

# **Balancing Universal and Local Knowledge in Teaching the Comparative Policy Process: An Actor-Centered Approach**

**Kent Weaver**

**Georgetown University**

- I. Some starting propositions**
- II. What we need to teach our students**
- III. Some specific suggestions for the classroom**

# **Some starting propositions**

**1. The most compelling “universals” about the policymaking process suggest conditionality and uncertainty rather than homogeneous impacts. For example:**

- Policymakers have multiple objectives rather than maximizing a single objective**
- Institutions affect both:**
  - political behavior of actors**
  - who has power and who doesn't**
- “Local knowledge” affects how political actors behave**

## **2. Reducing student's understanding of the policymaking process to the crudest theoretical common denominator, rent-seeking:**

- is an inadequate basis for understanding how policy is made across societies**
- engenders a dangerous and (at least partially) misplaced cynicism on the part of our students**

### **3. We do our students a disservice if we only teach them technical skills because:**

- Most of our students will not spend their entire careers as technical analysts**
- The policy world is almost always the world of the politically-influenced second- or third best**
- Even the best policy ideas need to be sold in the marketplace of ideas**

**4. Students will regress to the safe “comfort zone” of the technical and the context-free unless we push them, which:**

- leads to student projects that have no connection to the real world**
- is poor preparation for their future careers**

**What we need to teach our  
students**



# **1. How to understanding the impact on policy choices and outcoomes of:**

- Macro-societal influences like:**
  - Political culture and policy paradigms**
  - Globalization**
  - How interest groups are organized and constrained**
- Institutional influences**
- Feedbacks from past policy choices**

## **2. Key political skills and how they are used by real actors in real political systems, including**

- Problem definition and issue framing**
- Agenda-setting and agenda control**
- Policy formulation**
- How interests are mobilized and constrained**
- Managing interest coalitions**
- Venue-shopping and venue control**
- Overcoming implementation obstacles**

**...in addition to technical skills**

**In short...**

**3. How to ask the right questions to figure out:**

- How various political actors navigate in that political environment**
- What policy options are politically feasible**
- What policy options are implementable**

**regardless of the political system they are working in**

**4. Through “hands on” learning  
whenever possible**

**Some specific suggestions  
for the classroom...**

# **1. Understand the policymaking process in four “slices”:**

- Causes of and Constraints on Policymaking**
- Stages of the Policymaking Process**
- Policymaking Tasks and Strategic Skills**
- Putting the Analytical Building Blocks Together to Understand Cases and Countries**

**WEEK-BY-WEEK COURSE OUTLINE IN FOUR PERSPECTIVES OR “SLICES”**

<b>Week</b>	<b>Slice 1: Causes of and Constraints on Policymaking</b>	<b>Slice 2: Stages of the Policymaking Process</b>	<b>Slice 3: Policymaking Tasks and Strategic Skills</b>	<b>Slice 4: Understanding Countries and Cases</b>
1	Economic Development	Intro to Stages Problem Definition	Intro to Tasks and Skills Issue Framing	Background on India India OBC Case
2	Identities, Ideologies and Ideas	Agenda Setting	Setting Objectives Agenda-Setting and Control	Background on Sweden Economic Liberalization in Sweden Case
3	Interest Organization	Policy Formulation	Formulating Policy Alternatives Mobilizing and Controlling Interests Building and Maintaining Interest Coalitions	Background on Mexico Mexico Trade Unions Case
4	Development Trajectories, State Strength, Policy Inheritances and Path Dependence			Background on Nigeria: Economic Development in Nigeria and India
5	Globalization		Influencing Policymakers Venue-Shopping and Control	Background on Canada Canadian Forestry Case
6	Political Institutions: Coalitions in Parliamentary systems	Policy Adoption	All skills	Coalition formation in Sweden in India
7	Political Institutions: Presidential systems	Policy Adoption	All skills	Divided government in Mexico and Minority government in Canada
8	Political Institutions: Authoritarian regimes	Policy Adoption	All skills	Military government in Nigeria
9	Political Institutions: Multi-level governance	Policy Adoption	All skills	Sharia law in Nigeria
10	Political Institutions: Courts	Policy Adoption	All skills	Health waiting lists in Canada and air pollution in India
11	All causes	All stages	All skills	Econ devt. in India & Africa
12	All causes	All stages	All skills	Pensions in Mexico and Sweden
13	All causes	All stages	All skills	Climate change policy
14	STUDENT PRESENTATIONS			

