

POL SCI 4043: PUBLIC POLICY ANALYSIS

Washington University in St Louis
Washington University in St. Louis
Spring 2022
MW 1-2:20PM
Classroom: Umrath 140

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course teaches students how to provide good advice to decision-makers about matters of public importance. To that end, our focus will be on identifying policy problems, identifying potential solutions, navigating trade-offs between different policy goals, and evaluating the effectiveness of existing policies. The course has three main components:

1. Conventional policy analysis. This section will include market and government failures as a rationale for policy interventions, ideas for enumerating policy solutions, analysis of implementation, and an introduction to cost-benefit analysis.
2. Criticisms and alternatives. This section will discuss philosophical and practical objections to some ideas in conventional policy analysis and some alternative approaches.
3. Program evaluation. The final section will discuss how to retrospectively analyze whether existing policies achieved their aim. The main topic is causal inference.

Overall, the course will provide students with some important tools necessary to do serious policy analysis for governments, non-profits, or think tanks and provide some broader context for the methods used in these settings.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

PREREQUISITES

Quantitative Political Methods (L32-363) is a prerequisite for this course, though other introductory statistics courses may be used to substitute for this course. I may provide some demonstrations in R but students will not do any statistical programming in the course. The main substantive prerequisite is a working knowledge of the linear regression model.

TEXTBOOK AND READINGS

There are two required textbooks for this course. They are:

- Policy Analysis. David Weimer and Aidan Vining. Ed 5. 2011. ¹
- Mastering Metrics: The Path from Cause to Effect. Joshua Angrist and Jörn-Steffen Pischke. Princeton University Press. 2015.

¹There is a newer edition than this but I am still working from the fifth edition.

I will also provide supplemental readings for various weeks which will be made available on Canvas.

It is always absolutely essential for students to do the reading before coming to class. There are very few lectures in the course so students should arrive prepared to participate in class activities based on the readings.

ASSIGNMENTS

The graded components of the course are listed below, with percent contributions to your final course grade in parentheses:

- Participation (10%). We will rely heavily on in-class participation. The standard for full participation points is that your in-class behavior provides evidence that you came to class prepared and having done the readings. Obviously participation implies attendance.
- Response papers (40%): For each reading assignment you will do a short (less than 1 page) response paper reflecting on the readings. These are due at the beginning of each class. Response papers are not graded for spelling or grammar and points are not deducted for misunderstanding the material – it is expected that you get some things wrong your first time through the material. Instead, response papers are an opportunity to briefly reflect on the readings in preparation for in class discussions. Response papers may be informal and somewhat stream-of-consciousness. You should be able to write a response paper in around half an hour.
- Policy reports (50%). The writing assignments consist of several small assignments that culminate in a final (5-10 page) policy report. The components are as follows. Each component will be explained in greater detail in the course.
 1. Part One: Problem statement and identification. State the policy problem you plan to analyze. Justify its importance. Diagnose the problem: that is, identify what market failures, government failures, or other problems your analysis will propose to remedy.
 2. Part Two: Solution identification. Lay out some potential solutions to the policy problem identified in the previous part and discuss why they are potentially promising or deserve consideration.
 3. Part Three: Analysis and recommendations. Establish criteria on which the policies are going to be evaluated. Compare the policy solutions outlined in step 2 according to these criteria and make recommendations.
 4. Final paper. Distill the analysis from parts 1-3 into a short policy report that is concise, skimmable, non-technical, and designed to catch the attention of a policymaker or key decisionmaker with limited time and attention.

The first four writing assignments will be equally weighted and worth 20% of the total writing assignment grade, i.e. 10% of your final course grade. The rest of the grade will be for your final paper.

GRADING SCALE

The course will follow a standard grading scale:

97-100	A+	77-79	C+
93-96	A	73-76	C
90-92	A-	70-72	C-
87-89	B+	67-69	D+
83-86	B	63-66	D
80-82	B-	60-62	D-

EXPECTATIONS/PROCEDURES

Respect. Students are expected to treat one another with respect. This is essential to creating a good classroom environment. Incidentally, it is also essential to being a good policy analyst – a good policy analyst is charitable to the arguments of those who disagree with his or her conclusions.

