

# The Political Economy of U.S. Food Policy

University of Rochester, PSCI 235

Fall 2023

Mon/Wed, 10:25 am - 11:40 am, Hylan 202

Instructor: Dan Alexander (he/him/his)  
Contact: dan.alexander@rochester.edu  
Office hours: Mon & Tue, 12:30 pm - 1:30 pm **by appointment** via  
<https://calendly.com/danalexander7/office-hours>  
If those times don't work, email and suggest specific times that work for you.

## Course Information

**Description** This course seeks to answer a variety of questions about U.S. food policy and how it gets made. Who are the actors who push for change in food policy, in which institutions do they operate, and with what sorts of political pressures must they contend? What is the economic rationale underlying food policies, and what are the economic implications? Who do food policies serve? We will examine some prominent inequalities in the food system and study how reforms to food policy in the United States make their way through the democratic process. We will ask how these reforms constitute efforts to democratize our food system and foodways, and we will observe how these democratizing reforms confront the same normative challenges that democracy itself faces. Through a variety of readings, podcasts, films, as well as visits from guest speakers, students will learn about the role that activists, civil servants, lawmakers, corporations, and local organizations interact with legislative and regulatory processes, shape the preferences of citizens and lawmakers, and implement food policy on the ground in ways that seek to reform our foodways. Throughout, we will engage with the concepts of access, centralization, externalities, information, and representativeness.

**Assignments and Expectations** All students are expected to come to class having read the assigned material and should be prepared to ask questions and engage in discussions that draw upon the readings. Content presented in class will not directly mirror any of the assigned readings, striving instead to offer complementary background and concepts from social science, so attendance will be

crucial for students' success in the course. Participation and attendance will not be graded, but I reserve the right to revise this policy if it becomes necessary. Students will produce four-five structured write-ups (~3 pages in length) and two shorter responses to visits from speakers (1 page in length) as well as complete a mid-term and final exam. The weighting given to the assignments in calculating grades is provided below, followed by descriptions of those assignments and additional information for those students taking the course for writing-intensive credit.

- 4 structured write-ups (each worth 15%)
- 2 one-page speaker responses (each worth 5%)
- 2 exams (each worth 15%)

**Structured write-ups** At five points throughout the semester, students may complete a short paper, the top four grades of which will be used to calculate grades.<sup>1</sup> The topics will be, in order, analyzing 1) an example of inequality in the food system, 2) a piece of legislation relevant to food policy, 3) a regulation/rule pertaining to some aspect of the food system, 4) a local (not necessarily Rochester-based, but at the local level somewhere) initiative aimed at democratizing the food system, and 5) the perspective of a relevant interest group on a current (TBA) food-policy debate. All of the 3ish page papers will be heavily structured, in the sense that students will write a paragraph or two in response to each of several questions that I supply to help guide the analysis. I will post the questions for each assignment about two weeks in advance of the due date.

**Speaker responses** After two in-class speakers, students will write a one-page response (reflection) that highlights the ways in which each speaker hit upon themes of the class. What challenges and opportunities does food policy create for them? Do they work to change food policy in any way? Which political considerations did they mention? These should not be summaries of the conversations, but rather short, incisive analyses in light of the concepts covered in our course, emphasizing politics!

**Exams and Terms to Takeaway (TTT)** The exams will be mostly short-answer, with one or two short essay (i.e., a few paragraphs) questions. They will cover the readings as well as the key concepts covered in class, often asking students to synthesize the two. To make the important ideas from the course more salient, I will highlight them as “terms to takeaway” (TTTs). I recommend

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<sup>1</sup>The lowest grade of the five will be dropped, so you can skip one or improve a score you were not satisfied with.

reviewing the TTTs in advance of exams as well as keeping up with the reading. The midterm exam is scheduled for Wednesday, October 30, 2023; the final is scheduled for December 13, 2023, the last class session of the term. Both will be taken in person (more details leading up to the exams). Please let me know as soon as possible if you are unable to attend either of those days.

**Writing intensive** More information on this to come, but if you are taking the course as writing intensive, you will be expected to produce a paper of about 15 pages in length in addition to the other course requirements. I recommend that the paper be a more in-depth exploration of your first essay assignment, though I am open to other proposals. A draft will be due midway through the course. I will provide significant feedback on this draft, and a revised version is due on December 17.

