

Public Policy Challenges in American Politics

Junior Seminar

PoliSci 191

Spring 2022

Instructor: Sam Trachtman

Note: This syllabus is a course guide– not a contract. It is a living document that is liable to change.

Location and time:

We will meet weekly on Wednesdays from 10am to 12pm. The first two weeks of class will meet over Zoom at: <https://berkeley.zoom.us/j/2263128619>. Subsequent meetings will be in Hearst [Field Annex B1](#).

Office hours:

Time: Tuesdays 2pm-3pm, 4pm-5pm

Location: 802A Social Science Building

If you want to meet and this time does not work, send a Slack message proposing some other times.

Communication:

I will set up a Slack channel for the course, which will be the preferred mode of communication. You can also email me at sam.trachtman@berkeley.edu.

Course Description: In many ways, American government is failing the American people. We spend the most on healthcare than any country in the world, but do not have the health outcomes to show for it. We incarcerate more people per capita than any other nation. Despite the clear dangers of climate change, government is not moving fast enough to decarbonize the economy. Returns from economic growth continue to accrue to those at the top of the wealth and income distribution.

This course critically examines the role of American government in perpetuating and addressing social and economic challenges. Early course sessions will introduce a policy-focused approach to the study of American politics. This will include sessions exploring how American political institutions affect our ability to enact and implement effective public policies, how interest groups gain and wield influence over public policy, and challenges of policy implementation. Other sessions will focus on applying political science concepts to the study of critically important policy areas: affordable housing, work and organized labor, healthcare, climate change, and criminal justice. As part of the discussion, we will explore pathways for policy reform, and discuss the political challenges that make reform difficult.

A central focus of the course will be to develop students' ability to both comprehend and produce social science research. Readings will draw mostly from leading political science journals and showcase a range of research methods. In addition to engaging with the conceptual material in these articles, we will spend time discussing and critiquing authors' research designs.

The goal is to prepare students to write a research proposal that they could then implement for their senior theses.

Requirements:

- 1) **Participation and presentations:** This course will be conducted in a seminar format, with students taking responsibility for leading much of the discussion. Active participation is expected. You will also be responsible for being the “[expert](#)” for one article this semester, and present key content to the broader group (I’ll provide more details on this). I encourage you to make an appointment for office hours to discuss readings on weeks when you are an expert. Like most things, good participation is about quality, not quantity.
- 2) **Short response notes:** Students will submit four one-page (single-spaced) response notes on Bcourses. The notes will either respond to provided discussion questions or offer other critical reflections on the readings.
- 3) **Final project: research proposal or policy paper:**
 - a. **Research proposals** will draw on existing literature to ask a clear and interesting research question and outline an appropriate empirical approach—that uses either quantitative or qualitative data (or a mix)—to address that question. Research proposals will likely be 15-20 pages in length (double-spaced), though it depends on the project. The goal is that these proposals lay the foundation for senior thesis projects. Students that wish to collect and analyze preliminary data are welcome to do so, but it is not required. Students may work in teams of up to three. I will provide more information and resources for developing and writing research proposals as the semester progresses.
 - b. **Policy papers** will identify a social or economic problem and propose a set of related public policies that could mitigate it. In addition, policy papers will discuss the political barriers to adopting the proposed policy reforms and develop a political strategy for overcoming them. Policy papers will likely be 15-20 pages in length (double-spaced), though it depends on the project. Students may work in teams of up to three. I will provide more information and resources for developing and writing policy papers as the semester progresses.

Policies: Grades will be given according to the following breakdown:

Seminar participation: 30%
Response notes: 20%
Research proposal / policy memo: 50%

Please familiarize yourself with the University’s policies on cheating, plagiarism, and documentation. It is your responsibility to understand and abide by this policy, and violations will be turned in to the administration. If you do not understand what constitutes cheating or plagiarism, or are uncertain, please ask the instructor or seek assistance through your residential college.

Readings: This course requires less reading than what is sometimes required for a junior seminar. But many of the readings will be complex and difficult. Take your time with these. Most assigned readings are contemporary articles in top political science journals that reflect the best work of some of the sharpest minds in the discipline. The purpose of the reading is to, first, stimulate discussion and learning—and second, to provide models of high-quality research using cutting-edge methods.

All readings will be available via Bcourses. (Shorter news articles freely available online may be linked in the syllabus and not uploaded.) The syllabus lists under each week the readings to be done prior to that week's meeting (e.g. you will read Hacker and Pierson in preparation of our Jan 26 session). I will provide discussion questions for the week's readings several days in advance of each session.

