

The Political Economy of U.S. Food Policy

University of Rochester, PSCI 235

Fall 2025

Tue/Thurs, 11:05 am - 12:20 pm, Goergen Hall, room 110

Instructor: Dan Alexander (he/him/his) dan.alexander@rochester.edu
Office hours: Wed: 11:00 am - 12:00 pm and by appointment (Harkness 311)

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 be graded – we will

discuss this in class. Students will produce three structured write-ups (~3 pages in length, all in the first half of the class) and an additional writing assignment (in the second half of the class, details forthcoming, but I will provide less direction about the specific content/form/analysis than I do for the first three writing assignments). The weighting given to the assignments in calculating grades is provided below. This is *only* a writing intensive course this offering.

- 3 structured write-ups (each worth 15%)
- 1 additional, less-structured writing assignment (worth 35%, divided)
- General attendance and participation (each worth 5%)
- Speaker-day attendance and participation (each worth 5%)

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 Weekly Agriculture. We will discuss items that appear in these newsletters throughout the semester.

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).

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.

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. Please utilize office hours, and let me know if you are encountering difficulties that are affecting your ability to do your best work.

Academic Honesty Information

Academic honesty means acting with truthfulness and sincerity in carrying out all aspects of our individual and collaborative work, maintaining ownership over our work and acknowledging our debt to the work of others.

Students can best meet their obligation to academic honesty by adhering to the Academic Honesty Policy in all academic matters. This includes completing their work through their own honest efforts and expecting and encouraging honesty among their peers.

The text above is an excerpt taken from <https://www.rochester.edu/college/honesty/>, where students may – and should! – also find the full policy.

Suspected violations of academic honesty will be passed along to the Board that oversees such matters. As indicated in the guidelines linked above, the punishments for violations are significant. We will include some assignment-specific clarifications in the prompt for each assignment, but if you have questions at any point about whether your conduct adheres to the guidelines, reach out to ask!

If you have questions about proper academic writing or, especially, the use of various computer assistance, I urge you to reach out to me and particularly the campus writing center.

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 August 28, 2025: “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>); Intro and ch. 1-2 of *On Hunger*

Readings for September 2, 2025: “Normative Foundations” (chapter 1 from *Political Economy for Public Policy*); “Stark Disparities” (*Politico* article); Ch. 3-5 of *On Hunger*

Readings for September 4, 2025: “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/meat-processing-coronavirus.html>); “Culinary Modernism” (*Gastronomica* article); Ch. 6-8 of *On Hunger*

Essay #1 (on inequality) due on September 12, via Blackboard, by 5 p.m.

2 Legislating Food Policy

Readings for September 9, 2025: FFA Intro. & Chapter 1; “New Bill” (*Civil Eats* article)

Readings for September 11, 2025: FFA Chapter 2; “Intro. Remarks” (Congressional hearing)

Readings for September 16, 2025: FFA Chapter 3; “SNAP & CARES” (*NYT* article); “Food Banks” (NPR’s *The Salt* article)

Readings for September 18, 2025: FFA Chapter 4; “M.O.’s Food Fight” (*Politico* article)

No class September 23, 2025

Readings for September 25, 2025: 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>)

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

3 Executing Food Policy (Regulating the Food System)

Readings for September 30, 2025: FFA Chapter 6; “FDA.1” (H. B. Evich investigation); “FDA.2” (*NYTMag* article)

No class October 2, 2025

Readings for October 7, 2025: FFA Chapter 7; “Won’t Move” (NPR’s *The Salt* article); “Brain Drain” (*Politico* article); “Agency Restoration” (*Politico* article); “Again” (*Food Politics* blog post)

Readings for October 9, 2023: FFA Chapter 8; “Regulatory Capture” (*Food Politics* blog post: <https://www.foodpolitics.com/2020/09/corporate-capture-in-action-e-mails-illustrate-the-meat-industrys-role-in-keeping-plants-open-despite-covid-19/>); “Labels for the Blind” (*Food Navigator* article)

No class October 14, 2025

Readings for October 16, 2025: FFA Conclusion; “Cut to the Bone” (*The New Yorker* article)

Essay #3 (regulatory analysis) due on October 17, via Blackboard, by 5 p.m.

Writing assignment for second half

Topic, outline, and preliminary sources due on November 7, via Blackboard, by 5 p.m.

Final draft due on Dec. 5, via Blackboard, by 5 p.m.

4 Litigating Food Policy

Readings for October 21, 2025: FP Introduction & Part One

Readings for October 23, 2025: “New Way of Regulating” (chapter 1 from *Up In Smoke*); “Suing USDA” (case filing <https://www.citizen.org/wp-content/uploads/Pork-Line-Speed-Complaint-10.07.19.pdf>); “Dairy Antitrust” (*WSJ* article)

5 Activism and the Food System

Readings for October 28, 2025: FP Part Two

Readings for October 30, 2025: *Huerta* (documentary, found here: https://ezp.lib.rochester.edu/login?url=https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cvideo_work%7C4744779?account_id=13567&usage_group_id=98342); “Penny/Pound” (*The New York Times* article)

Readings for November 4, 2025: FP Part Three

Readings for November 6, 2025: “Rochester Food Policy Council” (<https://www.healthikids.org/blog/food-for-thought-creating-rochesters-first-food-policy-council>); “Lucky Peach” (two short interviews); “OKC Dollar Stores” (*WSJ* article)

6 Interest Groups and Food Policy

Readings for November 11, 2025: FP Part Four

Readings for November 13, 2025: “Corporate Responsibility” (Milton Friedman essay); “Racist Imagery” (*Food Dive* article); “Should there be a tax” (*WSJ* article)

Readings for November 18, 2025: FP Part Five

Readings for November 20, 2025: “Anti-Intellectualism, Natural Food” (*Gastronomica* article); “Ugly Produce” (*The Atlantic* article); “Michael Dukakis” (*The Boston Globe* article); “Revolving Door” (*Food Politics*: <https://www.foodpolitics.com/2020/12/the-revolving-door-keeps-turning/>)

7 Concluding Food Matters

Readings for November 25, 2025: FP Conclusion and Afterword; “Park Slope Food Co-op” (*TNY* article)

Speakers on December 2 and 4, 2025