

Bureaucratic Politics in the U.S.
Sages Departmental Seminar
POSC 385/485
Spring Term, 2008
Tuesday/Thursday 10:15 – 11:30 a.m.
Wickenden 301 (?)

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This course will fulfill the requirement that political science majors participate in a SAGES departmental seminar. Therefore course enrollment is capped at 17 students. Political science majors with junior standing will have priority in registration for this course; however, it will also be open to other students, including graduate students.

The department of political science views departmental seminars as an opportunity for students to carefully investigate core issues of the field. It also intends that the departmental seminars provide an introduction to what is expected for senior capstone projects. While many of our courses require papers, departmental seminars provide an introduction to oral presentation of a student's analytic work to an audience of colleagues.

The Topic

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. For example, thanks to Hurricane Katrina, I expect all students in this class will have heard of FEMA.

Yet many recommendations about how to improve public and specifically federal bureaucracies are wrong, because much “common-sense” about organizations is wrong. This course therefore begins by providing 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 of a government organization.

The 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 the 1978 Nobel Prize 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 part of the course considers how government organizations function in the United States. 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.

There are many criticisms of government bureaucracies, and they are based on substantial experience. 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? The key text for this subject is James Q. Wilson's *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It*. Wilson's discussion of the context within which managers try to run government organizations will be supplemented by a text that gives a classic statement of how it looks to a (very sophisticated) manager: Gordon Chase and Elizabeth C. Reveal's, *How to Manage in the Public Sector*. Students will be pleased to observe that Wilson is a more lively writer than Simon, and Chase more lively than Wilson.

Assignments

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. Discussion will focus on the reading: what it means, how it might be applied, and why you may or may not believe a particular argument or distinction. As part of this process, each student will help lead two class discussions, by bringing to class at least two *analytical* questions. For each of the class sessions with student discussion leadership, two students will be scheduled to lead.

Understanding of class material will be tested with two in-class examinations. These examinations will consist mainly of identification and explication of key concepts from the readings. Before each examination, students will be provided with a study guide that gives explicit instructions as to what it is most useful to review.

Each student will also be involved in a research project, as, described below. Students will make two oral presentations about their research projects. Undergraduates' research reports should be at least 2500 words long. Graduate student reports should be at least 4500 words. The different expectations for undergraduate and graduate students will be incorporated into the research plans.

The research project. Students can choose either of two kinds of research project. In each case students will submit a two-page summary of their project plan to the instructor **by February 12 at the beginning of class.** Students will make presentations about their topics and ask their colleagues for advice and questions about the research issues on February 21 and 26. **Papers will be due on April 29 by 3:00 p.m. Students then will make oral presentations about their findings during the three hours set aside for a final exam.**

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.

Students should 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 the student will design a research plan to investigate both the validity of GAO's criticism and possible explanations for the supposed failure. This will be the plan submitted by February 12, and described to classmates February 19-26. Research is likely to include both other published sources and a few interviews with people familiar with the agency or program in question.

Option B: Decision-making at Case Western Reserve University. The alternative topic would be decisions within the rather large bureaucracy known as Case Western Reserve University. Depending on the topic, this could be either an individual project or, with the instructor's approval, a team project. Team projects will be approved if the research involved seems likely to benefit from having more participants. However, only students registered in the same version of the course (that is, graduate students in 485, or undergraduate students in 385), can be teammates.

The first challenge for research on the university 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. Examples of topics that might qualify include:

- (1) Why do the course evaluation forms include the questions they do?
- (2) What is included in SAGES capstones? How do departments' implementations of that requirement differ? Why?
- (3) How do departments decide which courses are offered each term?

- (4) Why does the Information Technology department invest in the things it does?
- (5) How is the budget for a particular unit of the university determined?

Grading:

For undergraduates, assignments will add to the grade as follows:

First in-class exam: 20%
Paper prospectus and first presentation: 10%
Second in-class exam: 20%
Final paper: 30%
Final Presentation: 10%
Discussion: 10%

For graduate students, assignments will be weighted as follows:

First in-class exam: 15%
Paper prospectus and first presentation: 10%
Second in-class exam: 15%
Final paper: 40%
Paper oral presentation: 10%
Class discussion: 10%

My grading calculations are on a +/- basis. Your individual assignments may be graded with pluses or minuses or even as a borderline (e.g. "A-/B+"). The final grade, as required by college rules, will be reported as an "A" or "B" or whatever. But my calculations will include much more variation.

Students are expected to attend class. Any student who misses more than four class sessions, without a documented and approved excuse, will have their discussion grade reduced by one whole grade (e.g., B- instead of A-). A student who misses more than eight class sessions without appropriate documented and approved reasons would have their discussion score penalized by two whole grades (e.g. C instead of A). A student who misses more than twelve class sessions without appropriate documented and approved reasons will receive a ZERO for the discussion portion of the course grade.