Week 1: January 19 [ON ZOOM]

Introduction to the course

Week 2: January 26 [ON ZOOM]

Examining American politics through a policy-focused lens

- Hacker, Jacob S., and Paul Pierson. 2014. "After the 'Master Theory': Downs, Schattschneider, and the Rebirth of Policy-Focused Analysis." *Perspectives on Politics* 12(3): 643–62.
- Soss, Joe, and Vesla Weaver. 2017. "Police Are Our Government: Politics, Political Science, and the Policing of Race–Class Subjugated Communities." *Annual Review of Political Science* 20(1): 565–91.
- Bawn, Kathleen et al. 2012. "A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics." *Perspectives on Politics* 10(3): 571–97.

Week 3: February 2

Interest group influence in American politics (1)

- Ransom, Jan. 2022. "Jail Unions Gain a Powerful Supporter: Mayor Eric Adams - The New York Times." *New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/14/nyregion/rikers-jail-unions-eric-adams.html>
- Gilens, Martin, and Benjamin I. Page. 2014. "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens." *Perspectives on Politics* 12(3): 564–81.
- Moe, Terry M. 2015. "Vested Interests and Political Institutions." *Political Science Quarterly* 130(2): 277–318.
- Kalla, Joshua L., and David E. Broockman. 2016. "Campaign Contributions Facilitate Access to Congressional Officials: A Randomized Field Experiment." *American Journal of Political Science* 60(3): 545–58.

Week 4: February 9

The under-provision of affordable housing

- Demsas, Jerusalem, and Ranjani Chakraborty. 2021. *How the US Made Affordable Homes Illegal* - Vox. <https://www.vox.com/videos/2021/8/17/22628750/how-the-us-made-affordable-homes-illegal> (short video).
- Einstein, Katherine Levine, Maxwell Palmer, and David M. Glick. 2019. “Who Participates in Local Government? Evidence from Meeting Minutes.” *Perspectives on Politics* 17(1): 28–46.
- Hankinson, Michael. 2018. “When Do Renters Behave Like Homeowners? High Rent, Price Anxiety, and NIMBYism.” *American Political Science Review* 112(3): 473–93.
- Klein, Ezra. 2021. “Opinion | The Economic Mistake the Left Is Finally Confronting.” *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/19/opinion/supply-side-progressivism.html>

Week 5: February 16

Small group discussion of initial research / policy paper ideas, and optional lecture attendance (more information to be provided)– no readings

Week 6: February 23

How to think about conducting social science research

- **Writing assignment:** Write one paragraph about a potential research question *or* policy topic that you are interested in exploring.
- Anzia, Sarah F. 2018. “Looking for Influence in All the Wrong Places: How Studying Subnational Policy Can Revive Research on Interest Groups.” *The Journal of Politics* 81(1): 343–51.
- Eidlin, Fred. 2011. “The Method of Problems versus the Method of Topics.” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 44(4): 758–61.
- Angrist, Joshua D., and Jörn-Steffen Pischke. 2008. *Mostly Harmless Econometrics: An Empiricist’s Companion*. Princeton University Press. **Ch. 1.**

Week 7: March 2

Policy implementation and state capacity

- Mettler, Suzanne. 2011. *The Submerged State: How Invisible Government Policies Undermine American Democracy*. University of Chicago Press. **Chapters 1 and 2.**
- Teles, Steven. 2013. “Kludgeocracy in America.” *National Affairs*. <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/kludgeocracy-in-america>
- Lindsey, Brink. 2021. *State Capacity: What Is It, How We Lost It, And How To Get It Back*. Washington, D.C: Niskanen Center. <https://www.niskanencenter.org/state-capacity-what-is-it-how-we-lost-it-and-how-to-get-it-back/>.
- Matthews, Dylan. 2021. “What Democrats Can Learn from Mitt Romney.” *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/22280404/mitt-romney-child-allowance-tax-credit-biden>.

Week 8: March 9

Healthcare politics

- Scheltens, Liz, Mallory Brangan, and Ezra Klein. *The Real Reason American Health Care Is So Expensive* (short video)
<https://www.vox.com/videos/2017/12/1/16720076/american-health-care-expensive-prices-insurance>
- Gerber, Alan S., and Eric M. Patashnik. 2011. “The Politicization of Evidence-Based Medicine: The Limits of Pragmatic Problem Solving in an Era of Polarization.” *California Journal of Politics and Policy* 3(4): 1–14.
- Hacker, Jacob S. 2019. “Medicare Expansion as a Path as Well as a Destination: Achieving Universal Insurance through a New Politics of Medicare.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 685(1): 135–53.
- VerValin, Joe. *The Rise and Fall of Vermont’s Single Payer Plan*. Cornell Policy Review. <http://www.cornellpolicyreview.com/rise-fall-vermonts-single-payer-plan/?pdf=3671>.
- Golshan, Tara. 2020. “The Answer to America’s Health Care Cost Problem Might Be in Maryland.” *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/1/22/21055118/maryland-health-care-global-hospital-budget>.

