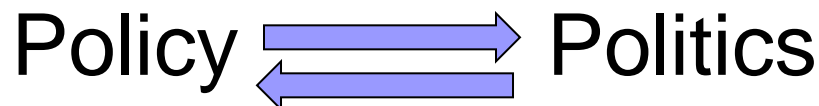# Policy Analysis Projects for Undergraduates

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Policy field is bifurcated:

- Typically, economists study best policy while political scientists study actual policy.
- A combined conception links the two:

Policy ⟺ Politics

- Each stance gives perspective on the other:
  - Best policy suggests changes in policymaking.
  - Political limits cause us to question best policy.
- Course covers policy *and* political analysis.

Special projects dramatize this idea:

- Teams of 5-6 students must address some major national problem:
- Examples I have used:
  - Reform of schools, Soc Security, Medicare.
  - Illegal immigration.
  - The budget and debt problem.
- Must be doable within a month.

Background I provide:

- 2-3 lectures in class on the problem.
- Assigned and recommended readings.
- I do not expect detailed costing or other calculations.
- For the budget project, web sites calculated deficit/debt results of student proposals.
- Students must still research their own plans.

Readings: budget reform plans:

- National Academy of Sciences.
- Bipartisan Policy Center (Domenici/Rivlin).
- Simpson-Bowles Commission.
- House Budget Committee (Paul Ryan).

Forming the teams:

- Students are allocated to teams based on their initial preferences on the issue.

- Typically, 2 teams are more liberal, 2 more conservative.

- But once formed, teams may take any position they can agree on.

- Team leaders are chosen from among students active in class discussion.

- Teams share out work among themselves.

Skills tested:

- Working together in a group.
- Public speaking.
- Summarizing complexity—30 minute limit.
- Writing PowerPoint.
- Answering questions and criticism.

Run-throughs are critical:

- I hear teams' initial presentations and give feedback.
- Typically speakers are hesitant.
- Teams try to cover too much, go into too much detail.
- Questions can be unexpected, unnerving.
- Run-throughs settle teams for presentations in class if number of teams is >4.

Class presentations:

- Typically much more polished.

- Questions from class are tough because other students also know the issue.

- Teams are graded on both run-throughs and final presentations.

- All team members get the same grade, subject to peer evaluations.

Feedback:

- Students say the project drives home the tension between policy and politics.

- The group experience is usually positive.

- Students do learn useful skills.