**POL-UA 395.001**

**Seminar: Thinking about Hard Issues in American Public Policy**

**M 11-1:30**

Since you are here, you are likely thinking about whether or not you want to take this course (TLDR: You do!). This gives you some guidance. I am sure some of you are concerned about the level of statistics wanted, so I will clarify that. Some of you want to know if this either requires 315 first or is redundant after 315. This is easy and answer to both it no. But the same person teaches 315 and this seminar, so you can get some ideas of what I do by looking at the relevant part of the 315 handout, which is at end of this document. Please also note that even 315 chooses topics based on current interest, and seminars are even more sui generis. So recent 315's were very covid based, I am HOPEFUL that by Fall Covid will be less of an issue and so I do not expect to deal with Covid details in this seminar (though we could deal with pandemic preparedness and such issues).

In terms of issues, we deal with things which are more or less on the current agenda (the Overton Window) and which you all express some interest. I do not do foreign policy since my methods don't work well there and you

can take Prof. Bueno de Mesquita's course. While we do consider normative issues in talking about policy, I don't have much of value to offer on almost purely normative issues (eg issues related to First Amendment or other issues that are mostly legal). Given we have lots of American Politics/Public Opinion courses, I also don't deal with issues that relate primarily to what we call politics, such as redistricting. However, as relevant our discussions and presentations will include normative and political/public opinion issues, when combined with the analytic and evidence issues of the seminar. To give an example, on the environment or climate change, we look at the analytics, but also normative issues related to environmental justice and electoral/public opinion/ "political" issues. There are things that we can do on the Second Amendment, but whether the founders omitted a comma by mistake is not something that we will make much progress on. We will also try to avoid direct discussion of the mid-term election while being aware of its impact on policy.

The seminar differs from the 315 lecture because it is a seminar. So LOTS more student participation, student presentations (likely group) and policy papers (group and/or individual). I will ask you to prepare a brief written statement before all or some classes (lots of details to be worked out). You are expected to speak in class. In 315 I do most of the talking; in this seminar I will try to shut up. In 315 I provide the data and written

material; in the seminar a decent part of your work is finding and assessing this material on your own.

Grading is similar to 315. I do not believe in exams or long papers. You will be assessed on participation, the short pre-class statements and policy presentations. For a seminar there are no exact grading breakdowns, but if you are worried about grades or crave certainty, this may not be the class for you. I note that I heavily reward effort.

In terms of statistics, there are no prerequisites other than some interest in using data to assess important topics. 315 was a lot more (too much?) concerned with issues of data and causality; this seminar less so (though still concerned). As noted, you will also collect more of your own data. This will mostly be secondary, from reports and web sites, not primary from actual surveys or other complicated data sources (unless you want to do this, in which case great; group projects can take advantage of different interests and sill sets). If you have had 850 great but I do not expect you to know how to analyze a survey using R (again, if you can or want to, great). We talk a bunch about causality, which is covered quickly in 850 (Mastering Metrics), but I think I can teach you all you need. So does Josh Angrist (Nobelist co-author of Mastering Metrics) who has a series of videos which cover the important parts of Mastering Metrics/Causality in a very palatable video

format (beyond what he passes off as his sense of humor).

To get an idea of the level of these videos, check out his Marginal Revenue University <u>videos</u>. (To see if this seminar fits your interests and skills, take  a quick look at the Introduction, the two videos under 3 and perhaps the randomized trials video. Since we have only 14 150 minute meetings, we discuss most of this in the first seminar meeting. It all makes sense and is not really hard (in spite of Angrist wining the Nobel for this type of work). If this course has a backbone, this is it.)

Finally, I do not have my head in the sand (I hope) and so am aware of the political climate at elite universities. But I hope we can have calm discussion of important issues and focus on bringing to bear all kinds of evidence on such. I hope we do end up looking like a twitter set of comments. Whether this can happen in the current environment is unclear. If we don't tweet about our discussions things will go better.

**POL-UA.315 Controversies in Public Policy: Logic and Evidence**
**Spring 2021**
**MW 11-12:15**

**What we do and study (and what we do not)**

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. In past years we dealt with important domestic policy issues: climate change; other environmental issues; inequality and poverty (including a lot on minimum wages: the intersection of race and inequality; criminal justice and policing (of course intersecting with race); making schools better; designing health policy. Obviously Covid-19 will also be an important topic.

For a variety of reasons we will only deal with domestic issues, primarily at the national level. We need policies your understand, we need repeatability, we need areas where we can get data and areas where we can use the methods of the course. The course is very US-centric, since that is what most of you are more familiar with, and where evidence is easiest to obtain; the methods of

the course travel well to other countries and their key issues. We do need repeated data, so, for example, we do not do logic and evidence in US foreign policy since hard to get such data. We do touch on normative issues, which are critical, but only in the context of combining this with logic and evidence. You will see how this works the first day. Some topics are mostly data; some more logic. For some topics you learn about specific skills, so cost-benefit analysis and discounting in terms of environment/climate change, etc. But I am not going to make you an expert in climate or epidemiology. I also assume that topics like foreign policy or elections or Congress public opinion or administrative law are covered in other Politics courses so I only pick the issues related to those topics insofar as I need them for the course.

Much of the course is about using the modern analysis of causality to help us understand policy issues. Do not worry; while, as always, academics can make things complicated, the basic ideas are easy enough. I provide some chapters from Angrist and Pischke's undergraduate text, Mastering 'Metrics (hereinafter MM) , but as they have begun to put their book on video through Marginal Revolution University (hereinafter MM/ MRU), I will rely more on that. (Alas, as of January 2021 not all chapters are on video, but things may change). But I do not like to be too abstract, so most discussion is about real policy controversies abased I I like to have

you read the actual contributions by scholars. I do edit those and I present so you can get the important ideas without fussing over the details that academics tend to focus on. Nicely, there is a MM/MRU video on how to read regression tables without a lot of tears. All policy articles are on classes, and I put them up in edited form (mostly eliminating details). Thus there are no required texts for the course.

You will note that I have not directly mentioned the 1000 pound gorilla in the room: events I will lump under Black Lives Matter. (BLM).  In my mind these topics are best treated, as I have always treated them, under topics like inequality, policing, Covid-19, health, education,  the environment and such. It is hard to think of a policy topic where race is not a crucial factor, and you will see this clearly in the readings and lectures and discussion.

At a general level I am pretty sure that issues related to race, covid, inequality, global warming, health care and poverty will be on the national or perhaps state/local policy agenda (what is known in journalism as the Overton Window). My preference is to talk about actual policies under discussion and clearly will learn about these over the semester. The methods work for all we do (or I choose what we do so we can use the methods of the course!) so I am not concerned, please bear with me. Undergraduates generally have lower tolerance for

uncertainty than I do; I hope to convince you that dealing with uncertainty is a really good skill.

The approach of the course is technocratic, but technocracy alone cannot settle any policy issues. Thus there are always normative issues at stake, as we shall see in our first breakouts. And of course politics and public opinion is always there, and these are intertwined with laws and institutions. I will try to weave these in without making this a course in US Politics or normative theory.