I know that some students worry about saying something "dumb" or "wrong" in class, so tend to be quiet. There is no such thing as a dumb question. If you're confused by something, somebody else is, too. I don't imagine that everything I say is crystal clear, both because I'm not perfect and because the material can be hard. After all, much of what you will learn in this course differs from what most people believe. Participation is valuable simply to keep discussion going and move the class along, and professors tend to appreciate it for that reason – at least I do. What I look for in discussion is that students are engaging the material and wrestling with it. A portion of the discussion grade will be based on how you contribute to the discussions for which you are assigned the responsibility of presenting questions.

Finding the Readings

Two assigned books for this course may be purchased at the university bookstore, or elsewhere:

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 third assigned book is Gordon Chase and Elizabeth C. Reveal, *How to Manage in the Public Sector* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1983). Unfortunately, this book is out of print. I therefore have posted it on the library's e-reserves, in three sections. The first section contains the Preface through Chapter 2. The second posting is Chapters 3 and 4. The third posting is Chapters 5 and 6.

There are two other assigned readings, an article by Ted Conover and one by Tom Hammond. Each is posted on the library's e-reserves. I have also posted a few other classic readings there, just in case anyone is interested...

Because this is a seminar course, I strongly urge you to bring copies of each day's assigned reading to that class.

SCHEDULE of CLASS MEETINGS and ASSIGNMENTS

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

January 15: Organizational meeting

January 17: 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.

PART 1: ORGANIZATIONS

Decision-Making in and by Organizations

January 22: Simon, *Introduction, Preface, Chapters 1 and 2.* Pages vii – xii; 1-54.

January 25: Simon, *Chapters 3 and 4.* Pages 55-91

During this class session, we will construct the schedule of dates for which students will initiate class discussion.

January 29: Simon, *Chapter 5.* Pages 92-139

January 31: *No Class: Instructor must attend a conference*

By the end of January, students should have either met or scheduled meetings with the instructor to discuss possible research topics.

February 5: *Simon, Chapter 6*. Pages 140-176.

Attributes of Organizational Structure

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

February 12: *Thomas Hammond, "Herding Cats in University Hierarchies."*

PROSPECTUSES DUE TO INSTRUCTOR TODAY. They should be in both hardcopy and electronic forms. I will put together a file of all the prospectuses and send that to all members of the class, so you can see what each other are planning, and be better prepared for the next week's discussions.

February 14: *Simon, Chapter 8*, Pages 208-249.

February 19: *Simon, Chapter 10*, Pages 278-304

February 21: Begin presentations about research topics:

Each student will take between five and ten minutes to summarize (a) the problem he or she is investigating, (b) what seem to be the key questions to answer and (c) how she or he intends to discover answers. Other students will then pose questions and provide other forms of feedback..

February 26: Continue presentations about research topics

February 28: *Simon, Chapter 11*, Pages 305-355.

March 4: *Simon, Chapter 9*, Pages 250-277.

March 6: First in-class Exam

SPRING BREAK, MARCH 10-14

PART II: Government Bureaucracies

Operators (The People Who Do the Work)

March 18: *Wilson, Chapters 3-4*, Pages 31-71.

March 20: *Wilson, Chapters 5-6, Pages 72-112.*

Managers and Executives

March 25: *Wilson, Chapters 7-9, Pages 113-175*

March 27: *Wilson, Chapters 10-12, Pages 179-232*

Political Context

April 1: *Chase and Reveal, Prologue and Chapters 1-2, Pages 1-62*
Wilson, Chapter 14, Pages 257-276

April 3: *Chase and Reveal, Chapters 3 and 4, Pages 63-115*

April 8: *Wilson, Chapters 13 and 15, Pages 235-256, 277-293*
Chase and Reveal, Chapter 6, Pages 145-175.

April 10: *Wilson, Chapter 16, Pages 295-312*
Chase and Reveal, Chapter 5, Pages 117-144

Reform

April 15: *Wilson, Chapters 17-18, Pages 315-45.*

April 17: *Wilson, Chapters 19-20, Pages 346-78.*

April 22: Catch-up discussion

April 24: Second in-class exam

Course Research Paper Due to Instructor by 3 p.m. on Monday, April 29, both in electronic form and as hard copy.

PRESENTATIONS INSTEAD OF THE FINAL EXAM
Tuesday, May 7, 12:30 – 3:30 p.m.

During the three hours set aside for the final exam, we will hold the equivalent of an academic meeting. Each student or group of students will have at least ten minutes to present the results of their study. Actual time allowed will depend on the number of presentations. Other students will be given short forms on which to record their reactions to the presentations. These forms will be anonymous, and each student will be given copies of the comments on her own talk. The instructor will also prepare a commentary as part of the grading process. Grades for the presentations will be based on the extent to

which the student manages to explain the questions, research, and conclusions clearly within the limited time available.

If possible, these presentations will be videotaped (or whatever recording to a DVD is called), and copies of the recordings of their presentations will be provided to each student at a later date. I will also be glad to meet with each student subsequently to discuss their talk, but having that conversation will not be a required part of this course.