

# Issue Portfolio Guidelines

The overall goal of the Issue Portfolio assignment is to challenge you to put a real public policy issue to the test using major concepts in the course. You will work with the same issue throughout the entire semester. Once you are assigned to an issue group, you will also have to state your preferences for the optional assignments (Assignments 2 & 3) so that they are evenly distributed within your issue group (sign up in week 3).

There are four portfolio assignments that will be completed by you individually, including: memos in which you will define the issue, evaluate the issue with regard to themes in our course with regard to Congress or the Supreme Court, evaluate the issue with regard to public opinion or elections, and, finally, report on how you have personally participated in the political arena with regard to the issue. These components will combine to create your Issue Portfolio. Throughout semester, you will be expected to complete these short 1-2 page assignments through which you will relate this issue to broader themes/issues in American government/politics (themes specifically addressed in class time and/or readings).

Through these short assignments throughout the semester, you will address things like: what's at the heart of the issue, who are the stakeholders, who has power over the issue, whether you are being represented in government with regard to the issue, how accurate public opinion polls regarding the issue are, and what the public thinks about the issue. Overall, you have the opportunity to uncover how the issue relates to various areas of American government, to relate the issue to broader themes/issues in American government, to familiarize yourself with various areas/topics within the field and to help you identify problems with the system. Please see the "writing effective memos" handout for details on the format for all four assignments. Throughout your assignment, be sure to cite ALL sources you use.

I encourage you to think creatively with this assignment. I will give you ideas for where to begin your research and about what kinds of evidence will be persuasive, but, ultimately, it is your responsibility to take charge of the assignment. There is no one right way to complete each assignment; in fact, that you will all take different approaches and potentially come to different conclusions is what is most interesting about politics!

## **1. Issue Portfolio Assignment 1: Define the Issue**

*Your memo must address the following questions:*

- Think about your issue generally. What are the key questions with regard to this issue are in contemporary U.S. politics.
- What are the "sides" to this issue? Are there more than two? What are they?
- What are the major arguments for and against the issue on each of the sides?
- Can you find any major pieces of legislation have been proposed on the national legislature? (finding this will help you see the major questions with regard to this issue). It may also help to look up relevant Supreme Court cases for this purpose (see Supreme Court sources below). Looking up key legislation and Supreme Court cases may also help you choose which assignment 2 you want to complete.
- Who are the key stakeholders or advocates for each side of the issue (e.g., interest groups, advocacy groups, political parties? On which side are these groups? Why?

*Potential sources:*

**Public Agenda Online.** A wealth of resources for most big policy issues. Find it at:

<http://www.publicagenda.org/>.

**UMM Library's Quick Start.** <http://quickstart.morris.umn.edu/> (go to political science for many links to great resources). A very useful list of resources.

**Republican National Committee.** <http://www.rnc.org/>

**Democratic National Party.** <http://www.democrats.org/>

**List of Interest Groups:** <http://www.libarts.ucok.edu/political/links/interest.htm>. Use this site to find links to interest groups which are relevant to your issue.

**UMM's Briggs Library.** Use library indexes you learned about in your orientation tour to find relevant books, articles, etc. related to this issue. You may want to look into periodicals, too, as magazines like TIME often include articles that help us define public policy issues.

**United States Senate.** Use this site to find your Senator's contact information, voting records, and other relevant information for the assignment: <http://www.senate.gov/>.

**United States House of Representatives.** Use this site to find your Representative's contact information, voting records, and other relevant information for the assignment: <http://www.house.gov/>.

**Project Vote Smart.** A great place to start for finding your Congressperson's voting records, interest group ratings (ratings made by interest groups on policy issues related to their goals), and issue positions. Find it at: <http://www.vote-smart.org/>.

## **2. Issue Portfolio Assignment 2: Congress or the Courts (choose 1 of the following)**

Second, you must relate the topic to various themes/topics in the course, specifically with regard to the Congress or the Supreme Court. Choose one of the following two topics:

### *1. First option: Congress.*

*Your memo must address the following questions about either your U.S. Senator or U.S. Representative (focusing on U.S. Representative, if possible, may be more fruitful for the later questions on representation, but it is your choice!):*

- Who is your Congressperson (Representative or Senator)?
- What does your Congressional district (or state citizens) think about the issue or a set of related issues?
- How does your Congressperson's (house or senate) voting record on this and/or related issues compare to the opinion of the district? If this is not available, what is your Congressperson's stance on the issue (from their campaign, from calling their office, etc.).
- What implications does what you've found out have for various forms of representation (related to our readings and class discussion regarding trustee and delegate models of representation)?
- How do you think your representative views representation (based on observation or by sending questions via e-mail or phone) and which constituency does his/her actions best represent (e.g., related to the class reading in Choices by Fenno)?
- Given what you've found, how well do you feel represented on this issue and/or related issues?

