

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 details leading up to the exams). You will have a set amount of time but a full day to start it.

Writing intensive More information on this to come, but if you are taking the course as writing intensive, you will be expected to produce a paper of about 10 pages in length in addition to the other course requirements. I recommend that the paper be a more in-depth exploration of your first essay assignment, though I am open to other proposals for your paper. A draft will be due midway through the course. I will provide significant feedback on this draft, and a revised version is due on May 10.

Materials One goal of the class is to develop “food-news literacy.” In order to do so and to stay up-to-date on news about food politics, please subscribe to the emails from www.foodpolitics.com and Politico’s Morning Agriculture. We will discuss items that appear in these newsletters throughout the semester. *Civil Eats* is wonderful – usually charges, but also has a good social media presence.

We will draw from two required books – listed below, preceded by the abbreviation with which they are referred to throughout the rest of syllabus – as well as from a number of articles in academic journals and the popular press. The articles will be posted on blackboard. The books are available for purchase from the bookstore (or from other book sellers), but because of COVID, I don’t think there will be any reserve copies at the library. THE REQUIRED BOOKS ARE:

FFA: Poppendieck, Janet. 2010. *Free for All: Fixing School Food in America*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

FP: Nestle, Marion. 2013. *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 10th anniv edition.

Assistance and Resources to Promote Student Success Please feel free to reach out to me at any point during the course with any concerns or information that you would like me to know to support your success this semester.

The University of Rochester respects and welcomes students of all backgrounds and abilities. In the event you encounter any barrier(s) to full participation in this course due to the impact of a disability please contact the Office of Disability Resources. The access coordinators in the Office of Disability Resources can meet with you to discuss the barriers you are experiencing and explain the eligibility process for establishing academic

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 within and outside of the classroom so that I may submit a CARE Referral on your behalf. A CARE Referral is submitted when the level of concern for a student necessitates inclusive, multi-layered support from the campus community. The CARE network administrator shares information only with staff who need to know it in order to help you. I *care* about your success and am committed to my role in helping you get connected to appropriate campus resources.

Attendance and COVID-related matters

It may seem as though things are returning to “normal,” but that is not the case. Many of you have encountered enormous difficulties this year. As the pandemic rages on, it is especially likely that some of you will have to confront significant challenges throughout this semester. I fully understand and expect that a) not everyone will be on-campus, b) not everyone will be able to participate remotely but synchronously, c) unforeseen circumstances will arise. While our classroom is big enough for the full class to meet safely in-person every session, attendance is not mandatory either in-person or on Zoom. All classes will be available for synchronous participation via Zoom (see Blackboard for link, meeting ID, and password) and recorded. For those of you participating via Zoom, you need not have your video on, and you are *not* expected to be available to unmute or even respond via the chat. If you’d like to chime in via the chat, by all means! But it’s not expected. For those of you unable to attend in-person or via Zoom, the lectures will be posted on Blackboard (Tools → Panopto).

I hope you will all take care of yourselves, and part of this is that I implore you to reach out if there is any issue preventing you from doing your best work in the class. And, of course, we may need to make big changes midway through the course, so let’s all remain flexible and understanding.

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 1 and 2 (episode 5 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 1 from *Political Economy for Public Policy*); “Stark Disparities” (*Politico* article)

Readings for February 11, 2021: “Food Studies” (*Gastronomica* article); “Culinary Modernism” (*Gastronomica* article); “Wasted Food” (chapter from *Feeding the World Well*)

2 Legislating Food Policy

Essay #1 (on inequality) due on 2/16, via Blackboard, by 5 p.m.

Readings for February 16, 2021: FFA Intro. & Chapter 1; “New Bill” (*Civil Eats* article)

Readings for February 18, 2021: FFA Chapter 2; “Intro. Remarks” (Congressional hearing)

Readings for February 23, 2021: FFA Chapter 3; “SNAP & CARES” (*NYT* article); “Food Banks” (NPR’s *The Salt* article)

Readings for February 25, 2021: FFA Chapter 4; “M.O.’s Food Fight” (*Politico* article)

Essay #2 (legislative analysis) due on 3/2, via Blackboard, by 5 p.m.

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: FFA Chapter 6; “Regulatory Capture” (*Food Politics* blog post: <https://www.foodpolitics.com/2020/09/corporate-capture-in-action-emails-illustrate-the-meat-industrys-role-in-keeping-plants-open-despite-covid-19/>)

Readings for March 9, 2021: FFA Chapter 7; “Won’t Move” (NPR’s *The Salt* article); “Brain Drain” (*Politico* article); “Agency Restoration” (*Politico* article)

Readings for March 11, 2021: FFA Chapter 8; “Cut to the Bone” (*The New Yorker* article) Essay #3 (regulatory analysis) due on 3/16, via Blackboard, by 5 p.m.

Readings for March 16, 2021: FFA Conclusion; “Labels for the Blind” (*Food Navigator* article); bring in questions to review!!!

MIDTERM EXAM (administered via Blackboard) on March 18, 2021

4 Litigating Food Policy

Readings for March 23, 2021: “New Way of Regulating” (chapter 1 from *Up In Smoke*); “Suing USDA” (case filing <https://www.citizen.org/wp-content/uploads/Pork-Line-SpeedComplaint-10.07.19.pdf>)

Readings for March 25, 2021: FP Introduction; “Dairy Antitrust” (*WSJ* article)

5 Activism and the Food System

Readings for March 30, 2021: No class – College-wide reading day

Readings for April 1, 2021: FP Part One; *Huerta* documentary; “Penny/Pound” (*The New York Times* article)

Readings for April 6, 2021: FP Part Two; “Rochester Food Policy Council” (<https://www.healthikids.org/blog/food-for-thought-creating-rochesters-first-food-policy-council>); “Lucky Peach” (two short interviews)

Readings for April 8, 2021: Elizabeth Henderson piece on food labor; “Ugly Produce” (*The Atlantic* article); “Oldie to Goldie” (*JACR* article, just skim); “Michael Dukakis” (*The Boston Globe* article); “Rewarding No-Waste Customers” (*China Daily* article)

Guest Speaker on 4/8: Elizabeth Henderson (reflection due on 4/15)

Essay #4 (local food policy initiative) due on 4/13, via Blackboard, by 5 p.m.

Readings for April 13, 2021: FP Part Three; “OKC Dollar Stores” (*WSJ* article)

Speaker reflection (Elizabeth Henderson) due on 4/15, via Blackboard, by 5 p.m.

Readings for April 15, 2021: “Corporate Responsibility” (Milton Friedman essay); “Racist Imagery” (*Food Dive* article)

6 Interest Groups and Food Policy

Readings for April 20, 2021: FP Part Four

Readings for April 22, 2021: “Should there be a tax” (*WSJ* article); “Revolving Door” (*Food Politics*: <https://www.foodpolitics.com/2020/12/the-revolving-door-keeps-turning/>)

Guest Speaker on 4/22: Chris Hartman (reflection due on 4/29)

Readings for April 27, 2021: FP Part Five

Speaker reflection (Chris Hartman) due on 4/29, via Blackboard, by 5 p.m.

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.