GU POLITICS FELLOW PATRICK DILLON

DISCUSSION GROUP OUTLINE

THE NEVER ENDING CAMPAIGN

How Politics & Campaigns Matter Even More When the Election’s Already Over

Discussion Group Synopsis
In 2016, the political system in Washington, DC appears broken. Big legislation is dead on arrival. Congress is paralyzed, the President is a lame duck, and the presidential candidates are running an even more polarizing, celebrity-driven campaign than ever before. They’ll talk a big game, promise big changes, and then they’ll get to Washington, and nothing will happen—grand visions chewed up in the buzzsaw of “politics.” Everyone knows this, so it must be true, right?

Does it have to be this way? Was it always this way, even in recent memory? What are the factors, and actors, that make it this way—and by knowing that answer, how we might make it different? Can “politics” be a force for policy movement, or only a recipe for policy standstill?

Not that long ago—as recently as six years ago, in 2010, Congress “worked.” It passed, and the President signed—one of the biggest pieces of legislation in decades, a signature campaign promise, addressing on a large scale a problem Presidents have tried and failed to address in a comprehensive way since the 1940’s. How did that happen? In part because politics—citizen and voter engagement across the board, at the right moments and in greater capacity than the other side—moved the levers of policy in a big way.

This discussion will look at how politics and campaigns play a pivotal role in translating the talk of elections into the action of governance. We will look at some of the key actors, and their tactics, to consider how organizing, communications, and political/electoral influence impact the development and execution of policy; with a special look at key issues—including health care, climate change, and immigration—and developments in the 2016 presidential campaign.

Week 1—How a Bill Really Becomes a Law: How Politics Truly Can Make Big Things Happen
The Politics of Health Care Reform 2009-2010
A case study of how just five years ago, in the midst of historic economic crisis, with rapidly intensifying political polarization and a historic “wave” election brewing, Congress and the President came together to pass health care reform, the largest social policy reform in a generation, and something that had eluded every President of the last 60 years. Our discussion will focus less on the policy, and more on the politics that made it happen (and very nearly defeated it): the electoral promises, the communications environment, and most importantly, the role of interest groups and campaigns that alternately pushed, supported, and outright opposed Congress and the President (some doing all three over the course of the debate); including the game-changing special election to replace Sen. Ted Kennedy after he passed away at a crucial moment in the debate.

Week 2—How a Bill Doesn’t Become a Law: How Politics Can Make Gridlock Seem Eternal
The Politics of Immigration & Climate Change
At the same time as a once-a-generation health care reform passed, major issues like climate change and
immigration reform stalled and didn’t make it to the finish line - and in fact, are still major points of
discussion in the 2016 presidential campaign. We’ll discuss how campaigns and the political environment
around these issues contributed to their outcomes so far, and what that might tell us about how they will
- or won’t - get over the finish line for the next President.

Week 3 – Policy in the Age of the Celebrity Campaign
Campaigns Aren’t Really About Substance...or Are They?
In a media environment where campaigns appear to be about personality, celebrity, and character - is
there any room for policy any more? We’ll discuss how policy plays a role in campaigns communicating
to voters, looking at how key positions are developed and communicated in an electoral context, the
benefits they bring to campaigns, and the constraints and expectations they can create for
governance. Key examples for discussion may include gay marriage and LGBT equality issues, student
loan reform and the cost of college, and, the outsize role of agricultural and renewable energy issues in
early nominating states like Iowa.

Week 4 – What Do the Polls Say?
Poll-Driven Policy...or Not
A discussion of how public opinion research affects the way lawmakers and policy actors govern, not just
campaign. What do polls really tell politicians about issues and voters and how do they really get used?
How much do politicians actually listen to them when it comes time to govern? Are policymakers
following their constituents’ beliefs; or trying to figure out how to sell their own to their constituents?
With growing leaps in data analytics and voter targeting, how is opinion research improving - or not - our
governing conversation?

Week 5 – The Endless Campaign
Call Your Member of Congress Today to Thank and/or Berate Them!
A discussion of how campaign tactics influence the policy debate long after the campaign is over, with an
eye towards understanding how groups - from non-profits to big companies/industries to unions -
communicate political support for their positions from outside Washington. Lobbying in Congress is just
the tip of the iceberg as advocates make their case. We’ll discuss how advertising (including “dark
money” groups and so-called “issue” attack ads), voter mobilization, and sophisticated campaign tools
influence voters to join policy debates and punish or reward policymakers.

Week 6 – Campaigns in the Classroom: The Politics of Education Policy Reform
Everyone has a stake in the success of the American education system – and nearly everyone has an
opinion on how to improve it. We’ll discuss how education policy reform is both driven by and limited by
politics, with a look at some of the dynamics in play around major issues – e.g. testing, curriculum – and
major players – e.g. philanthropists, unions, parents and student activists.

Week 7 – The Next President’s Agenda:
Mandate for Change or Dead on Arrival?
A discussion of the policies the presidential candidates are discussing and their prospects for realization in
2017. What are the political factors driving their positions? What will that mean for their inclusion in the
next Presidents’ actual governing agenda, and what kind of campaign would it take to make their visions
into reality?

Week 8 – Millennials Rising:
Does Growing Electoral Power Equal Policy Power?
Already a key voter bloc, how are millennials organizing and bringing political strength to bear not just on who wins the election, but what the winners do once they get into office? We'll look at this through the prism of issues including the cost of college, gun control, and the fight for living wages.