

Course guide | Classics in Public Administration and Political Science

Lecturers

Dr. Jelle van Baardewijk, Dr. Duco Bannink and Prof. Dr. Willem Trommel,
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Date and location

2-4 November 2020, Utrecht

In the course Classics in Public Administration and Political Science, we discuss the position of the social domain of politics and public administration in society and of the social-scientific domain of public administration and political science in the social-scientific literature. These positions are related. Changing societies lead to changes in the position of politics and public administration, both in social reality and in the literature. Therefore, we start the course by a seminar on 'society.' Politics and public administration are situated in society. They cannot be understood as a system of governance or government situated next to or on top of society. In its social context, politics and public administration themselves operate in socially structured ways.

The concept of institutions (in Selznick's well-known definition) as practices 'infused with value beyond technical requirements of the task at hand' underscores the social embeddedness of politics and public administration. We also understand politics and public administration as an institution, a practice infused with value beyond technical requirements. We extend this discussion and consider how institutions function and how this affects society. With regard to this, a number of authors have observed a shift from 'first' to 'second' or 'late' modernity. This is expressed in changed relations between actors (Giddens, Castells), diversification of life patterns (Beck), weaker binding of individuals to their social environment (Putnam) and changing normative orientations of individuals (Inglehart). This affects policy making and policy implementation. March and Olsen argued that the 'organizational basis of politics' affects political processes. How has this changed? Given the challenges of a late modern social structure, what is, e.g., the relation between policy making and the implementation of policies? We discuss how policy implementation cannot be seen as a rational process choosing optimal means to realize politically defined goals but is itself a socially embedded practice characterized by its own bounded rationality of institutionalized values and beliefs. This social embeddedness of policy implementation contributes to the limited governability of society.

We consider the limitations to governmental control ambitions and discuss how the social scientific field of political science and public administration has reacted to the limitations of public control by proposing variants of new modes of governance, starting from a shift from 'public administration' to 'new public management' in the 1980s, and a further shift to 'new public governance' in the late 1990s. While these new modes of governance seem promising, we might also have to consider whether classic ideas like Lindblom's incrementalism or the garbage can model of policy making might be more accurate understandings of the policy process.

Our political and administrative institutions appear increasingly weak in addressing the challenges of 'late-modernity'. In this context, a Tocquevillian mechanism seems to occur of increased individual liberties which then become subject to regulation. Contrary to such mechanism, several contemporary scholars argue that governments must step back and involve societal actors in the process of policy-making and implementation: bringing society back in.

During the course, we discuss these issues and relate them to the research projects of the participating Ph.D.-students: how does the conception of politics and public administration change and what consequences does this have for the conception of the social-scientific fields of political science and

public administration? And, consequently, what implications for the own research projects do the discussed ideas have?

Learning objectives

Upon completion of the course students, for Classics in Public Administration (PA) and Political Science (PS), will:

1. Be able to explain key themes and issues in PA/PS.
2. Be able to articulate key criticisms of scholarly work in the context of broader academic debates.
3. Be able to discern the social-scientific and practical relevance of the debate, to articulate practical advice to actors involved in politics/governance that is grounded in the scholarly work on public administration and political science and to articulate implications for the own research projects.

Preparatory essay assignment

To prepare for the course, we ask each participant to write a short essay (max. 900 words) on what he or she considers a core problem in current scholarly work on public governance. Is the discipline stagnating, and if so, what would be a way to regain progress? To what extent do the classics help to understand the 'state of the art', and to explore new avenues for theory and research? The essay needs to be handed in before October 1, 2020, 17h00 (send by e-mail to w.a.trommel@vu.nl and d.b.d.bannink@vu.nl).

We discuss the preparatory assignments in the first seminar.

Final essay assignment

To conclude the course, we again ask each participant to write a short essay (900 to 1500 words) that starts from the preparatory assignment and the course seminars on what he or she considers a suitable response to the discussed issues in current scholarly work on public governance and the own dissertation design. To what extent are you able to find new avenues for theory and research? How do these help the disciplines forward? The teachers send written feedback afterwards.

Structure of the class meetings

We start the meeting with a short introduction by the teachers. The students prepare the seminar in subgroups of about four students. Assignments for subgroup preparation are presented during the introductions. In any case, the subgroups need to distill the main issues from the studied literature and connect them to the larger social scientific debate in public administration and political science and to developments in the social domain of politics and public administration and their own dissertations. We use a variety of work forms.

Credits

4 EC