

Bureaucratic Politics in the U.S.
POSC 385/485
Spring Term, 2006
Tuesday/Thursday 10:15 – 11:30 a.m.
Syllabus as of January 12, 2006

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The Subject

Bureaucracy is nowhere popular. Criticisms of “bureaucracy” as inefficient or uncaring, and “bureaucrats” as slothful or self-serving, are staples of American political rhetoric. When we hear about government agencies, and actually notice their names, it is usually because they’ve screwed up to some major extent (thus I expect all students in this class will have heard of FEMA!).

This course should give you a more balanced appreciation of the forces that influence behavior within bureaus and the performance of bureaus. It will address three separate but related concerns. The most general is how organizations work. The second level is the management of public organizations in the United States. The third topic is the performance of specifically federal government bureaucracies in the United States.

These topics are essentially a set of nested boxes. Much “common-sense” about organizations is wrong, and therefore many recommendations about how to improve public and specifically federal bureaucracies are wrong. Hence the first topic must be organizations themselves. This part of the course provides a way of looking at the behavior of any organization, of any type. It involves perspectives from sociology, psychology, economics and cognitive science as much as from the field of “politics” per se. Yet it can also be viewed as an analysis of the politics of everyday life, for much of what we do occurs in or is shaped by organizations of various sorts. You can apply it to try to figure out what is going on in Case Western Reserve University, in any workplace, in a nonprofit for which you volunteer, or in a government organization. The key text for this part of the course is Herbert Simon’s *Administrative Behavior* (4th ed., 1997). Professor Simon, though his Ph.D. was in political science, won one of the first Nobel Prizes in economics for this work. It explains administration as a process of decision-making, and organizations as a way of dividing the labor of decision. For this 4th edition, on the 50th anniversary of the first edition, he added commentaries to each chapter, reflecting on how he was right, how maybe wrong, and how changes in the world required some changes in his conclusions.

The second topic, then, is what is peculiar to government organizations, particularly in the United States. We will look at that from the perspective of a public manager, and can relate that reading to the set of concepts about organizations in general. Everything government does works through some sort of administrative organization.

Government in action means local bureaucracies such as schools, the police, the crews that maintain streets and the inspectors who check whether restaurants are sanitary; state bureaucracies that decide who will get a welfare check, that administer unemployment insurance and are supposed to ensure the safety of nursing homes; and national bureaucracies that mail checks to our elderly relatives, design and require nutrition labels on food products, or fight our wars. Therefore how public bureaucracies make decisions, and how they perform their tasks, is how government works for us, or on us. The main text for this section is Gordon Chase and Elizabeth C. Reveal, *How to Manage in the Public Sector*. The Chase and Reveal book is the single best thing I've ever seen on the world of the public manager; it was recommended to me first by Mike Dukakis, the long-time governor of Massachusetts and 1988 Democratic nominee for President.

Finally, U.S. federal bureaucracy involves the general problems of public management in the United States, and the normal difficulties of organization, but within the unique political context of American national government. Is government bureaucracy in the United States incapable of or uninterested in serving the public? Or are failures, when they occur, more likely due to flawed policies created by legislatures, political executives, and courts, or simply because some problems are very hard to solve, even with the best of wills and ways? This course aims to help you form a thoughtful and analytical appreciation of both how public bureaucracies affect American society and what that implies for evaluation of the American political system. The key text for this subject is James Q. Wilson's *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It*. Wilson's book is, to my mind, the single best book about how American government works and why. By focusing on what agencies do he has a way of telling us how all the other aspects of political science courses – the presidency, Congress, courts, interest groups – matter for government performance.

Examinations, Reports, and Grades

This course is a cooperative endeavor. For my part, I will strive to provide guidance, direction, and thoughtful evaluation. For your part, you should strive to be an active, contributing participant in the joint venture. **YOU MUST COMPLETE ALL ASSIGNMENTS TO RECEIVE A GRADE FOR THIS COURSE.**

In accord with university policy, requirements for graduate students are somewhat greater than those for undergraduates. All students are expected to attend and participate in class discussion. Understanding of class material will be tested in midterm and final examinations. Each student will also be involved in a research project, as, described below. Graduate students will prepare a longer research project, and one supplemental book report.

