Syllabus for Government 467

Current Issues in Economic Policy
Spring, 2020

Mondays and Wednesdays, 1:30-2:45 p.m.
Buchanan Hall, D-001

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COURSE DESCRIPTION: This interdisciplinary seminar is offered as part of the concentration in Politics, Philosophy and Economics but is open to other students who have a solid understanding of economic principles. The aspiration of the course is to use concepts from economics, political science and philosophy to analyze real-world problems and evaluate a range of policy options to deal with them. Our fundamental questions will be: Why are things the way they are? What would make them better? What are the institutional and political factors that drive or impede change? How should we balance the tradeoff between fairness and economic growth, liberty and the need for collective action, self-reliance and mutual support? Topics this semester include immigration, the plight of the poor and working class, health care and global warming. There will be lots of discussion, occasional guest speakers and group presentations. Although there are no official pre-requisites for this course, students will need to have a solid understanding of basic economic principles and concepts. Without such grounding, you are unlikely to be able to keep up.
**CLASS SESSIONS:** This is a small, discussion-based seminar. What you get out of it will depend largely on what you put into it. Although I will moderate some of the discussions and play an active Socratic role, these class sessions are not meant to be a conversation between a professor and students. Rather, they are meant to be a discussion among students who respectfully discuss and debate with each other. There is no need to raise your hand to ask permission to speak. I will act as moderator to keep the discussion on track and make sure everyone gets a chance to participate. Roughly a quarter of your final grade—that’s a lot—will be based on the frequency and quality of your contributions to class discussions. Warning: I will sometimes call on students to participate in discussions even if they haven’t volunteered to speak. Attendance will be reflected in participation grades, so please let me know in advance if you will be unable to attend a class session.

The course is organized around four contentious and unresolved questions confronting the U.S. economy. Six class sessions will be devoted to each of topic.

The first session of each unit will feature an overview presentation by me that will include basic factual and historical information and a political map of the range of views on the question. At the end of the session, I will pass out a “policy puzzle”: a brief statement of the problem we are trying to analyze and fix. The puzzle should form the basis and set the parameters for the subsequent group presentations and individual policy memos.

The second session of each unit will be given over to a wide-ranging class discussion of the question/problem, using the professor’s presentation and the assigned reading as starting points. You should come to this session having completed the reading and having come to some of your own conclusions about the topic—or some questions you still have about it—to share with the class.

In the third session, the class will break up into policy teams of ideologically like-minded students—teams that will be established at the outset of the course. The assignment for each group will be to craft a five-point policy proposal to address the problem based on economic, political and moral considerations. In each group, the discussion will be
led by the student who has chosen to write his or her policy memo on the topic. You are expected to come to these sessions having already looked at policy options put forward by like-minded think tanks and policy experts—there is a lot of good work that is already been done and publicly available. During the class session, I will visit with each group to get a sense of where you are going and make suggestions for ideas and sources of information to explore. By the end of the session, your group should have come up with the outline of proposal that the group can further research and refine over the next week. Each group should work out a mechanism for communicating and collaborating with each other on the presentation outside of the class sessions.

The fourth session will generally be a talk by a guest expert on the topic. I will “interview” the guest for about a half hour, followed by your questions and a general discussion. You should do some of your own research about the guest and come to the session with thoughtful, well-informed questions that will help you and your policy refine their proposals.

In the fifth and sixth sessions, two of the groups will each make a 20-minute presentation of their analysis of the problem and their five-point plan for solving it. Although the topic expert(s) of the group should take the lead in organizing and presenting the material, other members of the group may also participate. A handout of no more than five pages summarizing the presentation should be distributed to all members of the class. The presenters should also use whatever slides and audio-visual materials they think best to help explain and justify their analysis and proposal. Once the presentation is completed, members of the other groups can ask questions and offer reactions. In terms of your course grade, every member of the group will have a personal stake in every one of the group’s presentations, not just the presenter.

Following both sets of presentations, I will prepare a written evaluation to each of the presentations and proposals and assign a score for each one on a 1-10 scale. These scores will be added up at the end of the semester to arrive at the group’s collective presentation grade.
**READING MEMOS:** On the second session of each unit, the day we begin our discussion, you should bring to class a two-to-four page memo summarizing the major points you took away from the assigned readings, a few questions they raised in your mind and one or two issues you would like to bring up in the discussion. The point of these memos is to demonstrate that you have read, digested and thought about the material. The memos will be graded as superior, satisfactory or unsatisfactory.

