

Public Policy to the Fore

Bryan Jones leads a resurgence

Public policy has traditionally been a centerpiece of political science at The University of Texas at Austin.

Emmette Redford was an early leader in the field. He sharpened his expertise through real public service in the 1940s, most notably his four years at the federal Office of Price Administration during World War II.



*Bryan Jones, J.J.
"Jake" Pickle Chair
in Congressional
Studies.*

Today, public policy is receiving a new push from Professor Bryan Jones, who received his Ph.D. from the Department of Government in 1970 and returned in 2008 to become the first occupant of the J.J. "Jake" Pickle Chair in Congressional Studies, named for the former Austin Congressman.

Public policy studies focus on the patterns of actions (and inactions) taken by governments, as well as the impacts, costs and benefits of policy initiatives.

"The quality of policies we get varies wildly, and policymakers often focus on issues that seem, at least to us, to be of little importance. We study public policy to understand why," says Jones.

Jones is one of the most well known political scientists in America, and this year he became the first Longhorn to lead the Midwest Political Science Association. He has won several best book prizes from the American Political Science Association and more than \$2.5 million in National Science Foundation Grants.

His return to Austin from the University of Washington at Seattle coincided with dramatic upheaval in U.S. public policy.

"Things started changing so fast it'll make your head spin," he says, commenting on the relationship between the government and financial services industry following the 2008 banking collapses.

The Geology of Public Policy

Jones has dedicated his career to systematically measuring and explaining how public policies change in the United States. He does so through a "geological" perspective that has precedent in the Department of Government.

Anyone who sat through a lecture by Professor Emeritus Walter Dean Burnham was as likely to hear the words “tectonic plates” as they were “presidential election.” Burnham popularized the idea that change simmers beneath seemingly static political competition, leading eventually to periodic, seismic shifts that forever change the political landscape.

Jones has applied a similar concept to public policy.

“We have had this notion of how policy changes are a little like earthquakes,” he says. “Most are either very small or really large.”

Jones has focused on the amount of friction that builds in a system, and the consequent amount of force needed to break through that friction and bring change.

In terms of public policy, two key factors make a public policy “sticky,” meaning friction has built up beneath it and a large policy shift is poised to occur.

One factor is the strength of the idea behind a given policy. In the wake of the financial crisis, changing policy entails fighting the friction built up by ideas that govern the proper relationship between the private and public sectors.

A second factor is the institutional framework in which policy is made. In the case of the U.S., Jones points to supermajorities that are required to pass legislation — the 60 votes needed to pass a bill out of the Senate, for example, helps increase friction in the system.

Jones is building a first class American public policy and American political institutions program at Texas, focused on Congress and public policy.

“Congress is about public policy,” says Jones. “We are going to take Congress and integrate it into public policy studies, and we are bringing the best graduate and undergraduate students into our program that we can.”

At the University of Washington he initiated a program that recruited undergraduates into a sequence of courses in which they learned quantitative data analysis, analyzed existing data sets or created original data sets and displayed their research findings through a series of formal poster sessions.

Some of his new undergraduate students did the same this spring during the Undergraduate Research Bazaar held at the Gregory Gym Plaza.

Jones has combined his program with Associate Professor Sean Theriault’s program on research on the U.S. Congress.

Since 2001, Theriault has worked with five to 10 undergraduates each semester on ambitious research projects.

“I am thrilled to combine forces,” Theriault says. “By the time the students are through with us, they’ll know how to do research and know more about the policymaking and lawmaking processes than they ever dreamed.”

Jones would like to see 10 to 15 undergraduates move through his program each year and be prepared to attend the country’s best graduate programs.

“We want to give them the research skills, analytical skills and ideas that they need to thrive in graduate school, and we want to leave them with a project that they can take with them to graduate school,” Jones says.

At the graduate level, Jones is working with faculty to bring in more grants and contracts to help support students.

“Grant support equals more time dedicated to research, which equals publications, which equals jobs,” Jones says. “Faculty is ready for it, students are ready for it, and we’re going to improve quickly.”

Tracking U.S. Policy

Central to all of Jones’s plans is his [Policy Agendas Project](#), which began with a National Science Foundation grant to systematically measure the process of policy change. The data generated by the project are free and publicly available and come with software that allows their use in classrooms across the world.

The project’s datasets include information from congressional hearings, presidential budgets, executive orders, State of the Union addresses and Gallup public opinion data dating to 1947.

A related undertaking, the Congressional Bills Project, focuses exclusively on bills introduced in Congress since 1947. Thanks to these data, the public can trace, graph and download U.S. policy changes since World War II.

The Department of Government’s proximity to the state Capitol makes it well situated to be an elite institution for the study of public policy. The Capitol provides students ample internship and research opportunities and gives lawmaker and policymakers the chance to teach students or collaborate with professors.

“One great thing about being in Austin is certainly that you can walk down to the Capitol and talk to people,” Jones says.

[Learn more about the Policy Agendas Project.](#)