DECISION MAKING AND PUBLIC POLICY

It is necessary for all governments and organizations, large and small, to develop and implement decision-making processes that permit policymakers to make informed decisions about a range of highly complex issues and problems. While there are differences in how governments and organizations are organized to perform this function, there are several fundamental components that determine how effectively these organizations respond to problems. This course focuses on the nature and mechanisms of governmental and organizational decision-making and interagency processes. It begins by examining the nature of decision-making, and then considers the domestic and international sources of influence on decision-making. The course then examines the interagency process, including the nature of the U.S. National Security Council, and various interpretive models, which are used to understand the constraints on individuals who operate in a bureaucratic environment. Finally, the course concludes with an exercise in which students will present and defend a policy memorandum in a simulated meeting of the U.S. National Security Council. In this meeting, the students will play the role of NSC principals who will present their positions in a discussion among “principals” for a decision by the president.

Thus, this course outlines the sources of influence on policy, perspectives on decision-making, the structure and conduct of the interagency process, and gives students the opportunity to develop and refine their policy memorandum writing skills. In addition, this course will use a series of case studies from the field of security studies to examine critically the theoretical and practical problems that influence how governments and private sector firms make decisions.

Grading
Policy Memoranda (3): 60%
Class Participation: 20%
NSC Meetings: 20%

Policy Memoranda
Since a critical skill in governments and private sector firms is the ability to analyze and express solutions to complex problems in succinct and precise terms, this
course will give the student the opportunity to develop and refine their policy memoranda writing skills.

The student will be required to write three 2-page (single-spaced) policy memoranda: first one on domestic policy (due June 1), second one (due June 15) on foreign policy. The third policy memorandum (due June 28) will be prepared in preparation for the NSC meetings in which each student will participate as a cabinet-level “principal.”

When organizing your policy memoranda, a useful approach is to frame these in terms of the central problem or issue in your field of interest. When writing these memos, I urge you to think of how you would inform a decision maker about a problem: what is the central issue, how should he or she think about the problem, what framework is most helpful in understanding the problem, how critical is it to resolve the problem, and what specific options and recommendations would you pose? My own view is that the most fundamental output of your policy memos should be to give decision makers a coherent way to think about a problem and the specific options that are available to them for resolving the problem.

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**WEEKLY SCHEDULE**

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**MAY 23 – TOPIC: INTRODUCTION TO DECISION MAKING AND POLICYMAKING**
The underlying principle for all organizations that are involved in public policy is that the participants operate within a complex decision making environment. As individuals and governments face important questions about their choices and responsibilities, it is essential for the scholarly and decision making communities to understand the environment in which decisions and policies are framed and made. The first week is designed to outline for the student the nature of decision making in organizations and the essence of the public policy choices that decision makers routinely confront. This course will increase the students’ understanding of the major political, organizational, and behavioral phenomena that are relevant both to governmental decision making, apply these frameworks internationally, and thereby encourage the student to comprehend the nature of effective participation in this process.

THEORY: INTRODUCTION TO DECISION MAKING & PUBLIC POLICY

RECOMMENDED READINGS


MAY 25 – TOPIC: HOW DOMESTIC POLITICS INFLUENCES POLICY

This week focuses on the domestic political system, including the critical actors, rules and tools that directly and indirectly influence decision making in the public policy arena. The objective is to evaluate how domestic institutions, including interest groups, public opinion, and the media, influence decision making. Those who have not participated in domestic political processes often have difficulty appreciating the complexity of the interactions and the ways in which these organizations influence decision making. Public opinion represents one of the most potent forces found in the domestic political system, but it is not easy to energize or control. Numerous decision makers in the domestic political system struggle with public opinion and media whose influence is so important that it cannot be simply dismissed as irrelevant. Since the majority of the public gets its knowledge of domestic and international events from mass media sources, leaders in public and private sector organizations as well as an ever
increasing number of special interest groups are well aware of this fact -- and seek to use the media as a conduit to communicate and gain support for their agendas. Great debates have raged regarding the role of the media in this process. This session focuses on public opinion, interest groups, the news media and the complex ways in which they can interact.

**THEORY: influences on decision making: domestic political**

**REQUIRED READINGS**

**RECOMMENDED READINGS**

**CASE STUDY: PANDEMICS AND GLOBAL CONTAGION**


**JUNE 1 – TOPIC: HOW INTERNATIONAL POLITICS INFLUENCES POLICY**

Despite the state’s considerable military, economic, technological, and diplomatic power, its policies are decisively shaped by the actions of many other actors in the international system. These actors include states, nations, intergovernmental organizations, and non-governmental organizations all of which operate in a constantly changing international system. The current trend toward greater and more complex economic, political, and military interdependence within the international political system suggests that international actors may gain even greater influence in future U.S. policy making. The second week is designed to outline the range of international actors
that influence decision making in all governments. By studying the distribution of power and influence in the international political system and the tools and rules used to translate that power in decisions, we can gain greater insight into the forces that contribute to both better decisions and policy making. Thus, we consider how the development of new actors, rules and trends present major challenges to decision makers. Specifically, we discuss how the power of ideas and norms, developments in international law, the role of religion and ideology, and the spread of terrorism influence public policy. Though not easily measurable, ideas have always been important components of the international system. Today, several important norms – ideas that govern behavior by shaping what actors believe is appropriate behavior – are in a state of flux. Using the case of terrorism, we consider how ideas influence the nature of decision making.

