From Plan to Practice in Public Policy

-Syllabus-

Education Programme WS17/18

Room: F21/03.80
Time: Wednesday, 16-18 h
Start: 18th of October 2017
Notes: The seminar will be taught in English.
Registration: Via FlexNow! From September 1st until November 5th, 2017 or during the first lesson.
Office hours: Wednesday, 14-16 h and by arrangement
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Relevance and aims

Public policy is the response to the problems a society faces which cannot effectively or efficiently be addressed by individual citizens. Right? No. For given that we cannot address all problems at once, which ones will we prioritise? What phenomena should be considered as ‘problematic’ at all? How can we come to effective and efficient solutions, when so often it is difficult to know the effect of our measures? And even if we did – how could be sure that the right policies are adopted, rather than those serving powerful interests primarily? Last but not least, how can we make sure that our plan is carried out as intended – and actually works? These questions suggest, that the practice of public policy is often not as straightforward as one might think. In fact, these questions further refer to various stages of what is called the policy cycle and they indicate, that at each of these stages, specific challenges to a linear view of policy exist. What makes things even more complex is the fact that those stages are often not clearly separable, as what appears as a good and quick solution at an earlier stage, for example, might increase problems later.

In this seminar, we will learn about concepts theories that should help us, at the very least, to understand what happens in this often chaotic process of public policy. We will start by first considering the so-called ‘policy cycle’ (or stages heuristic) and its deficits for adequately capturing the full complexity of the public policy process. Nevertheless, we will use this concept as a ‘heuristic’ (a kind of cognitive short-cut) for structuring the rest of the course. This means, that we will talk about policy problems as the rationale for public policy, move on to the questions of how they end up on the agenda, how decisions are made given uncertainty and complexity on the one hand and the legacies of earlier decisions on the other hand, how these are put into practice (‘implemented’) and how the effectiveness and efficiency of a policy can or should eventually be evaluated. Along the way, we will learn some basics of complexity thinking and will look at the particular challenge of making and analysing public policy when complexity is increased by technology.

As a result, you will not only have an overview of the often whimsical reality of public policy in general, which will come in helpful for many other courses, but will further have some first impression of research and teaching at the Chair for the Governance of Innovative and Complex
Technological Systems. The particular substantive focus on technology, widely defined, does in fact not imply a restriction: In discussions and papers, the topics of the seminar can be linked to the most salient political debates of the day, from Dieselgate over Fake News and hate speech to the lack of broadband internet connections for the countryside.

**Learning goals:**
- To describe the core elements of policy processes
- To identify the difficulties in developing and implementing policies
- To get an idea of the complexity of public policy
- To analyse policy-making in relation to technology
- To solve problems, rather than reproducing texts in their original form
- To improve your command of the English language by actively participating in classroom discussions and writing an (academic) paper.

**Teaching method and test**
The course is built on a teaching method known as ‘Problem-Based Learning’ (PBL). Most importantly, this includes active participation in classroom discussions of the assigned readings focused on so-called ‘Learning Goals’ centred on a broader problem or puzzle. Hence, in order to pass this course, students will be asked to regularly and actively participate in the classroom discussions, and to take over the ‘chairing’ of one of the sessions (25% of the overall grade) rather than individually presenting the readings assigned. Students further have to conduct a small research project of their own and write a respective paper (5,000 words; 75% of the overall grades). There will be ample room for individual feedback during the research process. Further details on PBL will be provided in the introductory session as well as in the Rules of the Game provided on the Virtual Campus.

**Course programme**

**October 18th 2017: Introduction**
In this session, we will discuss some administrative details and the general ‘rules of the game’. In addition, you will be provided with an overview of the seminar.

**Readings**
Optional:

**October 25th 2017: The policy cycle and its deficits**
The policy cycle or stages model is a very classic way of thinking about public policy. There are, however, undeniable problems resulting from the ‘incompressibility’ of public policy.

**Readings**
Mandatory:

November 1st 2017: Public holiday – no session!

November 8th 2017: Policy problems
Public policy generally addresses whatever a society perceives as problematic and in need of intervention. But some problems are more complex to address than others.

Readings
Mandatory:

Additional/optional:

November 15th 2017: Thinking in systems and feedback loops
We have learned already that policy-making is not always a ‘linear’ process. Before we move on, therefore, it is time to generally get to know an alternative to linear thinking.

Readings
Mandatory:

Additional/optional:

November 22nd 2017: Agenda-setting
In this session, we will try to make sense of the ways in which policy problems end up high or low on the public agenda by referring to Punctuated Equilibrium Theory.

Readings
Mandatory:

Additional/optional:
November 29th 2017: Decision-making under uncertainty and complexity
At some point in the policy process, it will be necessary to decide in favour of one or the other solution. Ideally, the solution should be picked that addressed the problem best. But how can one find the best solution, if one does not know for sure what effects the various options will actually have – and if one does not even know all the options?

Readings
Mandatory:
Optional/additional:

December 6th 2017: Path dependence and lock-in; OR: decision-making in context
In reality, decision-makers rarely study all options. Even if they did, they would still not be totally free or unbiased in making their choice, given the complex dynamics earlier decisions have developed meanwhile.

Readings
Mandatory:

December 13th 2017: Decision-making and technology
When elected politicians have to make decisions in technology-related areas such as industry policy, they are faced with an unfortunate combination of lacking expertise on the matter and potentially far-reaching consequences. Let’s see how this plays out.

Readings
Mandatory:
Additional/optional:
December 20th 2017: Implementation – an overview
Once a policy has been officially adopted, it then only needs to be carried out. Only?

Readings
Mandatory:
Optional/additional:

December 23rd 2017 to January 7th 2018: Christmas break – No sessions!
Enjoy your holidays.

January 10th 2018: Implementation – case studies
In this session, we will consider three case studies to take up the topic of implementation again that we had a first glimpse at before the holidays.

Readings
Mandatory:
Additional/optional:

January 17th 2018: Evaluation – an overview
Before we can do it better, we first have to know, how it went last time.
Readings
Mandatory:

January 24th 2018: Evaluation and technology
Technology is complex. This should be reflected in the way we evaluate technology-related policy. But how?

Readings
Mandatory:
Additional/ optional:

January 31st 2018: Complexity theory and public policy
There are many parallels between existing theories of public policy and complexity theory. This raises the question of the latter's added value.

Readings
Mandatory:

February 7th 2018: Feedback session
In this session, you will be given the opportunity to present your research project (i.e. your seminar paper) and receive feedback.

March 31st 2018: Deadline for Seminar papers
In the final paper, students should apply the concepts, theories and approaches learned during the course to a real-life issue of public policy in relation to technology and come to terms with the complexity of this particular case, as well as what can generally be learned from this case. The insights gained in the course should become tools, to be put to use in such a way that the issue in question is better understood than by mere (e.g. journalistic) description.
For more information, please refer to the “Rules of the Game”. 