This course is about poverty and welfare, and the controversies about them, in the United States. We will survey the nature of poverty and poverty politics, the development of antipoverty policies and programs, contending theories about the causes of poverty, recent welfare reforms, and current policy directions.

A common view today is that poverty is somehow related to other social problems such as growing inequality, the decline of the middle class, and the crumbling of marriage in lower-income America. We will examine what the evidence suggests about those connections.

In the 1980s and 1990s, national antipoverty policy was largely conservative. It culminated in the radical welfare reform of 1996, which enforced work in family aid. But under Obama, policy has turned more liberal with the enactment of the Affordable Care Act. There is interest in how to help poor men, who were largely ignored in welfare reform.

These issues have been the main focus of my research. My early books set out much of the theory that government followed in reforming welfare. As an expert on work requirements in welfare, I have been an advisor at the national level and in Wisconsin, New York City, and several foreign countries. My last book, in 2011, was on how to raise work levels among poor men.

The course seeks to capture the debate about poverty and welfare as it appears in Washington. I will present conservative views more fully than most academics do, because these views matter in the national debate. However, liberal arguments may also be made. The course expects students to develop their own points of view. Each class will focus on a key issue, on which I encourage discussion.

**READINGS**

Students should rent or purchase the following books at the bookstore, although those who wish to limit costs may read them on reserve at Bobst. They are listed in rough order of assignment:


These additional readings will be assigned as shown in the course schedule below. Many of these items are short. Students may purchase a copy of them for $40 from Unique Copy Center, 252 Greene St., phone 212-420-9198: Those wishing to minimize costs may read them on reserve at Bobst, where two copies of each are available, and some are available through Bobst e-journals.


David Whitman, “An Appeal to Authority,” *Education Next* 8, no. 4 (Fall 2008)


**REQUIREMENTS**

Students will write three short papers, take a final examination, and receive credit for participation in class. Each paper, the final, and participation will each count 20 percent of the grade.

The papers will be assessed with equal weight given to quality of writing and argument. See further details below.

The final examinations will be two-part. The first half will be to write six identifications of terms or concepts taken from the course, chosen out of 12. The second half will be to answer one broad essay question, chosen out of three. Each part of the test will count about half the grade.

Participation grades will consider both attendance in class (40 percent) and contributions to class discussion (60 percent). For each lecture, an issue is posed in the syllabus to which students should prepare responses, to be made orally. Discussion will seek, not only to contrast different positions, but to identify the underlying assumptions that really divide them. These premises, I
believe, often come down to what psychology and capability one imputes to the poor versus the better-off.

All these assessments will emphasize quality of argument. I encourage students to differ with my views, but your positions should appeal to hard evidence as well as your own preferences. Students must make use of the assigned readings. You will not be able to do well in the course relying only on background knowledge or the lectures. Students are strongly advised to do the readings prior to the classes for which they are assigned, and to take notes on them. Handouts on this and other useful skills will be made available on Classes.

Final grades will be determined by ranking the class on the basis of average. About the top third or 40 percent of the class will receive A’s, the next 40-50 percent B’s, the rest C’s or—in unusual cases—lower grades. Students should note that, because of this scaling procedure, final grades may not correspond precisely to what one might expect on the basis of average. Often, I give out more B’s during the term than I want to do for the record. So in the final reckoning, some students with high B averages typically get A’s; rarely, some with low B averages will get C’s.

Extensions, makeups, or Incompletes will be given only for unexpected demands on your time, such as illness or family crises—not demands that can be foreseen, such as jobs or athletic events. Incompletes will be given only on the basis of consultation out of class prior to the final exam. To arrange extensions, makeups, or Incompletes, students must confer with me in my office during office hours or at other agreed times. So, if you are in difficulties, speak to me in good time. I can be helpful. Students who fail to complete their work and disappear without explanation will simply fail the course.

**COURSE SCHEDULE**

The following is the schedule for class meetings, with reading assignments for each. Authors mentioned refer to the books or additional readings listed above. Readings should be completed in advance of class, to permit participation in discussion. Before each class, I will place the PowerPoint file from my lecture on Classes.

**Sept. 7: Introduction:** Forecast of the course. Current poverty and welfare issues in Washington.

AEI/Brookings Working Group, ch.2  
Porter, “Inequality in America.”  
Putnam, “Crumbling American Dreams.”

**I: Poverty**

**Sept. 12: What is Poverty?** The poor as understood in history, in the public understanding, and in the poverty measure used by government. Issue: Should our definition of poverty consider only income? What about inequality? Lifestyle?

Sawhill, “Behavioral Aspects of Poverty.”

**Sept. 14: Who Are the Poor?** The composition of the poor population. Variations by demographic characteristics and other variables. The crucial role of employment. Issue: Is the poverty debate about low income—or employment?