The research project. This syllabus suggests two ways to design the research project. During the first two class sessions we will discuss the alternatives, and decide whether the whole class will follow one option, or some students will do Option A and some Option B.

Option A: A government "failure." The purpose of this project is to give each student knowledge of a case of supposed bureaucratic failure, and to share that knowledge among the class. Students will identify supposed failures by finding reports by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), which criticize agency performance. The GAO evaluates agencies throughout the government, so each student should be able to find a subject within a policy area that interests him or her. The projects will proceed in the following phases:

1) Students visit the GAO website, download at least two reports, read them, and meet with the instructor. The student and instructor will then choose a topic, and sketch out a research plan to investigate both the validity of GAO's criticism and possible explanations for the supposed failure. Students will submit a two-page summary of their project plan to the instructor on **February 16**.

2) Subsequent research is likely to include both other published sources and a small number of interviews with people familiar with the agency or program in question. The instructor reserves the right to call on students in class or ask them to come in for meetings to describe their progress.

3) **Papers will be due at the beginning of class on April 25**, and students will describe their findings to the class during that week's class sessions.

Undergraduates' research reports should be at least ten pages (2500 words) long. Graduate student reports should be at least 18 pages (4500 words). The different expectations for undergraduate and graduate students will be incorporated into the research plans.

Option B: Decision-making at Case Western Reserve University. The alternative research project would be in some ways more difficult, would best be done as a team project, perhaps be more risky (you may not find out much), but might be of more immediate interest. Instead of studying a supposed government failure, teams of students could study some decisions within the rather large bureaucracy known as Case Western Reserve University.

Such a project would require, first, definition of a decision. To take one example, in this class there will be a unit on gender discrimination within the university, with one instance being subtle (or not so subtle biases) on the part of students against female instructors. The research question would then be something like: why is such a unit appearing in this class? At one level this question would be too easy: you would ask me why I included it. But as a university decision it involves a series of other levels:

- a) The instructor level: Why did Professor White put this in his syllabus?
- b) The department level: Why Professor White, as opposed to any other political science professor? Or is it happening in other political science classes?

c) Across departments: Why political science, rather than in other departments? If it is happening in other departments, which departments, why, and how often? How do those other departments determine in which courses this instruction will occur?

d) The operational level: Who determined the details of this gender discrimination unit? How were they put in touch with departments? How did they decide what to include?

e) The university level: How was this effort coordinated across the university? Who thought of it? Why are they doing it? What does who expect to accomplish? How is it being funded?

As you will see when we read Simon, one can consider decisions in terms of a division of labor, in which authority to decide about both values and facts are distributed throughout an organization. A report would explain, for example, which values are accepted by, say, professors from department chairs or department chairs from higher authorities, and what factual decisions are left by those higher up the chain to those below.

The first challenge for this research project idea is to find topics that (a) might be of interest but (b) are not so sensitive that it will be impossible or inappropriate or somewhat dangerous to gather data. A preliminary list of topics that might qualify includes:

- * Why do the course evaluation forms include the questions they do?
- * What is in a SAGES first seminar?
- * Why did they tear down the Baker building? And why did it take so long?
- * Why does the Information Technology department invest in the things it does?
- * Why are passwords being changed, and if it's so important, why didn't it happen before?
- * Which offices will move downtown to the Halle building?

Because the number of such projects must be limited and they would require some interviewing, studies of university decisions would be done by teams of two or three students. The deadlines for project approval and for delivery would be the same as for Option A. Teams would have to submit research plans and have them approved by the instructor by **February 16**. Papers would be due at the beginning of class on **April 25**. As a team project, however, Option B will also require some sort of evaluation by team members of their teammates' performance.

Graduate Student Book Review: In addition, each graduate student will be required to read one extra book, chosen from among classics in the field in consultation with the instructor, and write a 6-page paper summarizing the arguments of that book and how those arguments fit with other course material. Graduate students may be asked to report on the book to the rest of the class, if time allows.

