

# The Political Economy of U.S. Food Policy

University of Rochester, PSCI 235

Fall 2024

Tue/Thurs, 11:05 am - 12:20 pm, Lattimore 210

Instructor: Dan Alexander (he/him/his)  
Contact: dan.alexander@rochester.edu  
Office hours: Mon: 11:00 am - 12:00 pm (instructor, rm 311)  
Thurs: 12:30 pm-1:30 pm (TA, location TBD)

## 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 exams (each worth 15%)
- Attendance and participation (each worth 5%)

**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.

**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 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.

**Attendance and Participation** I'm going to keep track of attendance and participation. You do not need to email me for an occasional absence. If there is something that will keep you out of

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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.

class for several sessions, let me know. Participation does not necessarily entail speaking up in class. Participating in our small-group, in-class discussions also counts! Or...I may just do some pop quizzes. None of this is ideal, but based on trends over the past few years, this is where we find ourselves.

**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.

*If you have questions about proper academic writing or, especially, the use of various computer assistance, I urge you to reach out to me and particularly the campus writing center.*

### **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

**Readings for August 29, 2024:** “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 3, 2024:** “Normative Foundations” (chapter 1 from *Political Economy for Public Policy*); “Stark Disparities” (*Politico* article)

**Readings for September 5, 2024:** “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 13, via Blackboard, by 5 p.m.**

# 2 Legislating Food Policy

**Readings for September 10, 2024:** FFA Intro. & Chapter 1; “New Bill” (*Civil Eats* article)

**Readings for September 12, 2024:** FFA Chapter 2; “Intro. Remarks” (Congressional hearing)

**Readings for September 17, 2024:** FFA Chapter 3; “SNAP & CARES” (*NYT* article); “Food Banks” (NPR’s *The Salt* article)

**Readings for September 19, 2024:** FFA Chapter 4; “M.O.’s Food Fight” (*Politico* article)

**Readings for September 24, 2024:** FFA Chapter 5; *The Poison Squad* (documentary, found here: <https://login.ezp.lib.rochester.edu/login?url=https%3a%2f%2ffod.infobase.com%2fPortalPlaylists.aspx%3fwID%3d152714%26xtid%3d206157>)

**Essay #2 (legislative analysis) due on September 27, via Blackboard, by 5 p.m.**

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

**Readings for September 26, 2024:** 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 1, 2024**

**Readings for October 3, 2024:** FFA Chapter 7; “Won’t Move” (NPR’s *The Salt* article); “Brain Drain” (*Politico* article); “Agency Restoration” (*Politico* article)

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

**Readings for October 10, 2024:** FFA Conclusion; bring in questions to review!!!

**Essay #3 (regulatory analysis) due on October 11, via Blackboard, by 5 p.m.**

### 4 Litigating Food Policy

**No class October 15, 2024**

**MIDTERM EXAM on October 17, 2024**

**Readings for October 22, 2024:** FP Introduction & Part One

**Readings for October 24, 2024:** “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)

### 5 Activism and the Food System

**Readings for October 29, 2024:** FP Part Two

**Readings for October 31, 2024:** *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)

**Readings for November 5, 2024:** FP Part Three

**Readings for November 7, 2024:** “Rochester Food Policy Council” (<https://www.healthikids.org/blog/food-for-thought-creating-rochesters-first-food-policy-council>); “Lucky Peach” (two short interviews); “OKC Dollar Stores” (*WSJ* article)

**Essay #4 (local food policy initiative) due on November 8, via Blackboard, by 5 p.m.**

## 6 Interest Groups and Food Policy

**Readings for November 12, 2024:** FP Part Four

**Readings for November 14, 2024:** “Corporate Responsibility” (Milton Friedman essay); “Racist Imagery” (*Food Dive* article); “Should there be a tax” (*WSJ* article)

**Readings for November 19, 2024:** FP Part Five

**Readings for November 21, 2024:** “Anti-Intellectualism, Natural Food” (*Gastronomica* article); “Ugly Produce” (*The Atlantic* article); “Michael Dukakis” (*The Boston Globe* article); “Revolving Door” (*Food Politics*: <https://www.foodpolitics.com/2020/12/the-revolving-door-keeps-turning/>)

**Essay #5 (interest group analysis) due on Nov. 22, via Blackboard, by 5 p.m.**

## 7 Concluding Food Matters (and Thanksgiving 11/26, 28)

**Readings for December 3, 2024:** FP Conclusion and Afterword; “Park Slope Food Co-op” (*TNY* article); bring in review questions!!!

**FINAL EXAM on December 5, 2024** ■