THEORY: INFLUENCES ON DECISION MAKING: INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL

REQUIRED READINGS


CASE STUDY: TERRORISM

- Influenza Pandemic: Applying Lessons Learned from the 2004-05 Influenza Vaccine Shortage, Testimony before the Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives (Washington, DC: General Accountability Office, November 4, 2005).
There are several contending perspectives that are used to explain how decisions are made in the public policy arena. One perspective is that national security decision making is a rational process in which public policy choices are made by decision makers who carefully evaluate all the possible options, understand the consequences of each option relative to well-defined national interests, and choose the option that best promotes those national interests. Other perspectives emphasize the different interests, experiences and analytical capabilities of the various organizations and individuals involved in the decision-making process. These perspectives see decisions as resulting from organizational processes, imperatives, and pressures; from the interpersonal dynamics among key advisors; or from the personal convictions, values, or cognitive limitations of the decision-maker. To understand these competing perspectives, this week focuses on the outlining the basic elements of these perspectives using the Cuban Missile Crisis to illustrate the usefulness of the four perspectives in analyzing policy choices. Each of these perspectives will be addressed in greater detail with corresponding case studies during the next several weeks.

**THEORY: ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVES: AN INTRODUCTION**

**REQUIRED READINGS**


**RECOMMENDED READINGS**


**CASE STUDY: ENERGY VULNERABILITIES**

The first of the perspectives to be addressed is the rational actor model. The essence of this perspective is that decision making is defined in terms of a rational process by which policymakers evaluate the ends and means of policies. These individuals also carefully evaluate public policy choices in terms of all possible options, the consequences of each option relative to well-defined interests, and then select the option (or options) that best promote those interests. The presumption is that decision makers will have access to all pertinent information and that the organizational structure is designed to develop and implement options that represent the best possible set of alternatives.

**THEORY: Decision Making Perspectives: Rational Actor Model**

**REQUIRED READINGS**

**RECOMMENDED READINGS**

**CASE STUDY: Proliferation of WMDs**
JUNE 13 – TOPIC: POLICY MAKING PERSPECTIVES: ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR MODEL

The organizational behavior model emphasizes the different interests, experiences and analytical capabilities of the various organizations and individuals involved in the decision-making process. Furthermore, it sees decisions as the result of organizational processes, imperatives, and pressures. Policy and behavior are often summarized as actions chosen by a unitary, rational decision maker, despite the fact that it is not individuals but large and complex organizations, which Allison describes as “a vast conglomerate of loosely allied organizations, each with a substantial life of its own.” Organizations, including governments, perceive issues through the sensors of component organizations, which define their alternatives on particular issues according to predetermined standard operating procedures and organizational biases. Organizations tend to have bureaucratic characteristics, including hierarchical structure, formal lines of authority, degrees of specialization, and standard operating procedures. All organizations develop their own unique culture, which has many positive influences including the development of a strong sense of mission among organization members. Culture also causes organizations to employ informal and unofficial processes, notably selective attention toward tasks that are part of the culture at the expense of other tasks. This session focuses on how organizations behave in general, and how they respond to change and crises.

THEORY: DECISION MAKING PERSPECTIVES: ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR MODEL

REQUIRED READINGS


RECOMMENDED READINGS

CASE STUDY: INFRASTRUCTURE VULNERABILITIES AND CRISIS RESPONSE

• ASCE 2005 Report Card (full document – skim)

JUNE 15 – TOPIC: POLICY MAKING PERSPECTIVES: GOVERNMENTAL POLITICS MODEL

When important decisions must be made and rigorous analytical solutions are difficult to obtain, the government politics model necessarily enters into the selection of alternatives. Moreover, power and influence are the language in which political discourse takes place. The unique characteristics of bureaucracy dictate that participants must understand and exercise personal power and influence to be effective. Power and influence are tools required by every successful leader or manager. In public policy, success usually depends upon the assistance or at least the cooperation of others. With many advocates competing for limited resources, formal authority alone is rarely, if ever, adequate to accomplish one’s objective. Furthermore, issues seldom have a course of action so clearly superior that reasonable people could not disagree upon actions to be taken. The most effective individuals in this environment are those who understand the tools of power and influence, how these tools are acquired, and how they are used effectively. In this session, we discuss the tools of power and influence and analyze their sources as coalitions form among like-minded individuals.