**PAPER:** A week after making their presentations, topic leaders should submit a policy memo of 15-20 pages, including charts and graphs. The brief should reflect the students’ own views (not necessarily that of their entire team) and should incorporate additional research you have done on the topic, along with any suggestions or criticisms that emerged at the presentations.

The policy memos should be written in plain English as if for the hypothetical policy maker set out in the policy puzzle. They should be organized in three parts: (1) the first part, concisely analyzing the question or problem, making use of charts and graphs in presenting credible data; (2) the second, laying out what you consider the four or five most important and effective policy initiatives that should be taken to address the problem, along with a discussion of economic, political or moral costs and benefits of each initiative. Papers will be evaluated based on the thoroughness of the research, the clarity of the writing and presentation, the effectiveness of the arguments and the originality and sophistication of the thinking that went into it. Do not waste your time (or mine) by summarizing what you are going to say at the beginning and summarizing what you have just said at the end. I will provide you with several models of policy memos that have been done on other issues at some of the leading think tanks.

**COURSE EVALUATION:**

- Reading Memos 25%
- Policy Memo 25%
- Team Performance 25%
- Class Participation 25%
The required reading for this course is substantial, including several books that are quite long, so you will need to carefully plan your reading. Since all of the reading for each unit will need to be done by the first day of that unit, it will be impossible to complete the reading the day before the unit begins. You will need to plan your work so that you are doing the reading for the next unit while we are still discussing the previous one. To get a jump on the reading, you might want to consider getting a head start during the January break.

Although some of the books are long, you should develop the knack for knowing when to skim when the material gets repetitious or is so technical that it will not useful for your purposes. This is an important skill to learn—using your time most efficiently—be it for school, for work, for life. Your challenge is to figure out what you need to know in order to develop a fairly sophisticated understanding of a problem.

The books are available at the bookstore but you may find you can buy them cheaper online. The articles are available on the Internet, or online through the Mason Library, and are no less important than the books. Do not make the mistake of thinking the articles are optional reading – they aren’t. In conjunction with your group presentation, you will need to supplement the assigned reading by consulting academic papers, news articles and policy briefs published by think tanks and other analysts. You will be expected to be fully familiar with the current debate on the topic.

The assigned readings are:

Unit 1: Immigration

*Heaven’s Door*, by George Borjas

*Open Borders*, by Bryan Caplan and Zach Weinersmith

“Shifting Public Views on Legal Immigration Into the U.S.,” Pew Research Center, June 28, 2018
Unit 2: Health Care

*Reinventing American Health Care*, by Ezekiel Emanuel
*An American Sickness*, by Elisabeth Rosenthal
Articles by Atul Gwande in the New Yorker (see below)
“From Incremental to Comprehensive Health Reform, How Various Reform Options Compare on Coverage and Cost,” Urban Institute

Unit 3: Declining Opportunity of Poor and Working Class

*Our Kids, The American Dream in Crisis*, by Robert Putnam
*Coming Apart, The State of White America, 1960-2010*, by Charles Murray

Unit 4: Climate Change

*The Climate Casino*, by William Nordhaus
“Conservatives and Climate Change,” by Jim Manzi and Peter Wehner, National Affairs, Summer, 2015
“Climate Change in the American Mind,” March, 2018, GMU’s Center for Climate Change Communications
CLASS SCHEDULE:

Jan. 22  Introduction, Team and Topic Assignments

Jan. 27 – Feb. 12  What Should We Do About Immigration?

The election of President Trump has forced reopening of an unresolved debate about immigration. What more should be done to secure the border against illegal immigration? What should we do about the 11 million illegal immigrants in the United States? How many, and what kind, of legal immigrants should we allow in every year, and what conditions should be set for their becoming citizens? How many refugees of war, famine or political oppression should be prepared to accept and under what conditions? In answering such questions, we must consider not only the economic costs and benefits of immigration to Americans, but also the benefit to the immigrants themselves and the costs to the countries from which they come. In addition to economic considerations, there are moral and political considerations as well.

Required Reading:

*Heaven’s Door*, by George Borjas

*Open Borders: The Science and Ethics of Immigration*, by Bryan Caplan and Zach Weinersmith (comic book!)

