and (relatively) lucrative 3-year fellowship for PhD students. The core of the application is a Graduate Research Plan Statement, which details a plan for research on a topic of both practical and academic importance. The statement describes an original topic for research over the course of your PhD, and presents the background and
importance of the topic, a set of very specific research questions, objectives, or hypotheses to be explored, and a realistic plan for exploring them.

The catch is that the entire statement can be only 2 single-spaced pages (standard 8.5” x 11” page size, in 12-point, Times New Roman font or LaTeX font, 10-point font may be used for references, footnotes, figure captions and text within figures, and 1” margins on all sides). This option is therefore more difficult than the final paper, because it requires you to exhibit similar depth of understanding and an even more specific research plan in a fraction of the space. The advantage is that you will have finished at least a draft of the fellowship application that you could if you choose develop into a full application for next year’s submission (unfortunately applications are due in late October, halfway through our class).


**Key Dates**

- **October 7:** Sign up for the weeks that you will lead discussion on the Canvas website, and decide whether you would like to write a paper or a GFRP Research Plan for your final assignment.
- **October 20:** Topic for your final assignment.
- **November 3:** A short plan for your final assignment: topic, preliminary key questions, and descriptive outline. Submit on the Canvas website by 3pm.
- **November 24:** First draft of your final assignment. Submit on the Canvas website by 3pm.
- **December 18:** Final assignment due on the Canvas website by 5pm.

*Note: Requests for extensions will only be granted in exceptional circumstances, and only when accompanied by a note from a doctor, dean, or other suitably authoritative source. Unexcused late assignments will be penalized half a point (on the 4.0 point scale) for every day they are late. There will be no exceptions to this policy.*

**Scheduling for October 28 and November 18**

Please mark your calendars: classes on October 28 (when Mary Kay Gugerty will guest teach) and November 18 will begin at **4:00** instead of 2:30.
Course Schedule

September 30  Introduction

Introductions to the class, its structure, and each other.

Required Reading: None

October 7  How to Think about Institutions

What are institutions? How do you know one when you see one? What the major theoretical perspectives on them?

Required Reading (prior to class):

Assignments (prior to the next class):
1. Sign up for the weeks that you will lead discussion on the Canvas website.
2. Decide whether you would like to write a paper or a GFRP Research Plan for your final assignment.
October 14  The Economic Perspective

What is the economists’ perspective on institutions? How do scholars with this perspective try to reconcile it with the key difficulties it has explaining reality?

Required Reading (prior to class):

Recommended:

Assignments (submit on the Canvas website by 3pm on Tuesday, October 20):
1. Topic for your final assignment
Institutions and Collective Action: from Individuals to Groups

How do individuals act collectively without institutions? How does their collective action interact with institutions? How do institutions shape collective action?

Required Reading (prior to class):

Recommended:
NOTE: Class today will begin at 4:00; it will end around 6.

Guest Instructor: Mary Kay Gugerty

What is the sociologists’ perspective on institutions and organizations? How do scholars with this perspective try to reconcile it with the key difficulties it has explaining reality?

Required Reading (prior to class):
4. W. Richard Scott (1998), Organizations: Rational, Natural and Open Systems, Prentice Hall. Read chapter 2 through page 49; this is intended as historical overview on theories of formal organization, especially Weberian bureaucracy.

Recommended:

Assignments (submit on the Canvas website by 3pm on Tuesday, November 3):
1. Short plan for your final assignment: topic, preliminary key questions, and descriptive outline.
November 4  Origins

Where do institutions come from? How do individuals, groups, and organizations shape the
development of institutions?

Required Reading (prior to class):
1. Samuel Huntington (1968), *Political Order in Changing Societies*, Yale University Press,
   chapter 1, pp. 1-91.
   Review of Political Science* 2, pp. 369-404.
5. Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson (2006), *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and
6. Douglass North, John Wallis, and Barry Weingast (2009), “Violence and the rise of
   open-access orders,” *Journal of Democracy*, 20, pp. 55-68.

Recommended:
   the Institutions Governing Public Choice in 17th Century England,” *Journal of Economic
   History*, 49, pp. 803-832.
8. Barrington Moore, Jr. (1966), *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and
   Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, Cambridge: Beacon Press, esp. chapters VII -
   IX, pp. 413-483.

November 11  No Class (Veterans Day)
November 18  Change

NOTE: Class today will begin at 4:00; it will end around 6.

How do institutions change?  How do individuals, groups, and organizations shape institutional change?  How does the past influence whether and how institutions change?

Required Reading (prior to class):


Recommended:


Assignments (submit on the Canvas website by 3pm on Tuesday, November 24):

1. First draft of your final assignment
November 25   Institutions and Political Leaders

What incentives and constraints do institutions create for political leaders?

Required Reading (prior to class):

Recommended:
1. Documentary: Richard Attenborough’s “Gandhi”
December 2  

Institutions and the Bureaucracy

What incentives and constraints do institutions create for the bureaucracy and for bureaucrats?

Required Reading (prior to class):

Recommended:
December 9 Institutions and Policy

How do institutions shape policy? How do they shape the ability of individuals, groups, and organizations to influence policy?

Required Reading (prior to class):

Recommended:

Your Final Assignment is due on the Canvas website by 5pm on December 18