

The Political Economy of U.S. Food Policy

University of Rochester, PSC 235 Spring

2021

Tue/Thurs, 9:40 am - 10:55 am, Harkness 115

Instructor: Dan Alexander (he/him/his)
Contact: dan.alexander@rochester.edu
Office hours: Mon/Tue, 12:30 pm - 1:30 pm,
& by appointment via Calendly

Course Information

Description This course seeks to answer a variety of questions about U.S. food policy and how it gets made. Who are the actors who push for change in food policy, in which institutions do they operate, and with what sorts of political pressures must they contend? What is the economic rationale underlying food policies, and what are the economic implications? Who do food policies serve? We will examine some prominent inequalities in the food system and study how reforms to food policy in the United States make their way through the democratic process. We will ask how these reforms constitute efforts to democratize our food system and foodways, and we will observe how these democratizing reforms confront the same normative challenges that democracy itself faces. Through a variety of readings, podcasts, films, as well as visits from guest speakers, students will learn about the role that activists, civil servants, lawmakers, corporations, and local organizations interact with legislative and regulatory processes, shape the preferences of citizens and lawmakers, and implement food policy on the ground in ways that seek to reform our foodways. Throughout, we will engage with the concepts of access, centralization, externalities, information, and representativeness.

Assignments and Expectations All students are expected to come to class having read the assigned material and should be prepared to ask questions and engage in discussions that draw upon the readings. Content presented in class will not directly mirror any of the assigned readings, striving instead to offer complementary background and concepts from social science so attendance will be crucial for students' success in the course. Participation and attendance will not be graded, but I reserve the right to revise this policy if it becomes necessary. Students will produce four-five structured write-ups (3 pages in length) and two shorter responses to visits from speakers (1 page in length) as well as complete a mid-term and final exam. The

weighting given to the assignments in calculating grades is provided below, followed by descriptions of those assignments and additional information for those students taking the course for writing-intensive credit.

4 structured write-ups (each worth 15%)

2 one-page speaker responses (each worth 5%)

2 exams (each worth 15%)

Structured write-ups At five points throughout the semester, students may complete a short paper, the top four grades of which will be used to calculate grades.¹ The topics will be, in order, analyzing 1) an (in)equality in the food system, 2) a piece of legislation relevant to food policy, 3) a regulation/rule pertaining to some aspect of the food system, 4) a local (not necessarily Rochesterbased, rather at the local level somewhere) initiative aimed at democratizing the food system, and 5) the perspective of a relevant interest group on a current (TBA) food-policy debate. All of the papers will be heavily structured, in the sense that students will write a paragraph or two in response to several questions that I supply to help guide the analysis. I will post the questions for each assignment at least two weeks in advance of the due date.

Speaker responses After two in-class speakers, students will write a one-page response (reflection) that highlights the ways in which each speaker hit upon themes of the class. What challenges and opportunities does food policy create for them? Do they work to change food policy in any ways? Which political considerations did they mention? These should not be summaries of the conversations, but rather short, incisive analyses in light of the concepts covered in our course, emphasizing politics!

Exams and Terms to Takeaway (TTT) The exams will be mostly short-answer, with one or two short essay (i.e., a few paragraphs) questions. They will cover the readings as well as the key concepts covered in class, often asking students to synthesize the two. To make the important ideas from the course more salient, I will highlight them as terms to takeaway TTTs I recommend reviewing the TTTs in advance of exams as well as keeping up with the reading. The mid-term is scheduled for Wednesday, March 18, 2020; the final is scheduled

¹ The lowest grade of the five will be dropped, so you can skip one or improve a score you were unsatisfied with.

for Wednesday, May 6, 2020, the last class meeting of the semester. Both will be taken via Blackboard (more

accommodations. You can reach the Office of Disability Resources at: disability@rochester.edu; (585) 276-5075; Taylor Hall.

The Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning has a number of resources to improve study habits, including one-on-one study skills consultations, study skills course (CAS 142), quiet study space with peer support (Study Zone), and, for specific courses, one-on-one tutoring, drop-in group tutoring, and weekly study groups.

Student success at the University of Rochester includes more than just academic performance. Please feel comfortable speaking with me about challenges you are experiencing to improve study habits,

Course Schedule

Readings for each day (not necessarily *reading* in the strictest sense). Anything without a link is available on Blackboard, found by the Short Title used below

1 Inequalities in the Food System

Readings for February 2, 2021: One Meat Plant One Thousand Infections podcast from *The New York Times* s The Daily (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/04/podcasts/the-daily/meatprocessing-coronavirus.html>)

Readings for February 4, 2021: The Land of Our Fathers parts and episode of *1619* podcast: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/23/podcasts/1619-podcast.html> Ethics over Exploitation chapter from *Feeding the World Well*)

Readings for February 9, 2021: Normative Foundations chapter from *Political Economy for Public Policy*

Readings for March 2, 2021: FFA Chapter 5; *The Poison Squad* (documentary, found here: <https://login.ezp.lib.rochester.edu/login?qurl=https%3a%2f%2ffod.infobase.com%2fPortalPlaylists.aspx%3fwID%3d152714%26xtid%3d206157>)

3 Executing Food Policy (Regulating the Food System)

Readings for March 4, 2021:

Readings for April 29, 2021:

Anti-Intellectualism and Natural Food (*Gastronomica* article)

7 Concluding Food Matters

Essay #5 (interest group analysis) due on 5/4, via Blackboard, by 5 p.m.

Readings for May 4, 2021: FP Conclusion and Afterword (Park Slope Food Co-op *TNY* article); bring in review questions!!!

FINAL EXAM (Blackboard) on May 6, 2021 Writing Intensive Final Drafts due on May 10, 2021 via Blackboard by 5 p.m.