

Institutions and Actors in the Policy Process

Institution:	School of Public Policy, Central European University
Year/Term:	Year 1
Course type:	Core course
ECTS:	4

Brief description

This course introduces students to how institutions structure policy-making processes and influence actor behaviour, policy output, as well as opportunity structures for participation and engagement. The course adopts a broader understanding of political institutions and takes a governance perspective. Rather than being just branches of government, political institutions – be they formal or informal – significantly frame and affect actor behaviour. Policy-making does not happen in a vacuum but it is constrained by different institutional settings which enable or disempower particular actors, include or exclude them, encourage or discourage association or dispersion of actor groups. Students learn how political regime types, constitutional practices, patterns of party politics and political competition, and informal norms impact on the policy process.

Can environmental NGOs and associations of indigenous people seek support from constitutional courts to revert a government decision to construct an oil pipeline? Are minorities more successful in securing their interests in systems of proportional representation? Are authoritarian regimes dependent on the legitimization of their policies? What determines which societal interests prevail when pressure groups seek to get a grip on the policy process? Are presidential systems of democratic representation more effective in delivering policies than parliamentary ones or vice versa?

The course compares domestic experiences in different country settings around the world. It takes a domestic perspective while considering the impact of regional settings on domestic policy-making. Students acquire core knowledge in analysing the impact of institutional settings on the policy process and who different groups of actors are affected by them. The course introduces participants to comparative perspective and provides illustrations of relevant research perspectives. It helps students to consider different institutional environments when designing policy and developing strategies for influence. It equips them with advanced foundational knowledge on which the program's specialised electives build.

1) The institutional foundations of policy-making

- legitimacy, power and policymaking
- constitutionalism
- representative democracy (majoritarian, proportional, presidential systems)
- semi-authoritarian regimes

2) Actors in the policy process

- political parties
- lobbying by corporate actors and interest groups
- civil society, NGOs and social movements
- courts

3) Interaction of actors and institutions in policy-making

- governance and government
- political opportunity structures and veto points
- electoral cycle and public opinion

Learning outcomes

With completing the course students will

- be able to understand key patterns of how political institutions impact on the policy process and identify the role of different types of actors within this process;
- be able to apply key concepts which are used in the analysis of political systems and governance structures in relation to different country settings and across different dimensions of contemporary governance systems;
- have a critical understanding of core concepts and approaches in the field and including their potential conceptual and empirical limitations;
- have the skills necessary to engage and learn through discussion and team work in the field of political analysis;

- be able to engage in independent research in the field using multiple sources including scholarly contributions and empirical information also in areas which are new to them;
- be able to offer assessments of how political institutions and the specific roles of different actors influence policy choices.