Systematic ideas and organized knowledge have come to play a central role in American politics and government. Of course, ideas about good and bad policy have always been part of the competition for public office, but in earlier times ideas were often less important than loyalties—to party, class, and locality and to ethnic, religious, and occupational groups. Today, ideas have become much more organized, systematic, and influential. Ideologies such as “social conservative” and “progressive liberal” define the attitudes of many citizens toward candidates and officeholders. Academic fields such as economics and psychology supply highly developed frameworks for understanding and debating issues of public policy. Empirical techniques such as statistics and econometrics are used to interpret social and economic problems and to evaluate the results of government programs. Reflecting these developments, academics and intellectuals now figure prominently in politics and government, working out of think tanks, schools of public policy, journals and websites, and policy offices in the White House, Congress, and program agencies.

This course will study the influence of ideas in four areas of policy contention—taxation, regulation, welfare, and abortion. It will also consider the distinctive approach of one important school of political thought—the “neoconservatives” who congregated at the quarterly journal, The Public Interest, beginning in the late 1960s. An initial session will examine the tensions between abstract ideas and the practical requirements of politics and government. Then, turning to our four policy issues, we will read essays by leading neoconservatives—Irving Kristol, Edward C. Banfield, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and James Q. Wilson—and consider the fate of their ideas in the world of politics and policymaking.

Monday, July 15, 2013, 9:00 am to Noon

Knowledge and Politics: General Considerations

Reading:

- Friedrich A. Hayek, “The Use of Knowledge in Society,” American Economic Review (September 1945)

Discussion Questions:

1. What, according to our authors, are the dangers of melding “policy science” and practical policymaking? Do the dangers arise primarily from the limitations of the sciences
themselves, or from the different purposes of science and politics, or from the political ineptitude of intellectuals?

2. Where do our authors agree and disagree? Would they have different advice on how to avoid the dangers they identify while reaping the benefits of more informed public policies?

Tuesday, July 16, 2013, 9:00 am to Noon

Taxation and Supply-Side Economics

Reading:


Discussion Questions:

1. Are the arguments for supply-side tax cuts primarily economic or political?
2. Have supply-side tax cuts been a success, a qualified success, or a failure?
3. Is the case for (or against) supply-side economics the same today as it was in 1980?

Wednesday, July 17, 2013, 9:00 am to Noon

Understanding Regulation

Reading:


Discussion Questions:

1. Which is more helpful in understanding the nature of government regulation—Wilson’s categorization of different types of regulation and their distinctive politics, or Stigler’s unified economic theory?
2. Are the authors’ analyses “normative” as well as “positive”—that is, are they useful in designing strategies for improving regulation?
3. Do today’s regulatory policy debates reflect either Wilson’s or Stigler’s ideas from thirty years ago?

Thursday, July 18, 2013, 9:00 am to Noon

Welfare and Its Reform

Reading:

- Daniel P. Moynihan, *Family and Nation* (1986), excerpt
- Daniel P. Moynihan, “In Opposition to the Welfare Reform Bill,” United States Senate, 104(2) *Congressional Record*, S8074–8076, July 18, 1996

Discussion Questions:

1. Where does Senator Moynihan differ from Banfield and Murray on the nature of the welfare problem and purposes of welfare reform?
2. Is Moynihan a “neoconservative”? Does his position seem to reflect his position as a practicing politician rather than academic?
3. Who seems to have been vindicated by the results of welfare reform to date?

Friday, July 19, 2013, 9:00 am to Noon

Rights versus Morality in Abortion Policy

Reading:

- Guttmacher Institute, “State Requirements for Ultrasound,” March 1, 2013
**Discussion Questions:**

1. What is the difference between morality and rights?
2. Is abortion a matter of morality or of rights? Why have advocates on both sides sometimes framed it as a moral issue and sometimes as a rights issue?
3. Was it a help or hindrance to Wilson’s proposal that it was attacked by both pro-life and pro-choice advocates?