Public Choice
2025/26
ECO1028
Beatriz Gietner
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Class: Wednesdays 12:00-14:00

Office Hours:
Fridays at 11:30 via Zoom Link
(Meeting ID: 868 8108 1383, Passcode: 676403)
Wednesdays at 11:00 in Q251

Course Description

Public Choice applies the tools of economics—rational choice, incentives, and constraints—to political behaviour. Rather than assuming politicians, voters, and bureaucrats pursue the "public interest," we analyze how they respond to incentives, just as consumers and firms do in markets.

This course explores fundamental questions: Why do people vote when their vote doesn't matter? Why do democracies sometimes produce inefficient outcomes? Why do bureaucracies grow larger than optimal? Why do small interest groups win over the majority? How do institutions shape economic development?

We combine rigorous economic theory with applications to Irish politics. Each week, student groups present Irish Context applications, connecting abstract models to real institutions. You will critique cutting-edge research and evaluate AI-generated content.

By the end of this course, you will understand why housing policy is difficult to change, hospital waiting lists persist, and some taxes are politically untouchable.

The course will cover the following topics:

1. Introduction

2. The Paradox of Voting

3. The Median Voter Theorem

4. Political Competition and Macroeconomic Performance

5. Bureaucracy

6. Federalism & Decentralisation

7. Interest Groups, Rent-Seeking & Lobbying

8. Behavioural Economics

9. Institutions, Development & Political Regimes

The class will meet for two hours per week. My expectation, and recommendation, is that you attend class, take notes, and ask questions. If you do, you will find the assignments a lot easier. I also strongly encourage you to make use of my office hours. They are a resource to be used

and in my experience the students who do so tend to do best. In particular, it would be sensible to discuss your plans for the assignments with me.

Assessment

There are three assignments for this class.

Irish Context Presentation (25%)

Working in pairs or trios, you will apply one week's theory to Irish politics. Presentations are 20 minutes and occur at the start of class in Weeks 3–6 and 8–10 (Week 7 is Reading Week).

Your presentation should:

- Briefly recap last week's theory (5 minutes)

- Present specific Irish examples with evidence (10 minutes)

- Pose 2–3 discussion questions for the class (5 minutes)

Submission: Slides + 1-page summary due 48 hours before your presentation via Loop.

Group Formation: Email me your group names (pairs or trios) by **Friday, 23 January 2026**. I will assign you to a presentation week.

All group members must be present and contribute equally. Unequal contribution documented through the presentation will be reflected in individual grades.

Project 1: Paper Critique & Presentation (45%)

This assignment has two components:

Written Component (22.5%):

Select a Public Choice paper published in 2024–2025 or "forthcoming." Write a critical review (2000–2500 words) that:

- Summarizes the research question, methodology, and findings

- Evaluates strengths and weaknesses (theory, empirics, interpretation)

- Assesses the paper's contribution to the field

- Analyzes applicability to Irish politics with specific institutional details

Your review should demonstrate critical thinking, not just summary. Reference specific tables, equations, or sections when making claims.

Paper Declaration: Email me your paper choice by **Friday, 6 February 2026** (first-come, first-served on paper selection).

Word Count: 2000–2500 (plus or minus 10%), excluding references
Reference Style: APA, Chicago, or Harvard (be consistent)
Due Date: Friday, 20 February 2026, 17:00 via Loop

Presentation Component (22.5%):

Present your critique in 7 minutes followed by Q&A. Your presentation should:

- Explain the paper's argument clearly

- Present your critical analysis

- Discuss Irish application with specific examples

- Engage thoughtfully with questions

Presentation Dates: Weeks 11–12 (23 March–3 April 2026)
Slides Due: 48 hours before your assigned presentation week via Loop

Presentations will be scheduled in advance. Attend all presentations—you will learn from your peers' analyses.

Project 2: Grading an LLM (30%)

You will be randomly assigned a topic from the module in Week 8. Your task:

Part 1: Craft Your Question (40% of Project 2)

Write a question for an LLM (ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, etc.) that asks it to produce an essay on your assigned topic. Write a 500-word motivation explaining:

- Why this question is important

- How it relates to class material (be specific)

- What gap it fills in our knowledge

- Why the answer would be useful for policy or economics

Part 2: Grade the LLM's Output (60% of Project 2)

Generate the essay using your question, then evaluate it as if you were the instructor:

- Assess accuracy (check facts, theory, references using Google Scholar)

- Assess relevance (does it answer your question?)

- Assess quality of referencing (are citations real? LLMs often fabricate sources)

- Assess depth of argument (surface-level or substantive?)

- Identify Irish context errors

- Provide detailed written feedback and assign a grade with justification

Your grade depends on the quality and specificity of your evaluation, not on the LLM's performance.

Note: AI will be used in your careers. Learning to evaluate arguments critically, identify errors, and provide constructive feedback is essential. This assignment teaches those skills.

Topic Assignment: Monday, 2 March 2026 (via email)
Word Count: 500 words (motivation) + LLM essay + detailed feedback
Reference Style: APA
Due Date: Friday, 3 April 2026, 17:00 via Loop

Key Dates

Friday, 23 January	Group formation for Irish Context due
Friday, 6 February	Project 1 paper declaration due
Friday, 20 February	Project 1 written critique due
23–27 February	**Reading Week (no class)**
Monday, 2 March	Project 2 topics assigned
Weeks 11–12	Project 1 presentations
Friday, 3 April	Project 2 due

Course Policies

Late Work: Written work submitted late without an approved extension receives a 10% penalty per day (maximum 7 days). Presentations cannot be rescheduled without prior arrangement.

Extensions: Contact me *before* the deadline for emergencies with appropriate documentation.

Academic Integrity: You may use AI to understand concepts but may NOT submit AI-generated text as your own work. All written work must be in your own words. Project 2 is literally about evaluating AI—I will know if you used it improperly. Plagiarism results in 0% on the assignment and referral to DCU Academic Integrity Officer.

Attendance: Not formally graded but strongly encouraged. We only meet 2 hours per week. Missing class means missing essential content. All group members must attend Irish Context Presentations.

Disability Accommodations: Students requiring accommodations must register with DCU Disability & Learning Support and provide accommodation letter to instructor.

Materials

Textbook (optional): Mueller, D. C. (2003). *Public Choice III*. Cambridge University Press.

All readings and other materials will be posted on Loop and on GitHub: `https://github.com/BeaGietner/PublicChoice`

Grading Scale

70–100%	A	First Class Honours (1st)
60–69%	B	Second Class Honours, Grade I (2.1)
50–59%	C	Second Class Honours, Grade II (2.2)
40–49%	D	Pass
0–39%	F	Fail