This course is about using logic to think about issues of public policy and evidence to do the same thing. One way to think about this course is it is mostly about evidence based policy making: making schools better, designing health policy and dealing with climate change (with tons of other policy applications possible, see below for topic choice). For a variety of reasons we will only deal with domestic issues, primarily at the national level.

The course is in two parts. We start with the methodology of quantitative policy assessment, using Angrist and Pischke, Mastering Metrics (MM). You should buy this, either via the bookstore or however you get books (including electronic form). It is, by textbook standards, quite cheap. After learning a variety of methods, we circle back and apply these to various policy topics of interest. We always do something related to health insurance (“Obamacare”), climate change/environment and education. However, I prefer to keep the policy topics open so we can deal with issues that are on the agenda this spring, or very new research.

Once we finish MM, the readings are relevant applied papers, all available online (and posted in classes). Of course the part of your work which involves finding data (which may be the most important thing you learn), leads to many possible paths, but at all at zero monetary cost to you (though not at zero time cost!).

We use Stata because that is what 850 uses; it is, alas, too hard for me to deal with more than one program, though if students know R, we can talk about using that. Stata is available in most NYU labs, and can be run via the Virtual Computer Lab (which students either like or hate). You are of course free to buy a version of Stata (ordered through the
Stata web site, https://www.stata.com/order/new/edu/gradplans/student-pricing/). You want Stata/IC (the labs have more powerful versions, but IC will work for our needs). For the class you can, of course, purchase the 6 month license for $45, but if you are doing an honors thesis you may well find the $198 perpetual license a good buy. But if money is an issue, using Stata in the labs is just fine.

If you have a MacBook with Stata it would be great to bring that to class. Alas, Stata does not run under IOS. But even if you do not have Stata, searching for data with an iPad or iPhone is useful. While everything can, of course, also be done on a Windows oriented machine, I myself do not use Windows and so may not be able to help you.

There are two big (related) differences between this version of 315 and previous versions. The course will actually ask you to both gather (web scraping) and analyze (using Stata) data. For the first part I will give out the data; for the second you will gather it. Because of the stats prerequisite (we will discuss the first day why I think this is the case), the class is very small (right now just over 10 students enrolled). Thus it will run more like a seminar with lots of discussion and group work. However, unlike a seminar, there is no big paper or presentation but rather smaller exercises/homeworks/projects assigned more or less every two weeks (or for every major topic). The MM exercises are pretty canned; the second set of exercises involve figuring out how to find the data as well as analyzing. Since this is the first time I have taught 315 this way, there is a lot of openness here. Also, even with the stats prerequisite, I am not sure how much Stata you know. Fortunately, the department has a an underused Data TA who is available to help you. So will play it a bit year, but do not worry; this openness will not harm either you or your grades (so long as you participate, work hard and try).

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING DETAILS (specifics will be provided on Classes in a timely way)

1. There are 8 homework exercises. In the first part of the course they are more related to specific skills we have studied, in the second part they are related to applying the skills to the four policy areas we study. They are are varying form and length (on average three to five pages of essay writing for 4 policy exercises, the 4 skills exercises are more like homework than essays. For simplicity, are each worth 10 points, for a total value of 80 points. Some parts of these may be done in small groups, but each member of the group has to participate in the writeup.

2. Participation - 20 points. If you miss one (or two) classes, don’t worry.

You will get plenty of notice on assignments, which are posted on classes. Submission is via classes. Everything will be submitted in pdf. Details when relevant.

3. You will note there are NO exams!
Plagiarism is a VERY serious issue in the internet era. You should know what plagiarism is and avoid it. If you feel you are close to the line, but to be safe and give a source than be sorry. Since you will be making heavy use of web pages, please always give url's. Citations may be informal (name, author, url or whatever, url so it is easy to see and find the source). Also feel free to add in parentheses something like “this argument paraphrase that of Smith, with informal cite).

I hope that the assignments are both sufficiently unique and perhaps sufficiently interesting that there will be no plagiarism. But if my optimistic outlook is incorrect, the first instance of plagiarism will result in a zero on that assignment. A second instance will result in an F in the course and a notification of CAS.

Please note that ALL relevant assignments will first be checked for originality via TURNITIN. Make sure that what you submit is consistent with TURNITIN (the required PDF’s should be, but check the receipt. Please note that once you submit a PDF and it goes to TURNITIN, there is no way to undo your submission. So far I have never had a plagiarism problem (detected) and I hope to keep it this way. The only way to plagiarize would be to use another student’s work; since I read all the homeworks, this would be a foolish thing to do. On group work, just make clear who did what, and what is your’s, what was done in the group.
0. Introducing the most critical ideas: causality and counterfactuals

Jan. 28 - Feb. 4 - Quantitative policy analysis. What is causality? Why is it important? Toy example on enrollment in 315. Real example with real data on how many deaths were caused by Hurricane Maria. How to analyze the data. Homework: Analyze the Maria death data in several ways. Various issues in the quantitative assessment of public policy including what it does best and what it does less well.

Reading: “Ascertainment of the estimated excess mortality from Hurricane María in Puerto Rico” and “Mortality in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria” (on classes, with data)

Exercise 1: doing that analysis.

I. The skills - we will use as a running example the effect of the expansion of Medicaid (as under Obamacare) but will discuss other applications in the class. Homeworks will both analyze the data from the articles below and also ask you to think of other applications.


Reading: MM ch 1. “The Oregon experiment — Effects of Medicaid on clinical outcomes” and “Effect of Medicaid coverage on ED Use — Further evidence from Oregon’s Experiment” (on classes, with data)

Exercise 2: doing that analysis

(Feb. 18 is a holiday)

Feb. 20-27 Observational approaches to causality: regression and matching. The analysis on a health survey on the impact of insurance via regression and matching.

Reading: MM ch 2

Exercise 3: Doing that analysis
Mar. 4-13 — Quasi-experimental designs (mostly different in differences). Once again, applied to the extension of Medicaid.

Reading: MM ch. 4 and 5. “Mortality and access to care among adults after state Medicaid expansions” and “Changes in mortality after Massachusetts health care reform” (on classes, with data)

Exercise 4: Doing that analysis.

II. Applications to policy areas of interest. Here are some guesses about topics and data, this is subject to change, each one will have an exercise including data collection and analysis and extensions. Readings to be assigned on classes.

Mar 25-Apr 3 Climate Change
Apr 1-10 - Minimum wage, income inequality
Apr 15-24 - Education - preschool, vouchers, universities
Apr 29-May 8 - Immigration

III. A summing up or whatever -

May 13