Purpose of the Course and Expectations

The term “decision process” emphasizes that social, environmental, economic and other outcomes are the result of decisions made—and decisions not made—by the people in those processes, as opposed to explanations based on variables that abstract from or ignore context, motivations, perceptions, and cognitive limitations of those involved in making choices.

The course has two basic goals. First, to introduce you to conceptual tools which may be useful in thinking more effectively and responsibly about any problem of decision; and second, to develop and
practice skills using the tools to analyze the various dimensions of a decision process for the purpose of making recommendations about how to realize a set of preferred outcomes in practical settings. To meet these goals, the course focuses on three primary activities: (1) core readings and discussion on decision process and the policy sciences; (2) periodic individual and shared assignments; and (3) a semester-long term project on a topic of your choosing.

This course is designed to teach a systematic framework for analyzing processes of decision making. The framework for analysis of decisions was first proposed in 1956 and provides the basis for much of contemporary academic policy inquiry. From the perspective of the policy scientist, the larger challenge is explore alternative courses of action within particular decision processes in order to increase the chances that decision making outcomes will serve human dignity and common interests.

Decision processes are typically highly complex, variable, and uncertain. Complexity results in part from the characteristics of issues in areas such as environment, development, security, health, economics, and so on and on, but also because of the vast number of participants involved in decision making with differing perspectives about and stakes in particular outcomes. Participants have a multiplicity of conflicting understandings of “the problem at hand,” have conflicting interests, and consequently different time horizons and criteria by which alternative courses of action might be evaluated. For instance, in the United States because millions of participants are involved in any significant national decision, and a vast array of factors might affect outcomes, policymakers and analysts necessarily operate on the basis of simplified representations or maps of the policy process, whether they do so consciously or not. This course adopts the perspective, to use the words of John Dewey, that some ways of thinking are better than others. That is, that some ways of thinking are more apt to lead more reliably to choices resulting in desired outcomes.

What you will get out of this class is proportional to what you put into the class.

In order to get the most out of this course, you will need to complete all of the readings, come to class prepared, participate, and complete all of the assignments. I encourage you to use the office hours as an opportunity to discuss in more detail certain aspects of the course, share ideas on your project, and to provide feedback on the course and the readings. The remainder of this syllabus details some of the important aspects of this course.

**What is a Decision Process?**

To better understand decision processes in their broader social context, the policy sciences propose a functional analysis of decision and social processes. The decision process is a conceptual model for mapping policy processes. The decision process can be used to help answer the following questions in any policy area:

How is the information that comes to the attention of decision makers gathered and processed?
How are recommendations made and promoted?

How are general rules prescribed?

How are general rules provisionally invoked in reference to conduct?

How are general rules applied?

How is the working of prescriptions appraised?

How are the prescriptions and arrangements entered into within the framework of such rules brought to termination?

The seven questions are reflected in the decision process model outlined below (and taken from Lasswell 1956). The decision process focuses on a decision (or policy), which it calls a prescription. In addition, there are five other phases of the decision process: intelligence, promotion, prescription, invocation/application, appraisal, and termination. Understanding and applying this framework is the focus of this course. (Note that the decision process is one part of a broader framework of the policy sciences)

Decision process

The intelligence phase of the decision process includes the gathering, processing, and dissemination of information for decision making.

The promotional phase involves changes in support from various groups for competing policy alternatives.

The prescription phase involves a consensus on rules to be enforced. In other words, a prescription is a decision or a policy. A prescription is explicit about Goals to be achieved through the policy, Rules intended to achieve those goals, and Circumstances in which the rules apply.

The invocation and application phase involves the initial and final characterization of a particular case in terms of the prescription (policy) -- In other words, policy implementation.

The appraisal phase characterizes the flow of decisions with respect to goals stated in the prescription. Appraisal asks "How have we done?"

The termination phase involves the cancellation of a prescription.
A decision process is a component of a broader *social process*.

