

Civics and Public Policy

DRAFT syllabus prepared for the Alliance for Civics in the Academy Workshop[#]
(University of Denver, October 2024)

- Introductory Master of Public Policy / upper division undergraduate Public Policy course
- 10-week quarter
- 3 hours of instruction per week

Dr. Naazneen H. Barma
(Naazneen.Barma@du.edu)

Douglas and Mary Scrivner Professor of Public Policy
Director of the Scrivner Institute of Public Policy
Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs
Josef Korbel School of International Studies
University of Denver

Course Description

This course brings together the study of public policy — how government formulates and attempts to meet the collective goals of society — with the study of civics — how people interact with government and public policy in myriad ways. It has three main goals: (1) to build a multi-faceted understanding of the ways in which state–society interaction shapes public policy, collective action, and civic participation; (2) to analyze how different groups in society experience public policy and government and the effects on their potential civic engagement; and (3) to explore how different forms of civic action affect public policy outcomes and lead to social transformation.

The course aims to build for students a comprehensive understanding of how state and society interact, to encourage them to think expansively about how government and communities could and should work together, and to empower them with the tools to become more informed, thoughtful, and active civic participants.¹ To achieve these goals, the course intersperses sets of shorter readings that present both perennial and current debates on particular topics with deeper textual dives representing specific diagnoses of our contemporary state of affairs along with potential approaches toward enhanced civic participation and policymaking.

Student Learning Outcomes

The course is inter-disciplinary, drawing especially on scholarship from the fields of public policy, political science, and sociology. It is geared toward building critical reflection and analytical skills, applied toward

[#] I am indebted to Katia Diamond-Sagias, a second year MPP student at the University of Denver’s Josef Korbel School of International Studies, for their research assistance and conceptual partnership in developing this draft syllabus.

¹ I deliberately avoid relying on the concept of “citizenship” to describe the identities, attitudes, and behaviors of members of the polity because, in common parlance, it is typically associated with a particular legal status. Instead, I foreground and emphasize the concept of civic identity to explicitly recognize the crucial participation in democratic values and practices of community members who do not hold legal citizenship per se.

examining the relationship between civics and public policy in both theory and practice and articulating how bringing the two together helps define and achieve the collective good. Students will be able to:

- Describe the broad range of issues with which public policy is concerned and identify how civic engagement might play a role in their definition.
- Identify the political, economic, institutional, and social forces that shape civic action and public policy formulation and implementation.
- Analyze the outcomes of public policy implementation and civic action through the lens of equity and other normative goals.
- Design an approach to how a specific collective social challenge might be met with a combination of policy tools and civic action.
- Reflect on the synergies between analytical rigor, normative values, and ethical considerations, while also considering the potential tradeoffs between such elements of civic participation and policymaking.

Course Assignments

Active class engagement (20 percent). This course will be conducted as a graduate seminar, with each session combining elements of lecture, significant guided discussion components, and group work. Successful engagement will require you to thoroughly and thoughtfully absorb the assigned materials. You will be graded on the quality and constructiveness of your contributions: the highest engagement grades will go to students who clearly integrate and expand on course material in their comments and questions and who demonstrate robust engagement in group work.

Two reading reflection essays — each 1,500 words (15 percent each). For two class sessions of your choice, write an analytical essay on the reading(s) assigned. The goal of this assignment is to reflect analytically on the assigned material before we cover it in class. Minimize summary and focus on delivering your own analytical argument about the key concepts advanced in the reading(s) and how they shed light on the relationship between civics and public policy.

Final project — 10-minute presentation (10 percent) and 3,000-word paper (40 percent). Identify and frame a specific policy problem or collective social challenge and design an approach that combines policy tools and civic action to address it and enhance the collective good. Be specific about the normative objectives of your approach and any ethical considerations that might pertain to it, while also applying critical thinking and analytical rigor to the policymaking and civic engagement elements that comprise it.

Schedule of Classes and Reading Assignments

Part I — How Do State and Society Interact?

Week 1: The Social Contract

Objectives: Examine the nature of the “social contract,” or the relationship between the state and society, which underpins both government’s responsibility to enact public policy and the right to civic participation in being governed.

- Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Book 2
- Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*. Chapter XVII: Of the causes, generation, and definition of a commonwealth; Chapter XXI: Of the liberty of subjects
- Anjali Dayal, “[We Must Reckon with the Terrible Realities Hidden in Plain Sight](#),” *On Being*, April 2, 2018
- Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1969), vol. I: pt. I, chs.2–6; pt. II, chs.1–10; vol. II: pt. II, chs.19–20; pt.III, ch.12; pt. IV ch.6.
- James J. Gosling, “Enduring Political Questions and Public Policy” in Stella Z. Theodoulou and Matthew A. Cahn (eds.), *Public Policy: The Essential Readings* (2013), 12–18

Week 2: Political Community and Civic Involvement

Objectives: Understand what public policy is for and the uses to which it can be put, along with the range of ways in which members of the civic community become involved in collective life.

- Deborah Stone, *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making* (2012), 1–128
- Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (1995), 1–48

Week 3: Collective Action and the Public Good

Objectives: Understand the concepts of the public good and the commons, along with the challenges of collective action and the management of shared, finite resources. Consider different normative lenses through which to articulate what constitutes the public good and how the common interest is constructed through identity and narrative.

