Course Description

The purpose of this seminar is to acquaint you with some of the predominant ways in which scholars study the development and setting of political agendas. The images, ideas, and rhetoric that are associated with policy issues can have a significant effect on whether and how those issues are addressed by government officials, how individuals understand and evaluate issues, and what types of outcomes emerge from political and policy debates. Consequently, the topics we will survey during the seminar include the nature of agenda power; problem framing and its implications; individuals’ attentiveness to and their processing of politically relevant information; the linkages between different government agendas and the items on those agendas; the role of the media in setting the public agenda; and theories of agenda setting, agenda development, and agenda change. Throughout the seminar we will be attentive to how scholars take up, formulate, and execute research to investigate political agenda setting. The seminar is designed to meet the needs of graduate students in political science who plan to do original research, master a doctoral field, or teach in one or more aspects of American politics.

Agenda setting is a very broad and heterogeneous topic of study. For one, it attracts the attention of researchers from many different disciplines. Political scientists, sociologists, psychologists, as well as communication scholars have each devoted effort to what is a common set of questions: how are problems identified and defined; why is more attention allocated to some social problems than others; and why is the public and governmental response to some problems different than it is for other problems? Moreover, even within political science, there are numerous perspectives and levels of analysis through which one might address these questions. At the level of the individual, one might try to understand how people acquire and retain information about social issues and government decisions. At the level of an issue, one might inquire about how its characteristics detract from or enhance governmental or media attention. At a more macro level, one might examine the relationships between different branches or levels of government. At a still broader level, one might assess how policy outcomes are affected by the institutional venues in which problems are attended to, as well as to way those problems come to be defined and discussed. Because no single approach or discipline offers the best or definitive answers to the questions that drive agenda setting research, we will cover in this seminar a diverse and multidisciplinary set of literature.

Course Requirements

Throughout the semester, seminar participants will engage in three basic activities. First, each
week we will as a group work through a set of required readings on a scheduled topic. I expect you to read and analyze these selections with care. (You may also wish to review some of the recommended selections but these readings are not required for the seminar discussion.) The readings, especially the articles, are often dense, and require time and patience to assimilate. You should come to each seminar prepared to discuss and debate what you have read, and to challenge the views of your colleagues.

Second, to assist your participation in the weekly seminars and to help you think critically about the work we cover, you will be required to prepare six short (three page) written responses to the readings (I will assign you weeks in which to respond). The reading responses are to be distributed to me and the other seminar participants by 6:00 p.m. on Tuesday. These papers should help you to crystallize your thoughts on the readings and will serve as a basis for your contribution to the seminar discussion that week. Notice that I am not asking you to summarize the readings each week. Rather, I’m asking you to engage them, to take them up and consider why they are relevant. There is no single formula or approach to writing a response paper. You should always communicate what is important about the material but beyond that your response to the work is likely to vary. For example, in some weeks you may believe that there is something important that the authors miss. In other weeks, the material may raise important questions that remain unaddressed. You might take issue with the strength of the authors’ arguments and/or evidence. In addition, you might want to explore some interesting connections between the set of readings we cover in a week, between the current and a previous week’s readings, or between the required and recommended material. I encourage you to draw into your discussion any additional reading that you deem relevant. On 8 September we will spend time in seminar drafting a response paper so that you have a clear sense of both my expectations and the nature of this exercise.

Third, each seminar participant will lead one seminar session. The session you lead will correspond with a week in which you prepare a reading response. As a seminar leader, you will be responsible for organizing and structuring our discussion of the assigned readings for that week. I am not asking you to prepare a lecture on a topic. Rather, I want you to pose some questions to the other seminar participants, and to decide how we’ll cut into the material. You should plan to sample some of the recommended readings during the week that you lead the seminar.