For undergraduates, the midterm will count for 20%, final exam for 30%, cumulative performance on the research project for 40%, and class participation for 10% of the grade for the course. For graduate students, the midterm will count for 15%,

final exam for 30%, cumulative performance on the research project for 40%, book report for 10%, and class participation for 5% of the grade for the course.

Class Schedule and Readings

Course readings will include three assigned books:

Gordon Chase and Elizabeth C. Reveal, *How to Manage in the Public Sector* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1983).

Herbert A. Simon, *Administrative Behavior*, 4th Ed. (New York: Free Press, 1997).

James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).

The books will be available for purchase from the university bookstore. In addition, a selection of further articles and book chapters will be on both physical and e-reserve at Kelvin Smith Library.

Because this course will involve some discussion, I strongly urge you to bring copies of each day's assigned reading to that class.

Part One: Behavior Within Organizations

Week One: Introduction to the class and each other. Theme: How do organizations matter?

Jan 17: No reading, naturally.

Jan 19: No Class: Professor White has to attend a conference to present a paper.

Yet you should **read Wilson, Chapters 1 and 2, Pages 3-28**. This gives a sense both of why organizations matter, and how conventional wisdom about organizations can be misleading.

Weeks Two and Three: Decision-Making in and by Organizations

Jan 24: *Simon, Introduction, Preface, Chapters 1 and 2*. Pages vii – xii; 1-54.

Class will decide form of research project

Jan 26: *Simon, Chapters 3 and 4*. Pages 55-91

January 31: *Simon, Chapter 5*. Pages 92-139

February 2: *Simon, Chapter 6*. Pages 140-176.

Week Four: Authority

February 7: *Simon, Chapter 7, Pages 177-207; Ted Conover, "Guarding Sing Sing" (ms.)* 19 pages.

February 9: *Thomas Hammond, "Herding Cats in University Hierarchies."*

Note: By the End of this week, students should have met with or scheduled meetings with the Instructor to discuss their projects.

Weeks Five and Six: Informal Organization and Organizational Culture

February 14: *Michel Crozier, "The Case of the Clerical Agency," Chapters 1 and 2 of The Bureaucratic Phenomenon. Pages 12-55.* Begin class sessions on gender in organizations, with Dorothy Miller Ph.D.

February 16: *Simon, Chapter 8, Pages 208-249.* Continue class sessions on gender in organizations.

Students Should Submit Research Project Proposals On This Date.

February 21: *Simon, Chapter 10, Pages 278-304.* Final class session on gender in organizations.

February 23: *Simon, Chapter 11, Pages 305-355.*

Week Seven: Efficiency, and Midterm

February 28: *Simon, Chapter 9, Pages 250-277.*

March 2: Midterm Exam.

Weeks Eight and Nine: Public Management

March 7: *Frederick C. Mosher, "The Issues," Chapter 1 in Democracy and the Public Service, pp. 1-23. Herbert C. Kaufman, "Emerging Conflicts in the Doctrines of Public Administration," American Political Science Review 50 (1956), pp. 1057-1073.*

March 9: *Chase and Reveal: Prologue, Chapters 1-2. Pages 1-62.*

March 13-17 Spring Break

March 21: *Chase and Reveal, Chapters 3-4. Pages 63-116.*

March 23: *Chase and Reveal, Chapters 5-6, Pages 117-179.*

Week Ten: Operators (The People Who Do the Work)

March 28: *Wilson, Chapters 3-4, Pages 31-71.*

March 30: *Wilson, Chapters 5-6, Pages 72-112.*

Week Eleven: Managers and Executives

April 4: *Wilson, Chapters 7-9, Pages 113-175*

April 6: *Wilson, Chapters 10-12, Pages 179-232*

Week Twelve: Context

April 11: *Wilson, Chapters 13-14, Pages 235-276.*

April 13: *Wilson, Chapters 15-16, Pages 277-312.*

Week Thirteen: Change

April 18: *Wilson, Chapters 17-18, Pages 315-45.*

April 20: *Wilson, Chapters 19-20, Pages 346-78.*

Week Fourteen: Research Reports

April 25: Begin class reports and discussion
Written reports due at the beginning of class.

April 27: Continue reports and discussion.

FINAL EXAM: May 10, 1:00 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.