IMPORTANT INFORMATION FOR STUDENTS THINKING OF TAKING POL 315 - CONTROVERSIES IN PUBLIC POLICY - NEW PREREQUISITE

315 will be a bit different this year because statistics is now prerequisite; this will allow me to cover things a bit more in depth and also to have you do your own analyses using Stata.

The standard prerequisite is POL 850 (or its precursor if you took years ago). If you took the Wagner course, GP 111, AND IF YOU USED STATA (this is took it with Andy Sinclair) you are also fine. In the latter case you will probably need to be cleared (just do by mail) by the political science undergraduate coordinator, Emily Mitchell-Marell. If you took another course, you will need to watch a few Stata tutorials and answer a few questions before enrolling but you will first need to contact me for instructions about what you need to do to register and how to learn enough Stata to start.

I do not need a lot of statistics but I do need people who have seen: probability, the normal and binomial distribution/density, the logic of testing (null and alternative hypotheses, Type I and II errors and such, difference of means tests and multiple regression). We go over this again, but it matters if the first or second time you have seen. If you have not yet had a statistics course, just take one and take 315 next year.

In terms of Stata, it is pretty easy, but you do need to know how to get data into Stata, how to get help, and how to do simple analyses (mostly multiple regression) and how to draw some graphs. There is help provided by the department during the semester, but again I do not want to start from scratch. So if you have not used Stata, but are rusty, watch some YouTube videos on a list made by Bobst and then curated a bit by me at (Stata intro for Beck). If you have not used Stata before I will send you a simple exercise once you have watched the videos - this will make sure you can get data into Stata and then run regressions or make graphs. (Early on we will get simple ways of moving data from the web to Stata, but I assume this is new to most.) Once you have done the exercise I will send mail to Emily Mitchell-Marell.

In past editions of the course students did no primary analysis and little finding of data. Now homeworks will ask you to do both
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315 will be a bit different this year because statistics is now prerequisite; this will allow me to cover things a bit more in depth and also to have you do your own analyses using Stata.

The standard prerequisite is POL 850 (or its precursor if you took years ago). If you have not had 850 but had another course you can check the 850 syllabus to see if is similar and then send a note to our undergraduate coordinator, Emily Mitchell-Marell. If you took another course but did not use Stata, you will need to watch a few Stata tutorials and answer a few questions before enrolling (again sending email to Emily Mitchell-Morell to get a registration code). If you took Statistics for Public Policy before Fall, 2018 you are fine; if you are taking now and learning Excel, you need to watch the Stata tutorials.

In past editions of the course students did no primary analysis and little finding of data. Now homeworks will ask you to do both (using Stata, which is why I need you to know it). We will also redo some of the analyses in Mastering Metrics as well as some of the article we read. The department provides a person who can help you with Stata issues, and I will provide You Tube tutorials and cheat sheets to simplify your lives. I will know more once I see how many people are enrolled and what their Stata skills are. The basic foundation of the course is unchanged as are the 8 assignments; last year’s syllabus is attached to this document. We will again start with Mastering Metrics. Topics may change because I try to have us discuss stuff that is on the current political agenda and of interest to the class (so long as it fits the kinds of things that 315 can deal with, so no foreign policy).

More information later. If you have questions you can email me, but remember I am about 16 time zones away.
POL-UA.315 Controversies in Public Policy: Logic and Evidence
Spring 2018
TTh 9:30-10:45
Silver 408

Prof. Nathaniel Beck
19 W. 4th St., Rm. 407
nathaniel.beck@nyu.edu
Office Hours: By appt. (send email, I am happy to arrange convenient appoints)

Course Assistant (Grader): Alec Gilfillan
alec.gilfillan@nyu.edu
(Alec's job is grading and not TAing; so contact him only with questions about homework grading or late assignment and the like)

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. This syllabus is written after the tax bill of 2017 was passed but before the 2018 session of Congress began. I like to deal with issues that are on the political agenda so this year there is even more openness than in past years. For example, I had thought that Obamacare was no longer a burning issue, but it looks like it has come to the top of the agenda again. Education, climate, inequality and poverty are always on the agenda. But I will lay out the structure of the course while leaving the policy topics for the later part of the course a bit open.