### *Potential sources:*

#### Public Opinion Sources:

**National Annenberg Election Survey of 2000.** I have data from a huge survey research effort done in 2000 and will give you data on issue positions in your home district during this period if you need it for your assignment. Opinions in your Congressional district on all five policy issues are available. Please let me know if you'd like to use it! (Need this data to do the assignment on your U.S. Representative).

**Minnesota Public Radio.** MPR has polls for Minnesota samples available on in its archives with regard to gay marriage and the death penalty. Search on their main site: <http://minnesota.publicradio.org/>. (This data will help you to do the assignment on your U.S. Senator).

**Minnesota Poll.** This poll, run by the Star Tribune newspaper, has polling data for Minnesota on the following issues: abortion, gun control, death penalty. <http://www.startribune.com/stories/784//>. Search for "Minnesota poll" plus the issue of interest. (This data will help you to do the assignment on your U.S. Senator).

**Your Own Data.** If you don't want to use these data sources, you are free to find other sources of data (in which you will have to be creative!). Be sure to document your source(s) and explain any limitations to the data.

Member Sources:

**United States Senate.** Use this site to find your Senator's contact information, voting records, and other relevant information for the assignment: <http://www.senate.gov/>.

**United States House of Representatives.** Use this site to find your Representative's contact information, voting records, and other relevant information for the assignment: <http://www.house.gov/>.

**Project Vote Smart.** A great place to start for finding your Congressperson's voting records, interest group ratings (ratings made by interest groups on policy issues related to their goals), and issue positions. Find it at: <http://www.vote-smart.org/>.

**2. Second option: Supreme Court.**

*Your memo must address the following questions:*

- What rulings has the Supreme Court made on this issue?
- Thinking about the Johnson & Martin paper we read in class:
  - Did the courts ruling follow U.S. public opinion at the time or in that general time period (compare decision to National public opinion polls OR discourse in newspapers or somewhere else)? Be sure to illustrate what your evidence of their congruence or incongruence with public opinion is.
  - Why is this – or is this not – the case? What about this specific issue makes you think the Court reacted in this way (salience, etc.)? How do you know (e.g., what's evidence of issue salience?).
- What does your research say about whether the courts the most insulated branch?
- Are justices, who are appointed not elected, responsive? What does this mean for representation in the U.S.? What form of representation discussed in class best describes the Supreme Court's behavior on this issue?

*Potential sources:*

Public Opinion Sources:

**Gallup Brain.** Go to the library website, click on "Article and Reference Databases" and click on "G" to get to GallupBrain. You can search for relevant public opinion polls on any topic. The polls all list when they were conducted.

**PollingReport.com.** National polls on many big issues in American politics.

**Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.** Archives of the results from many national public opinion polls. Find it at: <http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/>. A good place to start is to click on "public opinion matters" on the lefthand side.

**Pew Research Center.** <http://people-press.org/>. Another great resource for polling data. Click on "survey reports" or do a general search.

Supreme Court Sources:

**Legal Information Institute (1990-).** <http://straylight.law.cornell.edu/supct/index.html>

**Legal Information Institute (Landmark Cases):** <http://straylight.law.cornell.edu/supct/cases/name.htm>

**Find Law.** <http://www.findlaw.com/casecode/supreme.html>

**Searchable Index of 7000+ Cases!** <http://www.fedworld.gov/supcourt/index.htm>

### **3. Issue Portfolio Assignment 3: Elections or Public Opinion**

Third, you must relate the topic to various themes/topics in the course, specifically with regard to the Elections or Public Opinion. Choose one of the following two topics:

