

## Political Economy 402: Political Economy of Public Policy Issues

Spring 2017  
Williams College

Professor Johnson  
341 Hollander Hall  
Ph. 413-597-2519  
[cjohnson@williams.edu](mailto:cjohnson@williams.edu)

Professor Gentry  
329 Schapiro Hall  
Ph. 413-597-4257  
[wgentry@williams.edu](mailto:wgentry@williams.edu)

This course serves as a capstone to the political economy major. In it, you work in research groups to develop a political and economic analysis of some area of domestic or international public policy. You will draw on skills and knowledge acquired in the various courses across different disciplines that contribute to the political economy major. You will present your work to us in a series of papers, building to a substantial final written project. You will also present your work to the public in a formal presentation at the end of the semester.

The structure of this course differs from the structure of most Williams College classes. There are no lectures, and we rarely gather as an entire class. Instead, each week your small research group will have a meeting with us at a regularly scheduled time. You set the agendas for these meetings, and it is important that you come to each one with a clearly defined set of objectives in mind. We can discuss issues, ideas, difficulties, and questions you have encountered. We will work to address questions that you have, and we will pose questions to you. Throughout the semester we will provide assistance in constructing a research plan, offer suggestions on where to find good readings, and help you answer difficult questions that have emerged from your reading.

A highlight of the course is our trip to DC over spring break. **You are responsible for arranging your transportation to and from DC, arriving on the afternoon of Sunday, March 19 and staying through the late afternoon of Wednesday, March 22.** The College will pay for the hotel, and you will each receive \$250 to help defray travel expenses. During this trip, you will meet with and interview policy-makers who are actively engaged in the topic you are studying. There may be a reception on Monday evening with DC-area Williams alumni which you are required to attend. You will give a short, informal presentation on your topic, and you should be prepared for a lively question and answer session. During this trip, we expect your behavior to be consistent with the rules of student conduct as specified in the Student Handbook. We expect you to behave professionally at all times.

Another very important part of the course is the set of public presentations at the end of the semester. Each of you is expected to attend all of the presentations. Keep your schedule open from 4:00 to 6:00 pm on May 1, 2, and 5 and May 8, 9, and 11.

## **The Policy Project: To Be Completed in Stages**

Your objective in this course is to conduct a policy analysis. You will identify and articulate a problem that necessitates government attention, consider various alternative solutions to the problem, reflect on the obstacles and opportunities associated with each solution, and ultimately make and defend a recommendation about what policy response is optimal.

To help you along the way, we have you write two preliminary papers. With revision, each will become incorporated into the final project.

In all of these papers, your analysis will draw on work done by think tanks, advocacy groups, and relevant decision-making bodies (such as Congress). Your analysis should also cite appropriate scholarly sources in economics and political science.

### **Paper 1: Defining the Problem** (Due February 24, 15 to 20 pages)

Describe the problem you have selected, give some sense of the scope of the problem, explain why it is a public problem (rather than an individual problem), and if possible, discuss the causes of this problem. This might seem easy; after all, we can probably all agree that there are lots of problems in the world. But it is more difficult than one might expect, and it is very important. If you can convince your audience of the problem and its causes, you've gone a long way toward convincing them to accept the solution you will recommend.

To do this persuasively, your analysis should consider these questions: What is the harm that occurs, and who are the parties that are harmed? Document the size and scope of the problem. Has most of the harm already been realized, or is it mainly a matter of potential future consequences? What about the problem merits the attention of the public sector? Are there externalities or market failures? If not, what other justification might you use for a policy intervention? What are the obstacles to policy intervention – in other words, why hasn't the policy been implemented yet (don't forget that there might be logistic and/or political obstacles)?

### **Paper 2: Possible Solutions** (Due April 14, 25 to 30 pages)

Identify a range of possible policy alternatives, and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each in the context you are studying. You may also find it useful to consider policy solutions adopted in other countries or subnational governments (such as states in the U.S.). How would each alternative address the problem? What other difficulties might this policy alternative create? Who would support and who would oppose this alternative? What might need to be done to rally support and minimize opposition? This paper should build on what you learned from the DC trip.

Although the group might be moving toward a policy proposal it wants to recommend, the purpose of this paper is not to present and defend that particular policy, but to consider a host of different policy proposals. We want you to research and analyze a range of policy solutions before you settle on the one you prefer; this helps you make and defend that final choice.