“Shifting Public Views on Legal Immigration Into the U.S.,” Pew Research Center, June 28, 2018

Feb. 10: Guest Speaker: Mason Prof. Bryan Caplan

Feb. 17- March 4- Is Obamacare the Right Fix for a U.S. Health Care System That Overspends and Under-Delivers?

Despite spending far more on health care than other industrialized countries, U.S. health outcomes lag behind. Until recently, the US was also the only industrialized country without some form of guaranteed national health insurance. What are the market dynamics
that lead to high costs and disappointing results? How successful has Obamacare been in addressing those? Are there better alternatives? Should health care be a right guaranteed to all citizens in a rich country? How much responsibility, financial and otherwise, should individuals have for their own health care? Is a competitive “market” in health care even possible? Would national health insurance be better?

Required Reading:

*Reinventing American Health Care*, by Ezekiel Emanuel
*An American Sickness*, by Elisabeth Rosenthal

Articles by Atul Gwande in the New Yorker:

- “The Cost Conundrum,” June 1, 2009
- “Overkill,” May 11, 2015
- “Is Health Care a Right?” Oct. 2, 2017

“Comparing Health Insurance Reform Options, Urban Institute

Feb. 26: Guest Speaker: Linda Blumberg, Urban Institute

March 9-11 Spring Break

Mar. 16-April 6 Why Have Incomes Become So Unequal? Why Is Poverty So Persistent? Why is Opportunity Declining?

At the center of today’s political debate in the United States is the plight of a working class, particularly a white working class, that feels it has been left behind by globalization and technology and ignored by government and the business and cultural elites. These voters have now upended American politics and policy by providing crucial support for the Republican Tea Party and President Trump. To better understand this populist revolt, we ask why wealth, income and economic
opportunity have become so unequal. Why is poverty so persistent in some regions and some families? Which programs have been effective at alleviating poverty and why have others failed. (For this unit, we will have two days of discussion, not just one)

**Required Reading:**

*Our Kids*, by Robert Putnam
*Coming Apart, The State of White America, 1960-2010*, by Charles Murray

**March 30: Guest Speaker: Marcus Casey, Brookings**

**Apr. 8-27 What Should We Do About Global Warming?**

Taking as a given the scientific consensus on climate change, what should the United States do to prevent it from getting worse and/or deal with its consequences? What are the economic and political tradeoffs involved in reducing carbon emissions or compensating those who suffer economic harm? What is the right balance between prevention and mitigation? What are our moral obligations to future generations or poorer countries?

**Required Reading:**

*The Climate Casino*, by William Nordhaus
“Conservatives and Climate Change,” by Jim Manzi and Peter Wehner, National Affairs, Summer, 2105
“Climate Change in the American Mind,” March, 2018, GMU’s Center for Climate Change Communications, GMU

**April 20: Guest Speaker: Mason Prof. Andrew Light, former top state department negotiator on climate change (?)**

**April 29 Wrapup**

**May 4 Course Evaluation**
**ELECTRONIC DEVICES:** All cell phones and communications devices should be shut off during class. You may bring computers to class to take notes during lectures or look things up as we are discussing. If you are caught checking emails or Facebook, however, you will be asked to put your computer away.

**COMMUNICATION:** All students should check university e-mail accounts for class updates. I will access e-mail through Blackboard. If you cannot attend a class session, please let me know in advance.

**STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES:** If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodation, please see me and contact the Disability Resource Center at 703-993-2474.

**ENROLLMENT:** Students are responsible for verifying their enrollment in the class. Last day to add or drop classes without penalty is Wed., Feb. 5. Please let me know if you drop the class before or after that date.

**HONOR CODE:**

1. No help may be given or received by students when taking quizzes, tests or examinations, whatever the type or wherever taken, unless the instructor specifically permits deviation from this standard.

2. All work submitted to fulfill course requirements is to be solely the product of the individual(s) whose name(s) appear on it. Except with permission of the instructor, no recourse is to be had to projects, papers, lab reports or any other written work previously prepared by another student, and except with permission of the instructor, no paper or work of any type submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of another course may be used a second time to satisfy a requirement of any course. No assistance is to be obtained from commercial organizations that sell or lease research help or written papers. With respect to all written work, proper footnotes and attribution are required.