- Jane Mansbridge, “Why Do We Need Government? The Role of Civic Education in the Face of the Free-Rider Problem” in Elizabeth C. Matto, Alison Rios Millett McCartney, Elizabeth A. Bennion, and Dick Simpson (eds.), *Teaching Civic Engagement Across the Disciplines*, American Political Science Association (2017), 11–20
- Frederick W. Mayer, *Narrative Politics: Stories and Collective Action* (2014), 1–49, 101–141
- Ethan Bueno de Mesquita, *Political Economy for Public Policy* (2016), 1–50

Week 4: Political Equality and Democratic Participation

Objectives: What are the characteristics of political equality? How does democracy safeguard both individual liberty and social justice? How does power-sharing liberalism empower people to engage in governing public life?

- Danielle Allen, *Justice by Means of Democracy* (2023), Part I (1–64) and Part III (197–229), and choose one chapter from Part II

Part II: Policy Praxis and Civic Consequences

Week 5: Civics and Public Policy Around the World

Objectives: Explore civics and public policy with an explicitly comparative perspective. Consider what public policymaking and civic engagement look like and might achieve in non-liberal contexts where the nature of the state–society relationship is different. Learn how communities of different scale and across the world cooperate to manage common resources and attend to collective action problems.

- Catherine Shea Sanger and Wei Lit Yew, “Conceptualizing Civic Education and Engagement in Less Liberal Contexts” in Elizabeth C. Matto, Alison Rios Millett McCartney, Elizabeth A. Bennion, Alasdair Blair, Taiyi Sun, and Dawn Michelle Whitehead (eds.), *Teaching Civic Engagement Globally*, American Political Science Association (2021), 73–93
- Dick Simpson, “A Global Advance in Civic Engagement” in Elizabeth C. Matto, Alison Rios Millett McCartney, Elizabeth A. Bennion, Alasdair Blair, Taiyi Sun, and Dawn Michelle Whitehead (eds.), *Teaching Civic Engagement Globally*, American Political Science Association (2021), 381–390
- Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (1990), 1–28, 58–102

Week 6: Modern Public Policy Analysis — Benefits and Limitations

Objectives: Understand the economic foundations of modern public policy analysis practices and how this approach became embedded in government. Analyze the consequences of this approach to public policy analysis, with a particular emphasis on how it frames the perceived tradeoff between efficiency and equity and narrows the scope and remit of public policy as it is typically conceptualized.

- Cass R. Sunstein, *The Cost–Benefit Revolution* (2018), 1–66
- Elizabeth Popp Berman, *Thinking Like an Economist: How Efficiency Replaced Equality in U.S. Public Policy* (2022), 1–71

Week 7: Policy Implementation and Civic Participation

Objectives: Explore how people’s lived experiences of policy and government results in widely differential impacts on would-be beneficiaries, in turn affecting their civic and political participation.

- Pamela Herd, Hilary Hoynes, Jamila Michener, and Donald Moynihan, “Introduction: Administrative Burden as a Mechanisms of Inequality in Policy Implementation,” *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 9 (5): 1–30

- Annie Lowrey, “The Time Tax: Why is So Much American Bureaucracy Left to Average Citizens?” *The Atlantic*, July 27, 2021
- Amy E. Lerman, *Good Enough for Government Work: The Public Reputation Crisis in America* (2019), 3–47 and 225–246

Part III: Civic Duty and Policy Transformation

Week 8: Privilege, Inequality ... and Transformative Potential

Objectives: Understand how public policy can entrench certain forms of power and privilege and, in many cases over time, can disadvantage marginalized groups and amplify socioeconomic inequality. Explore how adopting a lens that emphasizes equity and other normative values can empower civic groups and form the basis for social transformation.

- Jennifer Hochschild and Vesla Weaver, “Policies of Racial Classification and the Politics of Racial Inequality,” in Joe Soss, Jacob S. Hacker, and Suzanne Mettler (eds.), *Remaking America: Democracy and Public Policy in an Age of Inequality* (2007), 159–182
- Suzanne Mettler, *The Submerged State: How Invisible Government Policies Undermine American Democracy* (2011), 1–30 and 110–123
- Jamila Michener, “A Racial Equity Framework for Assessing Health Policy,” Commonwealth Fund Issue Brief, January 20, 2022, 1–20
- Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Drum Major Instinct,” Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta GA, February 4, 1968. Choose between [audio](#) or [transcript](#).
- Sharon D. Welch, *After the Protests are Heard: Enacting Civic Engagement and Social Transformation* (2019), 1–38

Week 9: Critical Thinking and Civic Duty

Objectives: How can we orient our values in a disorienting time where the intellectual and the political are often pitted against each other? What prospects do we have, by means of policymaking and civic engagement, to recommit to democracy, justice, and the collective good?

- Wendy Brown, *Nihilistic Times: Thinking with Max Weber* (2023), 1–109

Week 10: Policy, Civics — and You

Objectives: How does your education shape your view of your civic responsibility and your role in our democracy?

- Ronald J. Daniels, *What Universities Owe Democracy* (2021), 86–186

In this final class session, each student will briefly present their policy and civic approach to a collective social problem.