There are however, topics that work for this course and those that work well; also some are covered better elsewhere. Thus I will not deal with tax reform because so much of the discussion should be based on what you would study in a macroeconomics course. As you will see, it is very hard in the context of this course to deal with issues where there is really little or no data that has been collected; thus, to take another very current issue, the availability of data or the lack thereof makes it very possible for us to discuss study gender disparities in wages (we have a lot of good data on this) but makes it very hard to discuss #metoo (at this moment a huge lack of good data, and the current discussion fits better with various law courses). You will see the kinds of things we can do, and the kinds of things that at this moment we cannot; there are many policy issues in the world and not all are amenable to the methods taught in this course (which is why you take many others!).
When you look at the syllabus you will see dates and assignments; these will not change. But the topic we study may change. Fortunately all readings except Mastering Metrics will be on Classes, and you will get enough notice for when and what to read. While the Trump administration will help settle the topics we discuss, this is not a course in Trump, and particularly not a course in either Trump fact-checking, Trump-bashing or Trump/hating-loving. There is no such thing as normative free policy analysis, but the course is about various methods that should be useful to anyone interested in improving public policy regardless of their political position.
USEFUL APHORISMS

“For a successful technology, reality must take precedence over public relations, for nature cannot be fooled.” (Richard Feynman)

“Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts.” (Daniel Patrick Moynihan)

“If something cannot go on forever, it will stop.” (Herbert Stein)

“Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” (Albert Einstein)

“The best is the enemy of the good.” (Voltaire)

“Accurate and minute measurement seems to the non-scientific imagination, a less lofty and dignified work than looking for something new. But nearly all the grandest discoveries of science have been but the rewards of accurate measurement and patient long-continued labour in the minute sifting of numerical results.” (Lord Kelvin)

"The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor." (D.T. Campbell)

“The future lies ahead.” (Mort Sahl)

“It’s tough to make predictions, especially about the future.” (Attributed to Yogi Berra)

"I've been rich and I've been poor. Rich is better.” (Usually attributed to Mae West but actually Beatrice Kaufman)

“A billion here, a billion there, pretty soon, you're talking real money.” (Everitt Dirksen, former Speaker of the house, but a misquote: ‘Oh, I never said that. A newspaper fella misquoted me once, and I thought it sounded so good that I never bothered to deny it.”

“Az di bobe volt gehat beytsim volt zi geven mayn zeyde.” (Yiddish saying, look it up, the counter side of a lot of what we do in this class so keep it in mind!)
READINGS

Most readings are available via NYU Classes (often just links to Bobst). There is only one text you need to buy, Angrist and Pischke, Mastering Metrics (MM). We use this early on so please make sure you have. I do not use the bookstore, but is easy (and cheap) to get from Amazon or your online vendor of choice (or you can get a Kindle version). We also use a tool to spark discussion: Learning Catalytics. You should purchase a 6 month license ($12) from the Pearson/LC site


If you are not sure if you are staying in the course you can postpone buying for the first week - there are no participation penalties during the first week

Some of the skills we need are economic. There is no economics equivalent to Mastering Metrics that I know of (Naked Economics comes close, but too little public policy). But I will put on Classes chapters from two straightforward and readable policy oriented economics books, Basic Economics: A Common Sense Guide to the Economy by Thomas Sowell (marked BE in the syllabus) and Economic Concepts for the Social Sciences by Todd Sandler (marked EC). You will note that, in particular, Sowell has a very strong view of how the world works and we will discuss that; Sandler is a bit more middle of the road, though of course all economists (and economically oriented people like me) bring a certain perspective to the study of public policy. While I chose those books because of coverage and level, it is nice that Bobst has a very user friendly policy of purchasing books as ebooks or otherwise making various books readily and legally available to the end user for free (though as you shall learn, if you don’t know, that nothing is free!).

The course is structured in two parts. Part 1 is built around skills that are covered in MM, with applications and readings drawn from public policy issues. Part II is a more general discussion of policy issues using a variety of skills (theoretical and empirical) to give us leverage on those issues.
ASSIGNMENTS (details 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 of 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. If any graphs are needed, they can be done in Numbers or Excel or the like (or on one many online tools). Some exercises will ask you to interpret in English more complex findings, but no complicated statistical analyses are assigned. For those who worry, none of the exercises are “high stakes” and worry/anxiety is not helpful. (If you are stressing, you should find me.)