**Final Paper: Elements of all the above, plus your policy proposal, why it is superior to the alternatives, and how you would implement it.** (Due May 19, 80-100 pages)

Your final paper should advocate for a particular solution. You want to convince your audience of your understanding of the problem, present your awareness of the scope of possible solutions, and explain why your solution is preferable. Your argument should include both political and economic analysis. You need not limit your proposal to a policy solution you think would be adopted easily today. You may choose to propose such a policy, but you could also propose a solution you think would be more difficult to adopt. For any policy you endorse, you want to have a strong analysis of who would be likely to support or oppose it and a good explanation of what would have to happen in order for the recommended policy change to occur.

In the final papers, students may all agree on the problem, proposal, and strategy. If so, they would submit one report. If students are in substantial disagreement, they may submit a majority and a minority report, after having consulted with the professors. Even in cases where a single paper is submitted, we will ask you to identify the student who took primary responsibility for each section of the paper.

## **Other Assignments**

***List of potential interviewees*** (Due week of March 6)

Bring to your small-group meeting a list of the organizations (interest groups, government agencies, congressional committees, etc.) and names of people you would like to interview in D.C.

***Peer review*** (Due March 10)

You will be matched to one other group and will serve as an outside reader for that group's first paper. Each of you will prepare a two-page referee report outlining specific ways in which the paper could be improved.

***Practice presentation*** (Week of April 24):

In the standard small-group meeting times, you will give a dry run of your presentation.

***Public presentation*** (Week of May 1 and Week of May 8)

Each group will make a public presentation to fellow students, us, other professors whom we invite, community members, and friends. There will be about an hour for presentation, and an hour for questions and discussion. (On days when you are not presenting, we expect you to provide critical and constructive remarks.) The quality of your presentation is an important part of your grade, and the questions and discussion typically provide good ideas and suggestions to be considered in the final paper.

## Course Schedule

Week Of	General Notes	Assignment Due Friday (via email)
2/1	Entire Group Meets, Feb 3	
2/6	Small Group Meetings	
2/13	Small Group Meetings	
2/20	Small Group Meetings	2/24: Paper 1
2/27	Small Group Meetings	
3/6	Small Group Meetings:	List of Potential Interviewees 3/10: Peer Review
3/13	Small Group Meetings	
3/20	D.C. Trip	
4/3	Small Group Meetings	
4/10	Small Group Meetings	4/14: Paper 2
4/17	Small Group Meetings	
4/24	Practice Presentations	
5/1	Public Presentations	
5/8	Public Presentations Entire Group Meets, May 12	5/19: Final Paper

## Grading

Grades are based on your individual work and your contribution to the group effort. Although most of the written papers will be treated as group projects, we will ask you to help us identify individual authorship or responsibility where appropriate. Your participation in the weekly meetings with us, as well as your participation in your group (as evaluated by your peers) will be important elements of your grade. In your weekly meetings with us, we will pay attention to how much progress you have made on your research plan, the degree to which you constructively contribute to the discussion and to your group's progress, the quality of your questions and answers, etc. Someone who comes every week to just "shoot the breeze," without showing evidence of having done substantial independent research, reading, and learning, will not do well in this class.

Even though a substantial portion of your grade is based on the work of the group, final grades may vary within the group.

Each component contributes to your overall grade in the following ways:

Group Grades:            Paper 1: 10%  
                                 Paper 2: 20%

Individual Grades:    Participation as observed by faculty: 10%  
                                 Participation as observed by peers: 10%  
                                 Referee reports: 5%  
                                 Public presentation: 20%  
                                 Final written project: 25%

A Note on Attendance:

We recognize that some of you may face scheduling problems during the semester, with the competing demands of athletics, job hunting, and other activities – not to mention the lure of sunny days in spring. Nonetheless, by the nature of this class, active and engaged participation is crucial. Among other things, you must attend the DC trip; this is non-negotiable and trumps athletic commitments, family travel plans, etc. We also expect that you must attend all of the group presentations in May (not simply your own group's). If you anticipate any problems meeting this obligation, you should contact us as soon as possible. You are also expected to attend all class meetings and group meetings. Poor attendance will be weighed in the evaluation of your work.