#### ***1. First option: Campaigns/Elections/Parties.***

***Your memo must address the following questions:***

- For this assignment, you want to first choose a recent state or national election to analyze. You may want to do some searching before you settle on a specific election.
- First, identify whether the political parties take a stance on this issue specifically or as a part of a larger agenda. Also, did the candidate(s) in the election you're investigating state an issue position (use Project Vote Smart or Candidate webpages)?
- Further, how salient do you think this issue in state or national politics and elections? (you could base this on many types of evidence: e.g., plethora of public opinion polls out there, thousands of hits on major newspaper sites' search engines, number of bills proposed that relate to it in state or local legislative bodies, etc. Be creative!).
- The rest of the assignment is to answer the following questions about the election you're analyzing:
  - Was your public policy issue discussed the election discourse (in speeches, at conventions, in the media, in debates, etc.)? How do you know? (may want to search candidate websites for your candidate(s), newspaper coverage on Lexis Nexis linked on the library webpage .
  - How much attention did candidates give the issue in your opinion?
- Now, using concepts from the issue ownership article we read by Petrocik, address some of the following (or another part of his thesis if you'd like): does one of the parties "own" the issue? How might this explain the amount of –or lack of– rhetoric by the candidates with regard to this issue in the campaign? How does their choice to focus (or not) on an issue relate to issue ownership?

#### ***Potential sources:***

**United States Senate.** Use this site to find your Senator's contact information, voting records, and other relevant information for the assignment: <http://www.senate.gov/>.

**United States House of Representatives.** Use this site to find your Representative's contact information, voting records, and other relevant information for the assignment: <http://www.house.gov/>.

**Project Vote Smart.** A great place to start for finding your Congressperson's voting records, interest group ratings (ratings made by interest groups on policy issues related to their goals), and issue positions. Find it at: <http://www.vote-smart.org/>.

**Republican National Committee.** <http://www.rnc.org/>

**Democratic National Party.** <http://www.democrats.org/>

**Minnesota Republican Party:** <http://www.dfl.org/>

**Minnesota DFL – Democratic Farmer Laborer Party.** <http://www.dfl.org/>

**Lexis Nexis.** You can search regional or national newspapers for articles of interest. Go to the UMM library page, go to "Article and Reference Databases" and scroll to Lexis-Nexis.

#### ***2. Second option: Public Opinion.***

- What do citizens think about this issue as reported in public opinion polls by media outlets, campaigns, or academics? (To answer this, you will want to locate national polling data and summarize the most recent findings).
- Also try to locate some stories in the media (e.g., in the New York Times or from another news outlet) that report some findings from a poll on this issue (this might help you with thinking about problems with poll interpretation).
- How have questions been asked about this issue? Using what we've learned through the Asher reading, the TA Section on Polls, and our class discussion on polls, can you identify any potential

problems with the common question(s)? How might these problems affect the interpretation of public opinion with regard to this issue?

- Are there any other problems with polls you see reported?

*Potential sources:*

**Gallup Brain.** Go to the library website, click on “Article and Reference Databases” and click on “G” to get to GallupBrain. You can search for relevant public opinion polls on any topic.

**PollingReport.com.** National polls on many big issues in American politics.

**Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.** Archives of the results from many national public opinion polls. Find it at: <http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/>. A good place to start is to click on “public opinion matters” on the lefthand side.

**Pew Research Center.** <http://people-press.org/>. Another great resource for polling data. Click on “survey reports” or do a general search.

**New York Times.** nyt.com

#### **4. Issue Portfolio Assignment 4: Participate!**

Finally – Participation! For this assignment you will participate in some sort of advocacy surrounding your issue based on your position and/or non position. Based on what you’ve learned about the role of this issue in American politics....you need to find a way to advocate your position and, ultimately, to attempt to influence the political system in some way (e.g., attend a county commission meeting to speak out on the issue, write a letter to your senator articulating your position and why he should follow suit maybe discuss representation, too! Or you could contribute money or volunteer time to a related group/cause in your community or in Minnesota or the U.S. more broadly).

A good place to start for this might be to return to Project Vote Smart’s website (listed above) and look at the Interest Groups involved with advocacy surrounding your issue. Be creative with your participation! Your memo should present short synopsis of your position/non position, how you participated, and how you felt when you were participating (e.g., did you feel knowledgeable and prepared to participate). You should include a short reflection discussing how the project has influenced your view of politics, your perception of your ability to participate effectively in the political arena, and your plans to do so again in the future. Also, did the Issue Portfolio project give you the skills and motivation to participate again in the future (with regard to this or another issue)? Feel free to go into more depth if the spirit moves you.