2. Participation (attendance in lectures and participation, as seen through Learning Catalytics - 20 points. If you miss one (or two) classes, don’t worry. If you miss more, send me email as to why. If you are ill, etc., we can deal with it. But proactive notification is the way to go here (though if you are in the hospital, wait until you are well to notify me). If you have something contagious, stay home! PLEASE NOTE THAT LATE PAPERS WILL LEAD TO A DEDUCTION FROM YOUR PARTICIPATION GRADE.

Assignments MUST be posted to courses under your login. Unless otherwise noted, you will upload your essays as a PDF attachment. YOU MUST SUBMIT IN PDF. Please name the PDF file as: YOURLASTNAME_DATE. The graders will download the pdf so you must name them so they will not get lost. Those that are not in PDF will be returned. The first non-PDF will simply generate a yellow card (warning). Should it happen again, it is not quite a red card, but it will hurt your participation grade.

All exercises are assigned on Thursday of the relevant week on due by midnight on the due date (the following Thursday). They are graded ✔+ (excellent), ✔ (all this was needed for the exercise), ✔- (deficiency, as noted by grader). Those exercises that are not received by when the grader finished grading receive a zero. This is a huge penalty. So do not game this! As noted, exercises that are late but in time for grading cost participation points.

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.
A NOTE ON READINGS

Many of the readings are technical reports (that is, real analyses of real problems). In class I will indicate what parts of those reports I want you to read. An important skill that often is not learned until later in life is how to read quite technical things to get the important points (and, as you learn more technique, to see the implicit assumptions that underlay the work). Thus for example, we will read several of Roland Fryer’s analyses of various educational experiments. The important thing, as I will point out, is to see how, say, experiments are used in assessing educational reforms. By reading the actual experimental papers you get the details of the experiment, which show both how they are useful and how they are limited. You can also see the conclusions that are drawn from the analysis, and you will learn how to assess the relationship between the actual study and the wider conclusions that are drawn. These documents are hard to understand, but failing to understand them leaves the debate to those who can speak the language of this type of analysis. The devil is truly in the (technical) details. One cannot discuss issues of climate change without understanding what discounting means, and it is hard to understand much of the discussion around the Stern Report on Climate Change without attempting to wade through (and understand) some long and technical writing. In short, most undergraduates are trained to read everything and expect to report on that reading on tests; here my goal is to get you to know how to pick out the important parts of very long and very technical papers. This is not an easy skill to pick up.

As you all know, the web is full of fake news and other garbage. Everything I assign you can trust (more or less). We will assume that government reports and data (such as from the Bureau of Labor Statistics) are accurate. Articles written by academics that are assigned can also be taken as real, but everyone (including academics) has a normative view on things which can shade conclusions and such. We will discuss how an intelligent consumer can deal (somewhat) with his problem, but it is a real problem when we get to contentious issues, and all issue we discuss are fairly contentious. Thus, for example, figuring out what data to believe on climate change is hard (but very doable), and we will discuss this issue. When exercises ask you to look at the web for opinion pieces or data, part of the exercise will be your estimation of the believability of what you find. You live in a complicated world. In dealing with controversial issues, evaluating sources and figuring out whom to trust (or at least trust more) is a good part of the game.
ELECTRONICS AND EMAIL

There will be many times in class that you may want to consult the web (for class related things, try to avoid Instagramming me in class). Learningcatalytics REQUIRES that you have a web enabled device to communicate (an iPhone or iPad works just fine, and you can work with any browser and operating system). If you do not have a smart phone or other way of connecting to the web, please make arrangements. If you do not bring your device to class, it will appear as though you were not in class. (Should this policy cause a hardship, please send me email.)

Electronic communications (email!) from students are highly encouraged. We can follow up non-electronically but start with email. Please schedule appointments (even for office hours) via email.

All assignments are made on Classes. Check it often, especially the schedule page which links to reading assignments and the various exercises. Information on Classes should be accurate; the syllabus is just a general guideline.

IMPORTANT NOTE ON EMAIL: NYU has an aggressive spam filter, particular for mail not coming from the nyu domain. So please start all email headers with POLICY, which should avoid your mail ending up in my spam filter. I am a good email responder, so if you do not hear back from me in a day or two assume your mail got lost and please resent.
BLOGS

Your learning in this course will be enriched by reading policy arguments. Most of these are in blogs. These come in many forms; some are quite believable (those listed below, for sure), some much less so. You need to learn how to distinguish which blogs and sources you want to believe.

These are blogs that I read (in my normal life, not just for this class).