There are two ways in which you can fulfill the final requirement for the course. First, you may design an original research project that takes up questions relevant to our understanding of agenda development and agenda setting. The research questions for the project you will design are due in class on October 6. Plan to submit the research question(s) for your project along with a brief description of why the questions you pose are important to the study of agenda setting, and how answers to those questions can move the field forward (in other words, I’d like you to justify the importance of designing a project to address the questions you pose). Second, you may undertake some original research that addresses questions relevant to our understanding of agenda setting. The research questions for the project you will undertake are due in class on October 6. Plan to submit the research question(s) for your project along with a brief description of why the questions you pose are important to the study of agenda setting, how your questions relate to existing scholarship, and how you plan to address your questions (e.g., data you expect to gather, research techniques you plan to use). Regardless of which option you choose, I encourage you to speak with me about your paper throughout the semester as questions arise, as you encounter difficulties, and so on. Seminar participants will present their research design/research in our final seminar session on December 8. Plan your presentation with the goal of educating seminar members about the research you completed, what you uncovered, and what you learned. You will have about 10 to 15 minutes to make your presentation (I will tell you before the Thanksgiving break about the format and precisely the amount of time you have available). Your papers should be roughly 25 pages in length (not including tables or references).
Grading

I will base your final grade on the extent and quality of your participation in class (20 percent), the quality and coherence of your reading response papers (30 percent), your leadership of one class session (10 percent), and your research design paper (40 percent). Obviously I expect you to attend each and every session, and to submit all assignments on time.

Required Books


I also have assigned a book that is out of print: Gandy, Oscar. 1982. *Beyond Agenda Setting: Information Subsidies and Public Policy*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Company. I will make available a copy of the full text of the book from which you can make copies. All required books also are available through regular reserve.

Other Reading Material

For your convenience, copies of journal articles and excerpts from books will be available in a mailbox in 203 Pond (located behind the door and labeled for our class) one week prior to the seminar meeting in which they are assigned (only required reading will be made available). You may use my copy to make a copy for yourself (but keep in mind that 203 Pond is accessible between 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. only). Please be considerate – do not keep the articles any longer than it takes you to make a copy. Many of the articles also can be found on JSTOR (www.jstor.org), or in the library.
Course Schedule

As we approach the units that span more than one session, I will tell you which readings we will discuss in each session. For example, on September 8, we will discuss Schattschneider, Bachrach and Baratz, and Berinsky from the Agenda Power unit. On September 15 we will discuss Gaventa.

Introduction to the Seminar (1 September)


Required


Assignment for September 15: Bring to our seminar meeting a recent example of agenda power. Your example can come from a news article, news report, or other similar source. Any example that you believe illustrates or reflects the concept of agenda power is appropriate. The example/illustration must be relatively current. We will discuss your examples in our seminar meeting, and use them to talk about the types of empirical phenomena that agenda setting researchers seek to explain.

Also recommended


More Attention Than Less Severe or Significant Problems? How Are Problems Framed? Why Do Framing and Definition Matter? What Are the Implications of Framing and Problem Construction? (22-29 September)

Required


*Debating Our Destiny: 40 Years of Presidential Debates (all or part of this program will be viewed in class)


*Also recommended*


**How Do People Think About and Process Information About Politics? To What Extent Do People Pay Attention? To What Do They Pay Attention? (Why) Is An Understanding of What People Are Attentive to Relevant to Agenda Setting?** (6-13 October)

**Required**


Also recommended


How Does the Nature of the Agenda Setting Process Affect the Attention Allocated to Issues and Problems? What Types of Relationships Exist Among the Agendas of Different Institutions? How Does Attention to One Problem Affect Attention to Others? How Swiftly or Slowly Do Agendas Change? (20 October)

Required


Also recommended


Are the Media Dominant Players in Setting the Public Agenda? Do the Media Serve the Classic Intermediary Role Between Citizens and Government? How Do the Media Respond to and Affect the Agendas of Government? (27 October-3 November)

Required


Also recommended


How Do Individual Institutions Manage (or not) Their Agendas? To Whom or What Are They Responsive? What Are the Consequences of Government Decision Makers’ Allocation of Attention to Issues? (3-10 November)

Required


*Also recommended*


**How Do All These Different Elements Come Together to Affect the Attention Allocated to Problems? How Are Policy Outcomes Affected by the Agenda Setting Process?** (17 November-1 December)

*Required*


*Also recommended*


Research/Research Design Presentations (8 December)

Presentation schedule and format will be announced before the Thanksgiving holiday.