Week 9: March 16-- Note: one-pager outlining plan for term paper is due.

Work and organized labor

- Yglesias, Matthew. 2015. “Scott Walker’s Plan to Crush American Labor Unions, Explained.” *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/2015/9/18/9345805/scott-walkers-union-plan>
- Frymer, Paul, and Jacob M. Grumbach. 2021. “Labor Unions and White Racial Politics.” *American Journal of Political Science* 65(1): 225–40.
- Hertel-Fernandez, Alexander. 2018. “Employers Are Increasingly Using Their Workers as Lobbyists. Here’s Why That’s a Problem.” *Vox*.
<https://www.vox.com/polyarchy/2018/3/29/17177204/employers-use-workers-as-lobbyists>.
- Galvin, Daniel. 2021. *Alt-Labor’s Turn toward Politics and Public Policy to Combat the Exploitation of Low-Wage Workers: Building Power and ‘Punching above Their Weight.’* Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/unequalpower/publications/alt-labors-turn-toward-politics-and-public-policy-to-combat-the-exploitation-of-low-wage-workers-building-power-and-punching-above-their-weight/>.

SPRING BREAK

Week 10: March 30

Incarceration

- Alexander, Michelle. 2010. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New Press. **Ch. 1.**
- Clegg, John, and Adaner Usmani. 2019. “The Economic Origins of Mass Incarceration.” *Catalyst* Vol 3(No 3). <https://catalyst-journal.com/2019/12/the-economic-origins-of-mass-incarceration>.

- Graves, Scott. 2020. “Criminal Justice Reform Is Working in California.” *California Budget & Policy Center*. <https://calbudgetcenter.org/resources/criminal-justice-reform-is-working-in-california/>

Week 11: April 6—Note: outline of term paper due.

Policing

- (Revisit) Soss, Joe, and Vesla Weaver. 2017. “Police Are Our Government: Politics, Political Science, and the Policing of Race–Class Subjugated Communities.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 20(1): 565–91.
- Beauchamp, Zack. 2021. “How Broken Policing Is Breaking Our Democracy.” *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/2021/4/23/22394495/police-democracy-weaver-lerman>.
- Sances, Michael W., and Hye Young You. 2017. “Who Pays for Government? Descriptive Representation and Exploitative Revenue Sources.” *The Journal of Politics* 79(3): 1090–94.
- Barker, Kim, Michael H. Keller, and Steve Eder. 2020. “How Cities Lost Control of Police Discipline.” *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/22/us/police-misconduct-discipline.html>
- Watch “Policing the Police”: <https://www.pbs.org/video/frontline-policing-police/>

Week 12: April 13

Decarbonization (1)

- Roberts, David. “Climate Change: How to Drive Fossil Fuels out of the US Economy, Quickly - Vox.” <https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/21349200/climate-change-fossil-fuels-rewiring-america-electrify>.
- Aklin, Michaël, and Matto Mildenberger. 2020. “Prisoners of the Wrong Dilemma: Why Distributive Conflict, Not Collective Action, Characterizes the Politics of Climate Change.” *Global Environmental Politics* 20(4): 4–27.
- Trachtman, Samuel. 2019. “Building Climate Policy in the States.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 685(1): 96–114.

Week 13: April 20

Decarbonization (2)

- Mildenberger, Matto, and Leah Stokes. 2018. “No, We Didn’t Almost S-olve the Climate Crisis in the 1980s.” *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/mischiefs-of-faction/2018/8/6/17649906/climate-crisis-solve>.
- Stokes, Leah, and Matto Mildenberger. 2020. “The Trouble with Carbon Pricing.” *Boston Review*. <https://bostonreview.net/articles/leah-c-stokes-matto-mildenberger-tk/>
- Stokes, Leah C. 2016. “Electoral Backlash against Climate Policy: A Natural Experiment on Retrospective Voting and Local Resistance to Public Policy.” *American Journal of Political Science* 60(4): 958–74.

- Guy, Johnathan, and Sam Zacher. 2021. “Climate Action: What the Sunrise Movement Can Do Better.” *The Wire Science*. <https://science.thewire.in/environment/climate-action-what-the-sunrise-movement-can-do-better/>.

Week 14– April 27– Student presentations

Week 15– May 4– Student presentations

Final projects due: TBD