Inclusive Learning Environment Statement. The best learning environment—whether in the classroom, studio, laboratory, or fieldwork site—is one in which all members feel respected while being productively challenged. At Washington University in St. Louis, we are dedicated to fostering an inclusive atmosphere, in which all participants can contribute, explore, and challenge their own ideas as well as those of others. Every participant has an active responsibility to foster a climate of intellectual stimulation, openness, and respect for diverse perspectives, questions, personal backgrounds, abilities, and experiences, although instructors bear primary responsibility for its maintenance.

A range of resources is available to those who perceive a learning environment as lacking inclusivity, as defined in the preceding paragraph. If possible, we encourage students to speak directly with their instructor or TA about any suggestions or concerns they have regarding a particular instructional space or situation. Alternatively, students may bring concerns to another trusted advisor or administrator (such as an academic advisor, mentor, department chair, or dean). All classroom participants—including faculty, staff, and students—who observe a bias incident affecting a student may also file a report (whether personally or anonymously) utilizing the online Bias Report and Support System.

Office Hours. Come! You will get a lot more out of this course if you come to office hours with questions related to the course material. Because of the virtual format of the course I will conduct Zoom office hours by appointment usingly Calendly. A link to the appointment page will be made available on Canvas.

Late Assignments. Assignments not completed by class time they day they are listed on the syllabus are late. Late assignments are accepted subject to a 5% per day (including weekends) late penalty. Other assignments are given as preparation for that day's in-class activities and therefore will not be accepted late.

Ethics/Violations of Academic Integrity Ethical behavior is an essential component of learning and scholarship. Students are expected to understand, and adhere to, the University's academic integrity policy: wustl.edu/policies/undergraduate-academic-integrity.html. Students who violate this policy will be referred to the Academic Integrity Policy Committee. Penalties for violating the policy will be determined by the Academic Integrity Policy committee, and can include failure of the assignment, failure of the course, suspension or expulsion from the University. If you have any doubts about what constitutes a violation of the Academic Integrity policy, or any other issue related to academic integrity, please ask your instructor.

RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS

Disability Resources. If you have a disability that requires an accommodation, please speak with instructor and consult the Disability Resource Center at Cornerstone (cornerstone.wustl.edu/). Cornerstone staff will determine appropriate accommodations and will work with your instructor to make sure these are available to you.

Writing Assistance. For additional help on your writing, consult the expert staff of The Writing Center (writingcenter.wustl.edu) in Olin Library (first floor). It can be enormously helpful to ask someone outside a course to read your essays and to provide feedback on strength of argument, clarity, organization, etc.

Sexual Assault The University is committed to offering reasonable academic accommodations to students who are victims of sexual assault. Students are eligible for accommodation regardless of whether they seek criminal or disciplinary action. Depending on the specific nature of the allegation, such measures may include but are not limited to: implementation of a no-contact order, course/classroom assignment changes, and other academic support services and accommodations. If you need to request such accommodations, please direct your request to Kim Webb (kim_webb@wustl.edu), Director of the Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Center. Ms. Webb is a confidential resource; however, requests for accommodations will be shared with the appropriate University administration and faculty. The University will maintain as confidential any accommodations or protective measures provided to an individual student so long as it does not impair the ability to provide such measures.

If a student comes to me to discuss or disclose an instance of sexual assault, sex discrimination, sexual harassment, dating violence, domestic violence or stalking, or if I otherwise observe or become aware of such an allegation, I will keep the information as private as I can, but as a faculty member of Washington University, I am required to immediately report it to my Department Chair or Dean or directly to Ms. Jessica Kennedy, the University's Title IX Coordinator. If you would like to speak with the Title IX Coordinator directly, Ms. Kennedy can be reached at (314) 935-3118, jwkennedy@wustl.edu, or by visiting her office in the Women's Building. Additionally, you can report incidents or complaints to Tamara King, Associate Dean for Students and Director of Student Conduct, or by contacting WUPD at (314) 935-5555 or your local law enforcement agency. You can also speak confidentially and learn more about available resources at the Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Center by calling (314) 935-8761 or visiting the 4th floor of Seigle Hall.

Bias Reporting. The University has a process through which students, faculty, staff and community members who have experienced or witnessed incidents of bias, prejudice or discrimination against a student can report their experiences to the University's Bias Report and Support System (BRSS) team. See: brss.wustl.edu.

