

Plans for Pol 315 Controversies in Public Policy: Logic and Evidence for Spring 2021

This is written to help students think about taking this course Spring 2021. It is written in late October, 2020 and so there is a bit of uncertainty on schedule and topics. The structure of the course has not changed, so there will be a series of two week modules on various policies in the context of learning how to think analytically and quantitatively about public policy. In terms of grading, there is a homework assignment due every other week. I am not sure what I will do about participation since the course will be remote. The reading will be similar in scope to last year, and, as always, I edit them to get the appropriate technical level. As always, all readings are provided on Canvas and no purchases are necessary. I want people to see real policy research, though, as noted, I edit for both length and to make readable for our class/

As noted, because of uncertainties due to Covid-19, I am planning for the course to be remote (on Zoom). Given the time of course is later morning, it should work for students who are at a remote site. Students in the course must be able to converse in breakout rooms.

While a lot of the course is lecture, it is important that you talk and think about the issues. Some of this is done via homework, but Zoom makes it possible to form small random groups to discuss issues. I plan to use this feature extensively. Thus class attendance is VERY important.

I try to choose policy topics that are on the current agenda. Last year I had no idea that Covid-19 would be important until early March; at that point we were able to have a bunch of Covid-19 related classes, discussing evidence that was available at the time. Similarly, presidents put a lot of items on the agenda, and of course at this time there is some uncertainty on this score. And while we have always dealt with policing and criminal justice, the killing of George Floyd, which came right after the course ended, has clearly moved such items very high on the agenda. Again, we have always done inequality and race, but Covid-19 has made these issues even starker. Other issues, like climate change, seem to always be with us. Poverty, and its interaction with both race and inequality, is another perennial issue in the class. We do not do some things because they do not fit with the focus of the course. So we do not do foreign policy (we have other logic and evidence courses on that), and we only do legal or normative issues insofar as they cannot be separated from the underlying policy issues. So trust me that the topic will be both interesting and relevant, even our focus is on what we know and how we find out what works.

I hope this helps in your decision making about Spring registration.

What follows is the unedited spring 2020 syllabus, which is similar in form, but not content to what we will do (it came pre-Covid-19). It is just to give you an idea, but I will not have a 2021 syllabus before registration.

POL-UA.315 Controversies in Public Policy: Logic and Evidence
Spring 2020
MW 11-12:15
GCASL 369

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[Email](#)

Grader: Julieta Valenzuela [Email](#)

Office Hours: By appointment or catch me after class. To schedule, send email. I am happy to arrange convenient appointments; confirm by email any appointments scheduled right after class. Because NY State appears to like silly rules, my formal office hours are MW 12:15-1:15. I am always happy to chat in GCASL right after class. Since the formal office hours are very limited, it is much better for you (and me) to simply arrange appointments by email. If you need to SMS me (to tell me you are running late for an appointment or I am not in my office for a scheduled appointment) my cell is 347-225-5564 but do not use other than for scheduling purposes. Only contact Julia directly in case of some obvious grading question.

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). We can also see this course as drawing from political science, public policy, economics (applied micro-economics and behavioral economics), data science (using the work of others, not learning the methods!) and statistics (interpretation of standard statistics and research design).

For a variety of reasons we will only deal with domestic issues. The issues chosen are important topics of public policy, typically on the "Overton Window" (the set of policies that are currently on the political agenda). We discuss policies where the methods of the course can contribute to your understanding and also are not covered in more detail elsewhere (eg trade and taxes). Thus for the first year we will discuss Jerry Yang's proposed version of the universal basic income. Similarly, we need to discuss the various Democrats proposals for making Obamacare more universal.

This year I am stressing n the methods by looking at the issues and research rather than reading about the methods per se. One other difference from previous years is that there will more discussion of getting interesting data (using web sites that allow for graphical analysis right on the site). This will all become clear (er) during the course.

All readings are on classes and are free. No software of any kind or needed. If you have a tablet or notebook please bring it to class. You can do some stuff on an iPhone but screen is too small.

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

There are 7 homework exercises. These vary by area but usually ask for some analysis, perhaps looking at some data (from a web site which enables the drawing of graphs so only screen shots are needed) and some interpretation of policy research. For simplicity, each counts equally (12 points each) and each involves perhaps 5 or so pages of writing (and some reading). **Thus homeworks are 84% of your grade.** For simplicity homeworks are graded on a 0-10 scale, with effort counting towards that grade.

Because I want you to talk (and think), participation is critical. In class we will sometimes break into small groups, with the groups discussing for a few minutes and then reporting back to the class. There will also be specific policy forums on classes (where I set the topics). **Participation is 16% of your grade.**

To encourage participation and for me to know what you know, and to make the participation portion of your grade a bit more objective, we use Pearson's [Learning Catalytics](#) (buy via this link). Best would be if you bought before first day of class, but if you want to postpone or have joined late, no worries. If you miss a few classes, no worries. If you miss a bunch for a good reason (health), let me know,

You will note there are NO exams!

PLAGIARISM

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.

READINGS AND OVERHEADS AND SUBMITTING ASSIGNMENTS

Readings will be posted on classes a week or so before they are discussed in class.

They are scheduled in the calendar and posted in resources. Please note that many readings are technical. I have tried to edit them to make them easier to read and to grasp what you need to grasp. One skill we will learn in the course is how to read technical papers that are a bit over your head. This is a very useful skill!

Overheads will be posted on classes (in resources) AFTER each class.

Exercises MUST be submitted electronically on classes. All exercises must be in pdf, and the title of your submission MUST be LASTNAME_EX{number}.pdf. Exact time for submission without penalty (and last date with penalty) will be on the exercise, as will page guidelines and such. Grading scheme for exercises and penalties will be explained in class and then posted.