

PLS 505 – Policy Analysis
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Exercise: Policies & Problems

Background:

This is a course in public policy analysis. Public policies are formed, debated, adopted, and implemented in order to address social problems. But what constitutes a “policy”? How do we frame and define problems? What is government trying to accomplish by adopting and implementing these policies? This exercise will get you thinking about policies and problems and the politics that surrounds their formation. Our discussion will also provide a mechanism for introducing many of the concepts we will discuss this semester.

Hopefully, you are aware of some of the issues surrounding our nation’s fiscal condition. We are in the midst of a slow economic recovery with high unemployment rates (about 9.1% nationally, 10% locally). These factors combined with historic budget deficits and unsustainable projected growth in entitlement spending has created an uncertain fiscal future that creates a number of public policy problems. These issues are high on the agenda for the President and Congress and have generated considerable activism on the part of the general public. For example, at the height of the debate concerning raising the debt session congressional offices were overwhelmed with phone calls and emails. This constellation of problems is likely to generate a wide range of competing policy proposals in Congress that may have profound impacts on the fiscal future of this country. Thus, we will be using examples from this policy debate to illustrate theories and concepts over the course of this semester.

Directions:

If you have not been following the policy debate concerning proposals to stimulate the economy, generate jobs, and get the nation’s fiscal house in order, this assignment will help you begin to get up to speed on the issue. For this assignment, you are required to watch President’s Obama’s speech to a joint session of Congress on Thursday September 8th at 7:00 PM. If you have class or are unavailable, you should be able to find the video archived (try C-SPAN) and should easily find a written text. If you are unfamiliar with the nation’s fiscal challenges, an excellent place to start is the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform’s report (December 2010) (See: <http://www.fiscalcommission.gov/>).

The objective of this exercise is for you to begin thinking objectively about the issues at the center of this policy debate. You should come to class with the answers to the following questions on no more than 1 sheet of paper and be prepared to share your answers:

- Review the text of President Obama’s speech and his proposals. Identify a specific policy proposal (i.e., a discrete change in existing policy or a new policy). Since a speech is a rhetorical device, you may need to restate his proposal in more concrete terms to specify the proposed policy.
- Identify the public policy problem that the policy addresses in no more than 1 sentence.
- Can you think of another way to reframe the same problem in a sentence?
- What behavior change on the part of individuals or organizations will it achieve?
- How would you determine whether the policy was a success?
- Find some data or facts that support the notion that the problem the policy addresses is important social problem (provide a citation).
- Think of an alternative way to address the same problem by writing an alternative policy