Policy Sciences Handout 2 (9.17.17)
Here is your Top-10 List of Main Points on the Policy Sciences.

1. Scholars often use the term “policy sciences” interchangeably with the term “public policy” when describing the field of public policy or policy studies. This is ok. I rarely do this because the term “policy sciences” means so much more and I really respect this history and past efforts. You can do what you want here.

2. Policy sciences refers to a specific research program established by Harold Lasswell and colleagues. See Lasswell and Lerner (1951). Side comment: Close to SPA, former CU Denver Professor Peter deLeon was “sort of” a Lasswellian; Peter devoted a good chunk of his career to the policy cycle and democracy.

3. Policy sciences is often simplified today into three general strategies. That is, the study of policy sciences should involve (1) contextualization; (2) problem-orientation; and (3) multiple methods. These three points are often simplified further as basic guides to the field. That is, the message is for the scholar to pay attention to context because context matters, study problems that matter to society, and use the best methods available. Lasswell did say this and this interpretation is accurate but not the full story.

4. A deeper reading of Lasswell shows that “contextualization” is the term Lasswell used to describe what we think of when describing the study of “policy processes” and “problem-orientation” is the term Lasswell used to describe what we think of when describing the study of “policy analysis” (see other handout). For Lasswell, you were doing the policy sciences when you did both contextual analysis (policy processes) to understand context and problem-orientation when you were doing problem-oriented advice (policy analysis). For better or for worse, these areas of study are still distinct and rarely done together.

5. Lasswell’s “decision functions” (1956) morphed into the policy cycle (Jones 1972) and made even more famous by Brewer (1974) and SPA’s own Peter deLeon (see Brewer and deLeon 1983). There were probably other sources of the policy cycle but Lasswell is possibly one of the major point of origin. Many people will equate the legacy of Lasswell’s work with the policy cycle. Policy cycle dominated the field as its definition and as a general framework for describing its scope and content for decades, possibly unto today for many.

6. Lasswell’s Policy Sciences Framework is a thing of complex beauty. See handout. In its most basic form, it has two main components to guide the analysis of policy problems: (1) study the decision functions and social processes (policy processes); (2) conduct the problem orientation steps (policy analysis). Given loads of reasons (e.g., it is so darn complicated, it is immune to change, the true policy sciences community is shrinking, it has been subsumed by other frameworks/theories, ...), the Policy Sciences Framework is “mostly dead.”

7. The journal of Policy Sciences used to be more focused on promoting the Lasswellian depiction of the policy sciences but is increasingly a typical public policy journal (like Policy Studies Journal).

8. Lasswell’s worldview was very much shaped by the need to embrace and encourage democratic processes and for policy scientists to engage in politics and government. However, political scientists largely frowned on this and the policy sciences community split from the political-science-associated public policy community (1960s or so). Among other reasons, political scientists were overly concerned about establishing a true science and were worried that applied sciences would taint the quality of the field.

9. Most, if not all, people recognize that Lasswell is one of the founders of the field of public policy in the US (and the world). I don’t disagree with this statement but I also find that many people of the same era have been sadly overshadowed in their contributions and the contributions of Lasswell is exaggerated some. E.g., people don’t give enough credit to the legacy of Dahl and his students in shaping the field of public policy.

10. For you, know that there is a cool deep history with Lasswell, that he beat the drum of democracy, that policy sciences is often equated with public policies as fields of study but there is more to it, that his work can be simplified into contextualization, problem-orientation, and multi-methods, and that there was a beautiful yet complicated Policy Sciences Framework that is “mostly dead” now.