Poverty tables.
Sept. 19: The Long-Term Poor: The distinction between the short-term poor and dependent and the long-term. The underclass, nonworking men, and the homeless. Issue: Are the poor different from other people?

   Sawhill, “Underclass.”


   AEI/Brookings Working Group, ch. 1.
   Haskins and Sawhill, ch. 2.

II History

Sept. 26: Poverty before 1960: The poverty problem up through the 1950s. The New Deal reforms and the postwar elimination of most working poverty. Issue: In what sense, if any, was poverty an issue before 1960?

   Patterson, chs. 1-5.

Sept. 28: The Liberal Era: Poverty becomes a political issue, and becomes less tractable. The 1960s and 1970s created a profusion of new social programs, most of them still operating. The welfare boom. Issue: Did the Great Society succeed or fail?

   Patterson, chs. 6, 8-12.
   Great Society handout

Oct. 3: The Conservative Era: After 1980, the Republicans attack abuses, curb dependency, and impose tougher work and child support requirements. A further rise, then fall in welfare. Issue: Did conservative antipoverty policy succeed any better than liberal?

   Patterson, chs. 14-16.


   Ron Haskins, “TANF at Age 20: Work Still Works.”
   Anderson et al., “Activation and Reform in the United States: What Time Has Told.”

Oct. 10: Fall Break—no class.

III Programs

Oct. 12: The Welfare State: An Overview: All the programs government runs to address poverty in America. Social insurance vs. welfare, cash vs. in-kind benefits, etc. Issue: Is the sharp distinction we make between social insurance and welfare justified?

   Spar, “Federal Benefits and Services for People with Low Income.”
1st paper due in class.

**Oct. 17: Welfare:** Means-tested programs, including family welfare, which was the main focus of welfare reform. *Issue: why did controversy focus here?*

Glenn, chs. 1-2, 4.

**Oct. 19: Other Programs:** Education, training, child care, and social service programs have only small effects on poverty but may be important for long-term change. *Issue: Do these programs matter for overcoming poverty, or not?*

**IV Theories of Poverty**

**Oct. 24: Disincentives:** Many conservatives, and some liberals, think poverty is due to the disincentives to marry and work set up by the welfare system and other benefit programs. Should we believe this? *Issue: Does welfare really cause poverty?*

Murray, *Losing Ground*, chs. 4, 12, 17.

**Oct. 26: Labor Market:** Liberals commonly blame poverty on growing inequality, low wages, or a lack of jobs. Is this plausible? *Issue: Can low-skilled people escape poverty on their own?*

Haskins and Sawhill, ch. 3.

Wilson, “The Economic Plight of Inner-City Black Males.”

**Oct. 31: Racism:** Liberals say that racial discrimination blocks integration and employment for the poor, many of whom are nonwhite. Conservatives deny this. *Issue: Are poverty and other social problems really due to race?*

Kirschenman and Neckerman, "'We'd Love to Hire Them, But . . .'"

**Nov. 2: Single Parents:** Nonmarriage as a cause of poverty. Why do poor parents typically have children without marrying and working regularly? Child care and the child support system. *Issue: Is the breakdown of the family the real cause of poverty and welfare?*

Edin and Kefalas, chs. 1-3.

Wilcox, “Marriage Haves and Have-Nots.”

**Nov. 7: Immigration:** Historically, immigrants overcame poverty, but today some believe immigration is increasing poverty. *Issue: Is today’s immigration like that of the past—or different?*

Borjas, *Heaven’s Door*, ch. 1.

Massey, “Immigration and Equal Opportunity.”

**Nov. 8: Election Day**—optional gathering at my apartment to watch the election returns.

**Nov. 9: Culture:** Some conservatives say that poverty is due mainly to a "culture of poverty" or the ethnic background of the poor. *Issue: Do the poor have a different psychology from the better-off?*

Haskins and Sawhill, ch. 6.
V  Policy Approaches

Nov. 14: Improving Opportunities: Liberals typically seek to improve public benefits or work incentives for the population in general, without focusing on poverty.  Issue: In general redistribution enough to solve poverty?  

Skocpol, "Sustainable Social Policy: Fighting Poverty Without Poverty Programs."
Halpern-Meekin et al., introduction, chs. 1-2, 6.
2nd paper due in class.

Nov. 16: Enforcement: Some conservatives blame poverty on permissive public policies. They seek to enforce work and other norms, and also devolve more authority to lower levels of government. Issue: To overcome poverty, is it enough to demand good behavior?

Mead, Beyond Entitlement, chs. 1, 3.
Starobin, “The Daddy State.”

Nov. 21: Paternalism: The close supervision of clients as an approach to antipoverty policy. Seen in welfare reform and other areas of social policy. Issue: Do the poor just need better oversight to better themselves?