Although there is a logical sequence to these activities, in the real world they typically do not occur sequentially. Any of these activities can occur at any time in the temporal sequence of a policy debate. For the analyst, the decision process categories serve as guides for thinking about and understanding the actions of different actors in the policy process, for assessing what has been left out, and for identifying possible actions on behalf of the preferred policy alternatives. For any particular policy problem, the categories can be used to work back and forth between the decision process as a whole and the vast array of potentially critical details in any particular component. Systematic use of the decision process model will produce more reliable estimates of when, where, and how to intervene effectively, especially under real-world time and resource constraints. Failure to consciously analyze the policy process will frequently frustrate even well-intentioned efforts to promote good policy alternatives.

**Requirements of the Course**

**Weekly One Pagers**

Every week you are expected to turn in a one-page essay. The essay will be in the form of a “Last Minute Quiz,” due by 5PM every Wednesday to be submitted via the course email list-serv:

[envs5730@sciencepolicy.colorado.edu](mailto:envs5730@sciencepolicy.colorado.edu)

You should address the following two items in your submission:

1. The most important thing I learned from the class discussion and/or readings was . . .
2. The thing I still don’t understand is . . .

You are of course free to discuss any topic related to the class beyond these two questions as well.

The purpose of this exercise is to allow you an opportunity to discuss aspects of the readings, integrate other material with the week’s focus, or to raise questions about what was unclear or unanswered by the readings. A secondary purpose is to ensure that you have an opportunity to provide me with feedback on the readings and your progress/satisfaction in the course.

**Group assignments**

There will be two types of group assignments (a) Guide to the Readings and (b) Group Case Study exercise.

For the “Guide to the Readings” I’d like you to work in small groups (to be determined during the first class meeting based on class size) to prepare for your classmates a guide to the week’s required
readings. Ideally this will be a document that provides a short synopsis of the readings, discusses main themes, and, if desired, introduces other, relevant literature not required for the week. At the end of the term, based on the 13 weeks worth of guides, each of you will have a concise set of summaries of the entire semester’s readings.

For the “Group Case Study exercise” I will ask you to work in small groups to prepare a discussion, exercise, game, role play, etc. during weeks 6-12 to illustrate the dynamics of that particular phase of the decision process in the context of the shared group project. Details on groups and the shared group project will be discussed during the first class meeting.

**Individual Term Projects**

You will be responsible for completing a semester-long research paper on a topic of your choosing. The project will involve a paper and an oral presentation at the end of the semester. The project will involve at least one short assignment due during the semester that will comprise part of your project grade. The term project is described in detail in a separate hand out. Late papers will not be accepted.

**Grading**

Your grade will be determined as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weekly one pagers</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>(no late submissions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Projects</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>(periodically)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual term project</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>(oral and written parts – see handout)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Tentative Schedule and Readings**

**15 January (1)**

Introductions  
Overview of the Course  
Discussion of the Shared Case Study  
Discussion of the Individual Term Projects

**22 January (2)**

Why Policy Research?


H. Simon, Reason in Human Affairs, 10-29, 67-97.


For further reading:


JANUARY 29 DROP DEADLINE

29 January (3) The Big Picture – Social and Decision Process Mapping


For further reading:


5 February (4) Discussion on the policy sciences


For further reading:


12 February (5) Introduction to the study of the policy process


L. Scaff and H. Ingram, The Influence of Theory on What We See, Politics and Research Methods (date).

For further reading:


19 February (6) Decisions - Prescription


D. Stone, Policy Paradox (1997), ch. 12 "Rules" and ch. 11 “Incentives”.


For further reading:


26 February (7) Decision Processes


5 March (8) Appraisal


12 March (9) Intelligence


9

R. Betts, Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures are Inevitable, *World Politics*61-89.

**19 March (10) Promotion**


For further reading:


26 March  
Spring Break

2 April (11)  
Invocation and Application


9 April (12)  
Termination


For further reading:


**16 April (13) Normative Considerations: Common Interests**

Madison, J. 1788. *Federalist 10*.


For further reading:


**23 April (14) Normative Considerations: Self-Orientation**


For further reading:


30 April (15) FINAL PRESENTATIONS – Papers Due!!