**Materials** One goal of the class is to develop “food-news literacy.” In order to do so and to stay up-to-date on news about food politics, please subscribe to the emails from [www.foodpolitics.com](http://www.foodpolitics.com) and Politico’s Weekly Agriculture. We will discuss items that appear in these newsletters throughout the semester.

We will draw from two **required** books – listed below, preceded by the abbreviation with which they are referred to throughout the rest of syllabus – as well as from a number of articles in academic journals and the popular press. The articles will be posted on blackboard. The books are available for purchase from the bookstore (or from other book sellers). **THE REQUIRED BOOKS ARE:**

FFA: Poppendieck, Janet. 2010. *Free for All: Fixing School Food in America*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

FP: Nestle, Marion. 2013. *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 10th anniv edition.

**Assistance and Resources to Promote Student Success** Please feel free to reach out to me at any point during the course with any concerns or information that you would like me to know to support your success this semester.

The University of Rochester respects and welcomes students of all backgrounds and abilities. In the event you encounter any barrier(s) to full participation in this course due to the impact of a disability please contact the Office of Disability Resources. The access coordinators in the Office of Disability Resources can meet with you to discuss the barriers you are experiencing and explain the eligibility

process for establishing academic accommodations. You can reach the Office of Disability Resources at: [disability@rochester.edu](mailto:disability@rochester.edu); (585) 276-5075; Taylor Hall.

The Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning has a number of resources to improve study habits, including one-on-one study skills consultations, study skills course (CAS 142), quiet study space with peer support (Study Zone), and, for specific courses, one-on-one tutoring, drop-in group tutoring, and weekly study groups.

Student success at the University of Rochester includes more than just academic performance. Please feel comfortable speaking with me about challenges you are experiencing within and outside of the classroom so that I may submit a CARE Referral on your behalf. A CARE Referral is submitted when the level of concern for a student necessitates inclusive, multi-layered support from the campus community. The CARE network administrator shares information only with staff who need to know it in order to help you. I *care* about your success and am committed to my role in helping you get connected to appropriate campus resources. Please utilize office hours, and let me know if you are encountering difficulties that are affecting your ability to do your best work.

### **Academic Honesty Information**

Academic honesty means acting with truthfulness and sincerity in carrying out all aspects of our individual and collaborative work, maintaining ownership over our work and acknowledging our debt to the work of others.

Students can best meet their obligation to academic honesty by adhering to the Academic Honesty Policy in all academic matters. This includes completing their work through their own honest efforts and expecting and encouraging honesty among their peers.

The text above is an excerpt taken from <https://www.rochester.edu/college/honesty/>, where students may – and should! – also find the full policy.

Suspected violations of academic honesty will be passed along to the Board that oversees such matters. As indicated in the guidelines linked above, the punishments for violations are significant. We will include some assignment-specific clarifications in the prompt for each assignment, but if you have questions at any point about whether your conduct adheres to the guidelines, reach out to the instructor.

## Course Schedule

Readings for each day (not necessarily *reading* in the strictest sense). Anything without a link is available on Blackboard, found by the “Short Title” used below.

### 1 Inequalities in the Food System

**No class September 4, 2023**

**Readings for September 6, 2023:** “The Land of Our Fathers,” parts 1 and 2 (episode 5 of *1619* podcast: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/23/podcasts/1619-podcast.html>); “Ethics over Exploitation” (chapter from *Feeding the World Well*)

**Readings for September 11, 2023:** “Normative Foundations” (chapter 1 from *Political Economy for Public Policy*); “Stark Disparities” (*Politico* article)

**Readings for September 13, 2023:** “One Meat Plant. One Thousand Infections.” (podcast from *The New York Times’s* The Daily: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/04/podcasts/the-daily/meat-processing-coronavirus.html>); “Food Studies” (*Gastronomica* article); “Culinary Modernism” (*Gastronomica* article); “Wasted Food” (chapter from *Feeding the World Well*)

**Essay #1 (on inequality) due on September 18, via Blackboard, by 5 p.m.**

### 2 Legislating Food Policy

**Readings for September 18, 2023:** FFA Intro. & Chapter 1; “New Bill” (*Civil Eats* article)

**Readings for September 20, 2023:** FFA Chapter 2; “Intro. Remarks” (Congressional hearing)

**No class September 25, 2023**

**Readings for September 27, 2023:** FFA Chapter 3; “SNAP & CARES” (*NYT* article); “Food Banks” (NPR’s *The Salt* article)