Mead, “The Rise of Paternalism.”
Bloom et al., Reengaging High School Dropouts, executive summary, ch. 3.

Nov. 23-5: Thanksgiving—no class.

Nov. 28: Marriage: Conservative proposals to promote marriage as a solution to poverty. Policy and political challenges faced by this approach.  Issue: Can marriage be the key to overcoming poverty?

Edin and Kefalas, conclusion.
Haskins and Sawhill, ch. 10.
Lawrence M. Mead, “Public Support and Demanding Policies.”

VI  Current Issues

Nov. 30: Welfare Reform Reconsidered: Recent criticisms of TANF point to desperate families unable to access cash aid. Issue: Was welfare reform, after all, a mistake?

Edin and Shaefer, introduction, chs. 1, 3, conclusion.”
"Sighing for paradise to come," The Economist, June 4, 2016, pp. 21-4.

Dec. 5: Education: Recent developments suggest that schools can do more to help overcome poverty. Issue: Are improved schools the real solution to poverty?

Haskins and Sawhill, ch. 8
Heckman, “Lifelines for Poor Children.”
Whitman, “An Appeal to Authority.”
3rd paper due in class.

**Dec. 7: Employment:** Recent ideas for raising work levels and wages for the low-skilled. *Issue: Are improved earnings the real key to overcoming poverty?*

AEI/Brookings Working Group, ch. 4.

Edelman and Holzer, “Connecting the Disconnected.”

**Dec. 12: Poor Men: Problem and Causes:** The problem of nonwork among low-income men and its likely causes. *Issue: Why do poor men fail to work consistently?*

Mead, *Expanding Work Programs for Men*, chaps. 1-3

Anderson, “Against the Wall: Poor, Young, Black, and Male”

**Dec. 14: Poor Men: Programs:** How to expand work programs for low-income men. *Issue: Can we put poor men to work, as we did welfare mothers?*


*Course evaluations.*

**Dec. 21: Final exam:** 12-1:50 PM, 194 Mercer St., #203.
PAPER ASSIGNMENTS

Questions:

The following are the questions to be addressed on each of the three papers, and the due dates for each:

Paper 1: “In light of who the poor are, public opinion about them, and the history of national antipoverty policy, is America able to run an effective antipoverty policy? Why or why not?”

Due Oct. 12 in class.

Paper 2: “Of the six theories of poverty considered in Part IV of the course, which one do you find the most persuasive and why?”

Due Nov. 14 in class.

Paper 3: “Of the four approaches to antipoverty policy considered in Part V of the course, which one do you find the most persuasive and why?”

Due Dec. 5 in class.

Argument: Note that in each paper you are asked to choose which one theory or approach you prefer. You must clearly choose one as best; you cannot combine more than one so as to avoid choice. On the other hand, to support your choice, you will have to discuss more than one option. One way is to rank the theories or approaches.

Note that you are supposed to defend your choice against opposing arguments. Don’t just describe your preferred theory or approach. That is not an argument for it. You will have to characterize your choice, but your main task is to justify it against the other possibilities. Since the papers are short, you must get directly to the point: Tell me straight out which position you favor and why. Imagine you are standing in front of a judge with only five minutes to make your case. What would you say?

There is no one answer to any of these questions. A plausible case may be made for many positions. All depends on how you define each option and how you reason about which is best. Typically, to favor a given position, you have to define it broadly so it explains more than it would otherwise, perhaps including aspects of other possibilities.

Writing: In assessing papers, I emphasize correct writing. Typically, student papers contain many low-level errors in usage, grammar, logic, or spelling. These problems are endemic today, at every college, even selective schools like NYU. One reason is that most faculty ignore the problem, and the NYU writing program has little effect upon it. While most students can make themselves clear in some basic sense, the slips trip up the reader and make it difficult to attend to your argument.

I correct students’ writing more than most faculty do. I have a system of symbols I use to do this. Here are the sort of problems I encounter. Most of them come down to unclear logic. I define each and also give the symbol I use to indicate that problem when correcting papers.

Reference unclear (RU): A term or pronoun is used that has no definite reference or antecedent. Thus, I'm unsure what it refers for. For example: "Members of Congress talk to
lobbyists, who might contribute to their campaigns. They have an interest in doing this." Here, it's not clear whether "They" refers to the members or the lobbyists.

Wrong person (WP): Students often use a singular noun, then replace it with a pronoun that is plural, or vice versa. For example: "The Army would like to avoid accepting gays into the military, but they may have to compromise." Here “Army” is singular but “they” is plural.

How relevant (HR): Writing may be clear, but it seems unrelated to the subject at hand or the argument you are making.

Point unclear (PU): You are writing about the subject and the words are clear, but the point isn’t clear as an argument. What are you really trying to say here?

