

Discussion Questions for 17.317, U.S. Social Policy

Part III: The Policymaking-Process

- This portion of the course examines how issues come on the political agenda and how several of the main policymaking institutions – Congress and the Courts in particular – function.

Policy-Relevant Institutions: Congress I

- Let's say there is a need to reform Social Security. The trust fund in crisis. Need immediate action – you're a congressman who's read Doug Arnold's book – what do you do? What will get constituents most riled up?
 - Increase retirement age
 - Decrease benefits
 - Change number of years of working life on which benefits are calculated
 - Increase wage ceiling for taxation
- Let's say there's a bill that would reduce the deficit and help the environment by imposing a BTU tax on energy consumption.
 - Should I vote for it?
 - What are the issues here?
 - How could a coalition leader make the bill more palatable?
- Concepts from Arnold to know:
 - attentive vs. inattentive public
 - early order vs. late order effects; costs and benefits
 - probability constituents will notice depends on magnitude, timing, proximity to others similar affected; instigator
 - Strategy: wait to cast vote on a bill, esp if freshman. Vote no, because when it passes, both people who wanted it will be happy (got what they wanted) and those who didn't wait it will be happy b/c at least you tried. Any problem with this strategy? (challenger bring it up)
- If lawmakers such good calculators, then why was the 1988 Medicare Catastrophic bill passed?
 - Increase in Medicare: cap out of pocket expenses (late order benefit)
 - Financed by new premiums on seniors, surcharge on high income seniors (early order cost)
 - What does the Medicare Modernization Act of 2003 say about what they learned?
 - Don't do financing on backs of seniors
 - Benefits right away
- Implication of much of Arnold: lawmakers should be "delegates" rather than "trustees". But what are strategies Arnold mentions that allow lawmakers to achieve the public good rather than particularized goods?
- What kinds of reforms are implied by Arnold? Eliminate roll call votes? Sunshine laws of early 1970s – pernicious consequences. We still see many difficult issues being resolved with secret negotiation like 1983 Social Security Amendments
- Issue of quality of information voters receive
 - How much of Arnold rests on voters receiving quality info (not distorted by negative campaigning, intentional fuzzing of differences btwn parties, etc)?

- Or is Arnold's whole point that info can be manipulated – reduce traceability, alter perceptions of costs, etc?
- Arnold and inequality:
 - Who gets info? Who is in info networks that disseminate info on magnitude, proximity? Who gets mobilized?