THEORY: DECISION MAKING PERSPECTIVES: GOVERNMENTAL POLITICS MODEL

REQUIRED READINGS


RECOMMENDED READINGS


CASE STUDY: ROLE OF INTELLIGENCE

- Preparing for the 21st Century an Appraisal of U.S. intelligence – The Role of Intelligence

**JUNE 20 – TOPIC: POLICY MAKING PERSPECTIVES: COGNITIVE MODEL**

The final perspective is the *cognitive model*, which addresses how the policy maker’s beliefs, biases, values, emotions, personal experiences, and memories influence decision making processes. Sometimes the effect is obvious—as when the decision maker’s emotions or impatience might short-circuit the evaluation of options. In other instances the effect may be subtle—as when a decision maker’s preconceptions or biases produce a personal predisposition towards one option or another, or skepticism about the estimated costs and benefits of particular options. In still other cases a decision maker may be so emotionally or physically exhausted that it hinders clear thought and action. This session examines the cognitive perspective and considers how individuals gather and evaluate data, deal with uncertainty and information overload, and make decisions that would not be predicted by the rational actor, organizational, or government politics models.

**THEORY: DECISION MAKING PERSPECTIVES: COGNITIVE MODEL**

**REQUIRED READINGS**

**CASE STUDY: HUMAN SECURITY**


**JUNE 22 – TOPIC: THE INTERAGENCY: PRESIDENT AND NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL**

The focal point for public sector decision making in dozens of countries, including the United States, is the National Security Council, which sits astride the interagency process (which we examine in detail in Week Ten). Historically, a series of foreign and domestic events have increased the power of the executive. Since World War II and during the Cold War, the increasing complexity of international problems has required the president to gain advice and information from a wide variety of expert sources, all while working within an expanding Executive branch. To help the student understand the influence and role of the NSC in decision making, this session focuses on the origins and functions of the NSC, the formal and informal processes by which advisors, including the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, are used within various presidential administrations, the ways in which the interagency process is dominated by the NSC, whether the NSC provides an effective tool for decision making, and various management styles presidents have employed to get advice and information.

**THEORY: INTERAGENCY PROCESS: PRESIDENT AND NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL**

**REQUIRED READINGS**

**RECOMMENDED READINGS**


**CASE STUDY: BALLISTIC MISSILE DEFENSE**


**JUNE 27 – TOPIC: THE INTERAGENCY: EXECUTIVE BRANCH AGENCIES AND PROCESSES**

The interagency process – a codeword for organizational processes in public and private sector organizations -- is designed to assist the chief executive in developing, coordinating, articulating, and implementing decisions in virtually all areas of policy. In the case of the United States this process involves a large number of executive branch departments and agencies, including the Departments of Defense, State, Commerce, Treasury, Homeland Security, Health and Human Services, Director of National Intelligence, and Interior, among others. Since all of these organizations have important

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1 While we will use the example of the interagency process in the United States, it should be noted that the principles articulated apply equally to all governments.
responsible in making and implementing public policy, all are active participants in the interagency process. The objective is to describe the general interagency structures and processes of governmental decision making as well as identify the authorities and roles of key departments and agencies. This session examines the interagency process in order to help the student understand the nature of policy making and its implications for how organizations (including governments) design and execute policy. The student will be exposed to the breadth and depth of the interagency process using the United States as the case study to focus our discussion on the departments and agencies that have important policy making responsibilities in the interagency process.

REQUIRED READINGS

RECOMMENDED READINGS

**JUNE 29 -- TOPIC: NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL DECISION MEETINGS; CONCLUSIONS FOR POLICY MAKING**

To integrate the concepts and principles examined in this course, we conclude with exercises in which students prepare policy memoranda on a selected problem and defend it in a simulated decision meeting of the National Security Council. Each of these exercises will involve a decision that the president needs to make in an area related to both domestic and international policy. In this meeting, the students will play the role of NSC principals who are responsible for presenting their positions in which the president is expected to make a decision. Once the nature of the specific issue is outlined in class, each student will be required to write a decision memorandum that will be presented and discussed at this meeting. While we will discuss the details in class, each memorandum must discuss relevant background on the issue, the specific recommendation being made by the principal, the advantages and disadvantages of this recommendation, and anticipated objections by other principals. These exercises will
put into practice the theories and practices discussed during the course, including how decisions are made in the public policy arena and the forces that influence them.

As the conclusion to the course, we will consider how decision making processes influence the conduct of public policy, and examine the implications for governmental actions and choices on an international scale in an era when the fundamental nature of domestic and international security are being reshaped.

REQUIRED READINGS