Non sequitur (NS): The writing suggests there is a logical connection or inference within a sentence or between sentences, when in fact there is none. For example, "On average, white people are better-off than blacks, so they are seldom poor." Here, both parts of the sentence state something that is true, but the first does not imply the second. Whites could be better off than blacks, yet still often poor.

I will put on Classes a complete list of these symbols and their meanings. These are the problems to avoid as you make your augments.

Another challenge is documentation. In a paper, when you refer to the work of other authors, you should observe established conventions for citing these publications. Few students know how to do this. I will also put a document about this on Classes.

Thus the focus is on stating an argument that is persuasive and also correctly made, avoiding writing and documentation problems. All the papers are short—no more than five pages. So you can concentrate on making a bulletproof case.

Scoring: In assessing papers, I give up to 50 points for argument and 50 points for writing. The writing score is 50 less one point for each correction I make, including for documentation. If a paper is short of the required length, the maximum score for writing will be reduced proportionately. The overall score will be the sum of the scores for argument and writing.

These scores and overall comments on your arguments will appear in Classes, under Assignments, rather than directly on the paper. Symbols for writing problems will be written on the papers, which I will return. If anything is unclear, come talk to me. It's important that you understand any writing problems that occur, so you can avoid them in future papers.

Typically, writing scores vary more than argument scores. Some students will initially get low writing scores. That is usually because they have never faced close correction like this before. Their earlier teachers have ignored the writing problem. Don’t panic! The problems are typically superficial, and everyone will improve.

Above all, do not interpret these scores as grades. Judge how you are doing by how your scores compare to the class average, which I will announce. I will convert scores to grades—which run higher—at the end of the course. I will do this by ranking the class based on their average paper scores and assigning number grades based on that ranking. These grades will then contribute to your overall average, and the ranking of those averages determines letter grade for the course. The final grade distribution will be much as in other courses, as discussed under Requirements above.
**Submission:** Papers may be handed to me in class on the day indicated or before the deadline. They may also be left in my mailbox at the Politics Department prior to when I leave for the class when the paper is due. Papers may not be submitted by fax or e-mail.

Papers given to me after the class when the papers are due will incur a penalty of:

- **5 points** if handed if within a week after the class when they were due.
- **10 points** if handed in later than this but prior to when final grades are submitted.

Be aware that delays due to commuting, the subway, or computer or printer problems are the student's responsibility.

*Keep a copy of your paper, in hard copy or on disk, in case it should become lost.*

For policy on extensions and Incompletes, see Requirements above.

**Format:** Papers should observe the following guidelines. Papers infringing the rules will be penalized up to 8 points.

Cover page: must include your name, local address, e-mail address, and all possible phone numbers. Please place this data in the upper left-hand corner, to make it easier to locate your paper in a stack.

Cover page must also include the question being answered as stated above. Write it out verbatim on your cover page. This is to make sure that you focus on it.

Length: 4-5 pages, excluding cover page and bibliography (if any) but including footnotes or endnotes. In figuring length, half the length of any tables or figures will be added to the text.

Papers must be typed or written on a computer.

Spacing: double-spaced, with 22-4 lines to the page.

Margins: 1-1.5" on the left and top of pages, .75-1" on the right and bottom.

Type size: close to the size used for this assignment. Footnotes may use a slightly smaller font.

Pages must be numbered, starting with the first page of text. Page numbers may be handwritten.

Binders—avoid. Instead, papers should be stapled at upper left-hand corner.

Documentation: May use either author/date or footnote/endnote method. See Documentation handout.

Sources: The paper may be written entirely from the readings assigned for the course. Other materials may be cited provided they were regularly published, such as books or newspaper or journal articles. This is to assure that they have faced some sort of review for accuracy other than by the author. Unpublished papers written by academics are also acceptable.

Materials from web sites may not be cited unless they were also regularly published. Two exceptions: You may cite government reports and news stories from reputable news organizations that appear on web sites; but cite these in published form if possible.

To save trees, please print on both sides of the paper, but this is optional.
**Originality:** Students may discuss the assignments with other students but must write their papers individually, without collaboration with others. Students may seek help with their writing in general, but the writing they hand in should be entirely their own, not edited by others.

**Plagiarism:** Do not use ideas drawn from readings without giving the source. Also, do not use an author's actual language as if it were your own. When you quote a source verbatim, it is not sufficient to give the reference; you must *also put quotation marks around the borrowed language* to make clear that someone else is talking. Do not copy material out of books into your paper unless the author truly says it better than you can. Plagiarism is a serious offense that will draw heavy penalties.

At the same time, the paper is intended to test your own thought and expression, not your mastery of academic conventions. Don't feel you have to have a citation for every sentence. If you rely on a source several times in a paragraph, for instance, one footnote at the end of the paragraph, giving all the pages referred, is usually sufficient. There is no need to document facts that are commonly known to your audience or in the context of this course.