Mental Health Mental Health Services' professional staff members work with students to resolve personal and interpersonal difficulties, many of which can affect the academic experience. These include conflicts with or worry about friends or family, concerns about eating or drinking patterns, and feelings of anxiety and depression. See: shs.wustl.edu/MentalHealth.

DISCLAIMER

The instructor reserves the right to make modifications to this information throughout the semester.

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS

Introductory materials

January 19 Introduction to course.

Reading: Chapter 1-2 of Weimer and Vining. (no response paper for first class)

Conventional policy analysis

January 24 Normative foundations for public policy.

Reading: Chapter 1 of "Political Economy for Public Policy" by Ethan Bueno de Mesquita on Canvas.
Response paper: Reflect on a policy argument you have heard recently. How would you characterize the normative framework used (perhaps implicitly) by the person making the argument?

January 26 Market failures as a rationale for public policy.

Reading: Chapters 4-5 of Weimer and Vining

Response paper: Answer “for discussion” question # 3 on page 112 of Weimer and Vining

January 31 Other rationales for public policy.

Reading: Chapters 6-7 of Weimer and Vining.

Response paper: Answer discussion question # 2 on page 131 and discussion question # 1 on page 155 of Weimer and Vining

February 2 Government failures.

Reading: Chapters 8-9 of Weimer and Vining

Response paper: Discussion question # 1 on page 190, discussion question and # 1 on page 208 of Weimer and Vining

February 7 Generic policy solutions.

Reading: Chapter 10 of Weimer and Vining

Response paper: Discussion question # 2 on page 262 of Weimer and Vining

PART ONE OF POLICY REPORT DUE

February 9 Adoption, Implementation, and Feasibility

Reading: Chapters 11 and 12 of Weimer and Vining

Response paper: Discussion question 1 on page 285 and discussion question 1 on page 307 of Weimer and Vining.

February 14 Doing policy analysis.

Reading: Skim Chapter 14 of Weimer and Vining. Read Chapter 15 of Weimer and Vining.

Response paper: Discussion question # 1 on page 382 **Note that this may take longer than the typical response paper.**

February 16 Introduction to cost-benefit analysis.

Reading: Weimer and Vining Chapter 16

Response paper: Discussion question 1 on page 423.

February 21 Cost-benefit analysis: Applications

Reading:

Radin, M., Jeuland, M., Wang, H., and Whittington, D. (2020). BenefitCost Analysis of Community-Led Total Sanitation: Incorporating Results from Recent Evaluations. *Journal of Benefit-Cost Analysis*, 11(3), 380-417.

Response paper: Discuss the costs and benefits enumerated in this paper and how each was monetized.

Criticisms and alternatives to conventional policy analysis

February 23 Decision theory and criteria for good policy decisions

Manski 2013, Chapter 4 (on Canvas).

Response paper: Contrast Manski's perspective on decisionmaking with the ideas expressed in the introduction to cost-benefit analysis

February 28 Efficiency and Kaldor-Hicks

Reading:

Reinhardt, 1992, **Reflections on the Meaning of Efficiency**, Yale Law and Policy Review.

Persky, 2001, **Cost-Benefit Analysis and the Classical Creed**, Journal of Economic Perspectives

Response paper: Discuss the Kaldor-Hicks criterion and the critiques in the readings. Does this change your view of any of the material we have covered so far? Why or why not?

March 2 Decision-theoretic frameworks for policy analysis

Gilboa, Rouziou, and Sibony. 2018. **Decision theory made relevant: Between the software and the shrink**, Research in Economics.

Nyborg 2014. **Project evaluation with democratic decision-making: What does cost-benefit analysis really measure?**. Ecological Economics.

Response paper: Contrast the approaches suggested in each paper with the standard approach to cost-benefit analysis from Weimer and Vining.

March 7 Valuation and measurement issues

Amartya Sen, **The Discipline of Cost-Benefit Analysis**

Response paper: Sen makes the argument that the dominant conception of policy analysis is far too narrow. What does he think is missing?

Program Evaluation

March 9 Randomized experiments.

Reading: Chapter 1 of Angrist and Pischke

Blattman, Christopher, Nathan Fiala, and Sebastian Martinez. "Generating skilled self-employment in developing countries: Experimental evidence from Uganda." The Quarterly Journal of Economics 129.2 (2014): 697-752.