**2. Focus on developing greater expertise on a small (3-6) number of diverse countries rather than “a country a week”**



### **3. Create group projects that focus on political skills as well as technical ones, e.g.**

#### **Group projects on:**

- **a strategy for the Swedish government for a second Euro referendum**
- **a politically feasible climate control strategy for India**
- **a strategy for reducing health care wait times in Canada that will win the approval of the provinces and the courts....**

**....with**

- **options and recommendations discussion in the introduction and**
- **the political analysis in the body of the report, e.g.,**
  - **How to reframe the issue**
  - **How to control the venues in which policy is considered**
  - **How to mobilize interest coalitions**

**From the perspective of the project's  
“client”**

## **4. Create memo-writing assignments that focus on political skills as well as technical ones, e.g.**

### **Memo assignments on:**

- **Developing priorities for Mexican environmental NGOs**
- **Lessons from India's experience with affirmative action  
“reservations” for African countries**

## **5. Use “quasi-cases” that draw on area studies journals and in-country media instead of KSG cases to:**

- **Add greater political context than KSG cases provide**
- **Present several points of view**
- **Get away from the “decisionmaker as hero” approach**
- **Cover issues that are very current**
- **Make students assess what information is relevant and what is not**

# Some examples of “quasi-cases”:

## **CASE MATERIAL ON COURTS AND CANADIAN HEALTH CARE:**

- Christopher P. Manfredi and Antonia Maioni, “Courts and Health Policy: Judicial Policymaking and Publicly Funded Health Care in Canada,” *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*, vol. 27, no. 2 (April 2002) pp. 213-239.
- Antonia Maioni and Christopher Manfredi, “When the Charter Trumps Health Care—A Collision of Canadian Icons,” *Policy Options*, September 2005, pp. 52-56.

## **CASE MATERIAL ON COURTS AND DELHI AIR POLLUTION:**

- Dinesh C. Sharma et al, “By Order of the Court: Environmental Cleanup in India,” *Environmental Health Perspectives*, vol. 113, no. 6 (June 2005), pp. 305-307
- Michael Jackson and Armin Rosencranz, “The Delhi Pollution Case: Can the Supreme Court Manage the Environment?,” *Environmental Policy and Law*, vol. 33, no. 2 (2003) pp. 88-91

# Some examples of “quasi-cases”:

## CASE MATERIAL ON DIVIDED GOVERNMENT IN MEXICO:

- Manuel Pastor and Carol Wise, "The Lost Sexenio : Vicente Fox and the New Politics of Economic Reform in Mexico," *Latin American Politics & Society*, Vol. 47, No. 4, Winter 2005, pp. 135-160
- Chappell Lawson "How Did We Get Here? Mexican Democracy after the 2006 Elections," *PS: Political Science & Politics*, Volume 40, Issue 01, January 2007, pp 45-48
- Sam Enriquez, "Calderon makes early gains on his tall agenda," *Los Angeles Times*, Sep 1, 2007
- Hector Tobar, "Political compromise makes it a win-win day in Mexico," *Los Angeles Times*, September 15, 2007

# Some examples of “quasi-cases”:

## CASE MATERIAL ON ISSUE-FRAMING ON CASTE RESERVATION IN INDIA:

- Evan Osborne, “Culture, Government and Development: Reservations in India,” *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, vol. 49, no. 3 (2001) pp. 659-685.
- Somini Sengupta, “Quotas to Aid India’s Poor Spark Push for Meritocracy,” *New York Times*, May 21, 2006.
- Subhash Gatade, “Phenomenon of False Certificates,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 22, 2005, pp. 4587-4588.
- Jayati Ghosh, “The Case for Caste-based Quotas in Higher Education,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 17, 2006, pp. 2428-2432.

## **6. Use simulations that mimic real life situations, e.g.,**

- **When should opposition parties bring down a minority government? (Canada)**
- **Developing a common program and negotiating distribution of cabinet seats for a coalition government (India and Sweden)**
- **Log-rolling to get legislation through in a newly-divided government (Mexico)**



## **7. Use some country-generated primary materials when available**

- **Local newspaper and newsmagazine accounts**
- **Clips from local news shows**
- **English-language websites of government agencies and NGOs**

# 8. Use “Movie Nights” to add depth and texture to students’ understanding

