STV2420 – Theorizing Public Organizations

Course content

This course will introduce you to major theoretical perspectives on the building blocks, the day-to-day operations, and change processes in public organizations. Where is the borderline between politics and administration? How and why do bureaucrats take decisions? How does organizational structure and culture affect policy outcomes? How do public organizations change, and why are they difficult to reform? These are some of the fundamental questions addressed in this course.

The course consists of three main parts:

(1) Theories on the building blocks of public organizations: individuals, organizations, institutions.

(2) Theoretical perspectives on the relationship between politics and administration.

(3) Theories on public organisations' change and reforms.

The course uses a combination of classic texts, textbook chapters, and empirical applications of major public administration theories. The aim of this course is not only to make you familiar with theoretical perspectives, but also to enable you to use theoretical reasoning in your own empirical analyses.

Learning outcomes

Knowledge

Having completed this course, you will

- have learned about seminal theories about actors and structures in public organizations.
- have learned about different ways of understanding the relation between politics and administration.
- have learned about seminal theories about reform and change in public organizations.
- have learned about the challenges of applying theory in empirical settings.

Skills

Having completed this course, you will

- be able to utilize existing theories to analyse actors and structures in public organizations, and how they affect public policies.
- be able to utilize existing theories to analyse how public organizations change over time.
- be able to formulate clear research questions, and to find relevant academic texts.
- be able to write academic texts drawing on relevant literature.

- be able to orally communicate your academic knowledge and provide constructive criticism to other students.

Competence

Having completed this course, you will

- have a better understanding of the functioning of public organizations
- have developed the ability to put differences between theories into words
- have developed academic writing skills

Prerequisites

STV1400 – Offentlig politikk og administrasjon or another introductory course to public administration.

Teaching

Lectures and seminars

Compulsory activities

- Attend the first seminar.
- Present a short outline for your term paper.
- Present your term paper.
- Comment on other students' papers.

The seminars are taught in English, and the papers handed in must be written in English.

The term paper shall

- Have a word count between 2500 and 3000 words.
- Have a 12-point, Times New Roman font and 1.5 line spacing.
- Be rooted in key parts of the literature on the reading list.
- Be on a topic related to the curriculum but selected by the student.
- Meet the formal requirements for submission of written assignments.

Examination

Portfolio examination

The portfolio examination will be given one overall grade and consists of:

- three short essays (max. 1500 words, excluding bibliography)
- one term paper

Language of examination

The examination language is English.

Outline:

Introduction

1. Theoretical perspectives on governing public organizations

Part 1: The building blocks of public organizations: individuals, organizations, institutions.

2. Decision theory
3. The impact of formal structure on policy outcomes
4. The institutional nature of organizations

Part 2: The relationship between politics and administration

5. The politics-administration dichotomy
6. Political control of the bureaucracy
7. Theories of bureaucratic politics

Part 3: Reform and change in public organizations

8. Administrative reforms: rational or anarchic?
9. The international diffusion of reform ideas
10. The politics of administrative reform