**Readings for October 2, 2023:** FFA Chapter 4; “M.O.’s Food Fight” (*Politico* article)

**Readings for October 4, 2023:** FFA Chapter 5; *The Poison Squad* (documentary, found here: <https://login.ezp.lib.rochester.edu/login?qurl=https%3a%2f%2ffod.infobase.com%2fPortalPlaylists.aspx%3fwID%3d152714%26xtid%3d206157>)

**Essay #2 (legislative analysis) due on October 9, via Blackboard, by 5 p.m.**

### 3 Executing Food Policy (Regulating the Food System)

**Readings for October 9, 2023:** FFA Chapter 6; “Regulatory Capture” (*Food Politics* blog post: <https://www.foodpolitics.com/2020/09/corporate-capture-in-action-e-mails-illustrate-the-meat-industrys-role-in-keeping-plants-open-despite-covid-19/>); “Labels for the Blind” (*Food Navigator* article)

**No class October 11, 2023**

**No class October 16, 2023**

**Readings for October 18, 2023:** FFA Chapter 7; “Won’t Move” (NPR’s *The Salt* article); “Brain Drain” (*Politico* article); “Agency Restoration” (*Politico* article)

**Readings for October 23, 2023:** FFA Chapter 8; “Cut to the Bone” (*The New Yorker* article)

**Essay #3 (regulatory analysis) due on October 25, via Blackboard, by 5 p.m.**

**Readings for October 25, 2023:** FFA Conclusion; bring in questions to review!!!

**MIDTERM EXAM on October 30, 2023**

### 4 Litigating Food Policy

**Readings for November 1, 2023:** “New Way of Regulating” (chapter 1 from *Up In Smoke*); “Suing USDA” (case filing <https://www.citizen.org/wp-content/uploads/Pork-Line-Speed-Complaint-10.07.19.pdf>); “Dairy Antitrust” (*WSJ* article)

**Readings for November 6, 2023:** FP Introduction & Part One

## 5 Activism and the Food System

**Readings for November 8, 2023:** “Rochester Food Policy Council” (<https://www.healthikids.org/blog/food-for-thought-creating-rochesters-first-food-policy-council>); “Lucky Peach” (two short interviews)

**Guest Speaker on November 8: Briana Middleton** (reflection due on November 15)

**Essay #4** (local food policy initiative) due on November 13, via Blackboard, by 5 p.m.

**Readings for November 13, 2023:** *Huerta* (documentary, found here: [https://ezp.lib.rochester.edu/login?url=https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic\\_entity%7Cvideo\\_work%7C4744779?account\\_id=13567&usage\\_group\\_id=98342](https://ezp.lib.rochester.edu/login?url=https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cvideo_work%7C4744779?account_id=13567&usage_group_id=98342)); “Penny/Pound” (*The New York Times* article)

**Potential Guest Speaker(s) on November 13: TBA** (reflection due on November 20)

**Readings for November 15, 2023:** FP Part Two

**Guest Speaker on November 15: Chris Hartman**

**Readings for November 20, 2023:** FP Part Three; “OKC Dollar Stores” (*WSJ* article)

**Readings for November 22, 2023:** “Anti-Intellectualism and Natural Food” (*Gastronomica* article); “Ugly Produce” (*The Atlantic* article); “Oldie to Goldie” (*JACR* article, **just skim**); “Michael Dukakis” (*The Boston Globe* article); “Rewarding No-Waste Customers” (*China Daily* article)

**Readings for November 27, 2023:** FP Part Four

**Readings for November 29, 2023:** “Corporate Responsibility” (Milton Friedman essay); “Racist Imagery” (*Food Dive* article)

## 6 Interest Groups and Food Policy

**Readings for December 4, 2021:** FP Part Five

**Readings for December 6, 2021:** “Should there be a tax” (*WSJ* article); “Revolving Door” (*Food Politics*: <https://www.foodpolitics.com/2020/12/the-revolving-door-keeps-turning/>)

## 7 Concluding Food Matters

**Essay #5 (interest group analysis) due on Dec. 11, via Blackboard, by 5 p.m.**

**Readings for December 11, 2023:** FP Conclusion and Afterword; “Park Slope Food Co-op” (*TNY* article); bring in review questions!!!

**FINAL EXAM on December 13, 2023** Writing Intensive Final Drafts due on December 17, 2023 via Blackboard by 5 p.m.