Introduction

by Ian Shapiro, Sterling Professor of Political Science and Global Affairs

This seminar was designed to help teachers craft teaching units about good public policy – what ought to happen – in light of a sound understanding of how the political system actually works. The motivation behind it is well captured in political philosopher John Rawls's phrase "realistic utopianism." The goal is to think about what public policies would improve the world, but to do it in ways that are informed serious attention to how they might be enacted and implemented. To this end, the seminar focused on a variety of public policy issues that interested the teachers, but we also devoted considerable time to understanding the peculiarities of the American political system and strategies for policy innovation that have been more and less successful in the past.

To help teachers think about these challenges we spent some time at the beginning on analytical tools. These dealt with the logic of – and obstacles to – effective collective action; the ways in which different people's ability to leave situations – "exit costs" – shapes the possibilities for change; and different analytical models of why democracy in general and American democracy in particular does not produce governments that ameliorate the inequalities that arise in the economy. In fact, it often exacerbates them.

The central challenge posed by the political system is that the political parties are weak and decentralized. This makes them susceptible to disproportionate influence from activists on their fringes, lobbyists and other forms of outside money, and hostile takeovers—most recently of the Republican congressional party by the Tea Party after 2009 and the presidential campaign by Donald Trump in 2016. National parties are further weakened by America's staggered electoral cycle, bicameralism, the separation of powers and federalism, all of which make it difficult for parties to enact the policies they run on at the national level. The system has many built in veto players whose capacity to stop legislation means they have to be accommodated, often limiting its effectiveness and undermining its purposes. The inevitable horse-trading makes it virtually impossible for parties to enact the programs they run on, a problem that has become worse in recent years as red states have become redder and blue states bluer, so that safe seats have proliferated. This magnifies the importance of low turnout primaries that are dominated by activists on the fringes of the parties and those who fund them. This makes compromise in Washington harder to achieve, exacerbating gridlock and voter alienation—making it easier for populist demagogues to gain purchase.

To illustrate the difficulties involved in enacting legislation for which there is broad support, we studied the decades of failed efforts to create universal health insurance since World War II. We also studied the self-defeating failure of efforts to expand home ownership to low income and minority populations that fed into the financial crisis of 2008, harming most the people it was intended to benefit. And we studied the ways in which the decentralized system of public school funding and the large number of veto players make effective reform

of public education such a dispiriting heavy lift.

And yet, sometimes effective social policies are enacted. To help understand how this happens, we spent some time looking at the creation of Social Security in 1935 and Medicare in 1965, two of the most effective, popular, and enduring pieces of social legislation in the twentieth century. The architects of both policies displayed a grasp of six building blocks of effective distributive politics. These are (i) assembling an effective coalition, which includes anticipating what the opposing coalitions will likely be; (ii) crafting effective proximate goals around which the coalition can be organized – goals that are both achievable but also way stations on a path to a better future; (iii) devising compelling moral narratives that can motivate supporters and hold coalitions together in the face of efforts to break them up before proximate goals are achieved; (iv) finding leaders who can both be strategically effective in moving toward the proximate goal and also articulate the moral narrative to motivate supporters to do what is needed to enact it (v); creating or finding the resources that will make the policy innovation feasible; and (vi) incorporating mechanisms to entrench proximate goals once they are achieved, so as to prevent future generations from reversing or undermining them.

The units designed by the teachers fall into three groups. Some are designed to illuminate particular features of the political system. Eun Jung Kim's unit deals with the history, evolution, and current condition of America's political parties. Christina Marsett created a unit to teach students about the interaction between the Supreme Court and Congress by comparing the conservative court during the Reconstruction era with the progressive Warren era court of the 1950s and '60s.

A second group of units deals with different aspects of the political system seen through the lens of a particular policy issue. Alexander de Arana examines the financial crisis of 2008; Christiona Hawkins studies the interaction between housing and education policy; and Hunter Najera's unit focuses on the changing role of money in American politics.

The third group of units explores efforts at policy reform by reference to the building block of effective distributive politics. Jennafer O'Neill's focus is on improving public health; Jacqueline Travis studies the civil rights movement in the run up to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights act of 1965; Tiffany Robinson explores social mobility and the policies that affect it, Valerie Schwarz studies efforts to regulate the tobacco industry; and Christopher Fong's unit centers on efforts currently underway to create a Universal Basic Income – a basic income grant that would be paid to all citizens regardless of work.

In one way or another, each of the units exemplifies the importance of thinking about policy and politics together in the service of realistic utopianism.