Response paper: Apply the lessons of the Angrist and Pischke reading to the Blattman, Fiala, and

Martinez paper: What were the authors trying to learn? Why did it help them to use randomization to do that? What did we learn that we could not learn from a non-randomized analysis of an existing program?

March 14 No class (Spring break)

March 16 No class (Spring break)

March 21 Ethics in field experiments

Trisha Phillips, 2021. **Ethics In Field Experiments**, Annual Review of Political Science

Katherine Casey, Abou Bakarr Kamara, and Niccolo F. Meriggi, 2021. **An Experiment in Candidate Selection**. Forthcoming, AER.

Response paper: Read the Phillips article and then apply its standards to the Casey et. al experiment. What ethical concerns are raised by the experiment? (Note that we will also have a substantive discussion about the article in addition to the ethical implications)

March 23 Regression review.

Reading: Chapter 2 of Angrist and Pischke.

Response paper: You can skip today's response paper.

March 28 Instrumental variables

Reading: Chapter 3 of Angrist and Pischke.

Response paper: You can skip today's response paper.

March 30 Instrumental variables reprise.

Reading:

Aizer, Anna, and Joseph J. Doyle Jr. "Juvenile incarceration, human capital and future crime: Evidence from randomly-assigned judges." The Quarterly Journal of Economics, Volume 130, Issue 2, 1 May 2015, Pages 759-803

Gerber, Alan and Donald Green. "The Effects of Canvassing, Telephone Calls, and Direct Mail on Voter Turnout: A field experiment." American Political Science Review, Vol. 94, No. 3. Paged 653-663

Response paper: Compare a contrast the use of instrumental variables in each of these papers. In both cases: what is the treatment variable? What is the instrument? What potential violations of the exclusion restriction can you see? Is one application more convincing than the other?

April 4 Regression discontinuity.

Reading: Chapter 4 of Angrist and Pischke

Response paper: You can skip today's response paper.

April 6 Regression discontinuity reprise.

Reading:

Jacob, Brian A., and Lars Lefgren. "Remedial education and student achievement: A regression-discontinuity analysis." *Review of Economics and Statistics* 86.1 (2004): 226-244.

Dobkin, Carlos and Ferreira Fernando. "Do school entry laws affect educational attainment and labor market outcomes?" *Economics of Education Review*. 29. 40-54. (2010)

Response paper: Comment on the use of regression discontinuity in each of these papers. What is the advantage of this research design for each application? Try to think of violations of key RDD assumptions that may threaten the validity of causal inferences in each.

April 11 Difference in differences.

Reading: Chapter 5 of Angrist and Pischke.

Response paper: You can skip today's response paper.

April 13 Difference in differences reprise.

Reading:

Krueger, David Card Alan B. "Minimum Wages and Employment: A Case Study of the Fast-Food Industry in New Jersey and Pennsylvania." *The American Economic Review* 84.4 (1994).

Card, David. "The Impact of the Mariel Boatlift on the Miami Labor Market." *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* (1990): 245-257.

Response paper: Comment on the role of the parallel trends assumption in each paper and point to potential violations of that assumption.

April 18 Policy evaluation synthesis.

Reading: Chapter 6 of Angrist and Pischke.

Response paper: Imagine that you were skeptical of the idea that schooling has a positive effect on wages (though I imagine you were not). What would you believe after reading chapter 6? Are you persuaded?

April 20 External validity and moving from causal inference to giving advice

Charles Manski, 2013. "Public Policy in an Uncertain World." Chapter 1 (on Canvas).

Response paper: Suppose a public official asks you how to go about increasing voter turnout. You are inclined to offer advice based on the Gerber and Green study from earlier in this class. Based on the Manski reading, reflect on how you would go about offering advice with particular attention to how you would express uncertainty. (Note I am not asking you to reread or recall all the particulars of the Gerber and Green study, merely to reflect on what you can say from such a study in terms of recommendations.)

April 25 Case study: Employment effects of minimum wage laws.

Manning. **The Elusive Employment Effect of the Minimum Wage**. 2021.

Response paper: What do we learn from this paper about current debates over a \$15 minimum wage? What do we not sufficiently learn from the literature about this debate?

April 27 Case study: Police shootings

Mummolo and Knox's op-ed

Response paper: What went wrong with the original policing study? Why do you think misunderstandings of the study persisted for so long?