The Monkey Cage
The Upshot
Paul Krugman
Greg Mankiw
Cheap Talk
Marginal Revolution
Economix
Econbrowser
NYU Development
Ezra Klein/Vox/The Weeds
538 (more about politics than policy, but some policy)
Environmental and Urban Economics
Dot Earth

There are many, many, more blogs
Weekly Schedule (by Week) - Changes announced on Classes supersede anything here. ALL READINGS AND ASSIGNMENTS ARE POSTED ON COURSES IN ADVANCE (overheads are posted after class).

Week 1 - Introduction to the course, preliminary discussion of the use of logic and evidence in public policy with examples. (1/23 and 25)

Exercise 1 on data (due 2/1)

Part I - skills (this part is set and will not change, though I may change example, the MM readings and topics are fixed)

Week 2 - Thinking about research design and causality: experiments (1/30 and 2/1)

Read: MM ch 1 (Randomized Trial up to the Appendix)
Also read experimental studies assigned on Classes

Week 3 - The basics of statistical inference for public policy; more on design (2/6 and 8)

Read MM ch 1 Appendix
Also read experimental studies assigned on Classes

Exercise 2 on experiments in public policy (due 2/15)

Week 4 - Regression based approaches - understanding regression (2/13 and 15)

Read MM ch. 2 (entirety)
Also read regression based studies assigned on Classes

Exercise 3 on understanding regression (due 2/22)

Week 5 - Regression Discontinuity (2/20 and 22)

Read MM ch.4 (we skip ch 3)
Also read discontinuity based studies assigned on Classes

Week 6 - Difference in difference designs (2/27 and 3/1)

Read MM ch 5 (entirety)
Also read DinD based studies assigned on Classes

Exercise 4 on quasi-experiments (due 3/8)
Part II - Policies (using skills) - the particular policies may change with the current political agenda, but the skills and such will not change

Week 7 - Climate change and the environment, including externalities (3/6 and 8)

Reading on externalities, prices, Pigou taxes and regulation as well as applied pieces on climate change assigned on Classes

BE ch 3 and 4
EC ch 2, 4 and 10

Week 8 (following break) - more on climate and the environment including how discounting (how to value the future) and uncertainty/risk (3/20 and 22)

Readings on risk and discounting and applied pieces on climate/environment on Classes

Exercise 5 on climate/environment (due 3/29)

Week 9 - Minimum wage and related issues (3/27 and 29)

Reading on the economics of the minimum wage and applied articles on Classes

BE ch 11

Week 10 - Inequality and Poverty in the US (4/3 and 5)

Reading on issues of inequality and applied articles on inequality and mobility on Classes

Exercise 6 on minimum wage/inequality (due 4/12)

Week 11 - Health Insurance, Obamacare and its possible replacement (4/10 and 12)

Reading on theoretical issues related to health insurance insurance markets and applied articles on issues related to Obamacare on Classes

EC ch 7

Week 12 - More on health care generally (4/17 and 19)

Readings on Classes

Exercise 7 on health including Obamacare (due 4/26)

Week 13 - Education, vouchers and charter schools (4/24 and 26)

Reading on the charters and vouchers and applied articles on policy proposals on Classes
Week 14 - More on education, moving to higher education (making college affordable) (5/1 and 3)

Readings on higher education economics and policies on Classes

Exercise 8 on education (due on Thurs May 10)
(using Stata, which is why I need you to know it). We will also redo some of the analyses in Mastering Metrics as well as some of the article we read. I will know more once I see how many people are enrolled and what their Stata skills are. The basic foundation of the course is unchanged as are the 8 assignments; last year’s syllabus is attached to this document. We will again start with Mastering Metrics. Topics may change because I try to have us discuss stuff that is on the current political agenda and of interest to the class (so long as it fits the kinds of things that 315 can deal with, so no foreign policy).

Please remember that when you look at the syllabus that it takes you time to do analyses and it takes class time to discuss how to do it. Hence we will do fewer things than in the attached syllabus. Also note that my job is to prepare you for the future, not the past. Thus I will add a section on Artificial Intelligence/Automation as it relates to policy (the future of the labor market, universal basic incomes, relationships to globalization); again, something will have to disappear to do this.

If you have any questions please contact me at the special class gmail account, remembering that I am 16 time zones away from you until the class starts. Please do not be put off by the statistics prerequisite; there is a reason we teach 850!