

Teaching Tips/Notes



Using C-SPAN as a Teaching Tool in Agricultural and Natural Resource Policy Courses

Introduction

Agricultural and natural resources policy courses focus on public policy and its impact on the structure and financial performance of the agricultural and natural resources sectors, nationally and internationally. Different approaches are used in policy analysis, but focal points tend to be the political process, affected stakeholders, public participation, solutions to policy problems and explaining the structural nature and factors influencing the policy problem. Discussion on national public policy issues tends to culminate in Washington, D.C. and involves the White House, senators, congressmen, their staff, lobbyists and various sorts of policy experts. One outstanding way to incorporate a national perspective into these policy courses is to include actual discussion and historical perspectives that center on the “drama” that takes place in Washington as the public policy process produces laws, regulations and real-world public policy. C-SPAN is one way to accomplish this.

C-SPAN is an acronym for Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network. It is a non-profit cable-satellite television network with three channels and a radio station. Most cable and satellite television systems include at least one or two of their channels. It is best-known for gavel-to-gavel coverage of all U.S. Congress sessions. Its content is unedited and includes congressional hearings, White House press briefings, presidential speeches and general governmental meetings. There are regular interviews of individuals involved with current events. Most important, their website includes a video archive of past programming and other historical content. Lots of this content involves agricultural and natural resources policy issues.

What C-SPAN Offers

Currentness is a main asset of the network. Public policy issues are most interesting and relevant when they are topical. At the federal level, the Farm Bill is debated on about a five-year cycle and is the primary vehicle for defining public policy that affects agriculture, food and natural resources. There are plenty of publications that describe the Farm Bill and that address the issues associated with it. However, only a discussion of the current Farm Bill will focus on immediate concerns, directions and consequences. C-SPAN provides that currentness.

The network provides live coverage of both Senate and House debate on the Farm Bill, with that coverage easily retrievable from its video archives. Searching “farm bill” on its website (www.c-span.org) produced dozens of related events, discussion and lectures. These included testimony of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack on the department’s current budget request before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture (lasting two and one-half hours), a discussion of the Farm Bill by Secretary Vilsack after it passed, the White House signing ceremony for the Farm Bill, expert discussion of negotiations over the Farm Bill, panel discussions over the future of American agriculture and natural resources and discussions of the Farm Bill by relevant House and Senate committees and subcommittee chairs.

Searching “agriculture” yields dozens of related videos on topics like government nutrition programs, Florida’s cattle industry, factors that impact U.S. food prices, agricultural trade between the U.S. and Europe, food access and security and President Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal. Searching “natural resources” yields topics like state hunting and fishing rights, national monument designations, the Clean Water Act amendment, history of Hawaii’ and sugar, arctic and deep water oil exploration, wildfire management and the lumber industry. Many videos are less than six months old. These are current discussions on very current topics.

C-SPAN has about two dozen series on topics like America and the Courts, American History, American Presidents and American Writers. Scattered among these videos are many agriculture and natural resource topics. Under American History, for example, is a “Reel America” (C-SPAN’s name for its historical videos) film titled “The River.” It is a 31 minute movie produced by the U.S. government with a New Deal promotional theme on the importance of the Mississippi River Valley, that argues that poor farming and lumbering practices result in erosion, flooding and poverty. The first film the U.S. government

produced for commercial release and distribution is included in "Reel America" and it deals with agriculture. It is a 1936 documentary produced by the U.S. Resettlement Administration on the history of the Great Plains region from the 1880s to the 1930s Dust Bowl. "The Plow That Broke the Plains" was designed to spotlight New Deal programs.

One of the strong aspects of the network is an emphasis on current nonfiction authors and books. The emphasis continues to be current events and many of these books and authors address agricultural and environmental issues. For example, Wenonah Hauter, author of *Foodopoly: The Battle over the Future of Food and Farming in America*, was recently interviewed.

Assessment

No textbook and few journal articles are absolutely current and much of public policy is being formulated in real time as classes take place. Students live in a world with instant access to news and communication and have come to expect course material to be timely and to include more than the printed word. Access to most political dialogue tends to be short clips from news agencies with limited public access. C-SPAN is the opposite of this. It is complete coverage of political events and it strives for accessibility. For an instructor trying to explain public policy, there is no better example than the actual legislative process, supplemented by experts explaining what is going on behind the scenes. For a professor willing to take the time, many nuggets of the public policy process can be gleaned from the C-SPAN broadcasts to add real-world flavor to a course.

C-SPAN has programs to make its material accessible to the classroom. The emphasis is on the middle and high school classroom. However, much of the access applies equally well to the college classroom. Their entire website focused on access and its framework serves to produce reams of potential teaching material. For any policy professor, it is a goldmine of "easy pickings."

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