Pol S 270 Introduction to Political Economy

Department of Political Science
University of Washington
Summer 2017

Instructor information
Instructor: Yu Sasaki
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Course information
Class meets: Monday & Wednesday, 12:00–14:10
Class location: DEN 258
Course website on Canvas

Course Statement

Political economy is the study of the efficient allocation of scarce resources. In this course, we make a few simple assumptions based on the study of economics: First, actors always want to maximize their own welfare while reducing its cost to a minimum. Second, actors always face constraints—financial, time, resources, power, to name but a few—upon making their decisions. Actors, therefore, always make a tradeoff in making their decisions. Based on these assumptions, we will examine a wide variety of questions from politics, the economy, and society. For instance, when it comes to alleviating poverty in Africa, what are some of the most cost-effective (or the “best”) ways to do so? Should government leaders cut checks for individual citizens? Should we instead distribute school uniforms to encourage children to go to school? Or should we introduce universal basic income to guarantee everyone with a minimum pay no matter what? Which policy is likely to yield greater income-generating behavior? Political economy provides powerful and useful perspectives to address these questions. The course has two broad tasks. First, it introduces students to basic analytical concepts of political economy. More specifically, the course stresses the principles of rational choice and explores a variety of applications to not just economic decisions in everyday life but also pressing political questions. The emphasis is on the individual and how individuals respond to incentives. Second, the course addresses some of the critical issues in politics with a focus on authoritarianism and economic development. It uses the political-economy approach to understanding why authoritarianism persists and why economic development is difficult. In short, the course examines political questions from economic perspectives and offers crucial analytical skills.
Course Objectives

This course will enable you to achieve, *inter alia*, the following intellectual goals:

- to understand how incentives shape individual behavior;
- to understand how rules affect individual behavior;
- to understand how rules create less-than-ideal situations and make individuals and society as a whole worse off;
- to understand how individuals make rules that benefit them at the expense of others; and
- to understand how and why poverty persists in Africa and why poverty alleviation is hard

Grades

Grades are based on three in-class examinations and class participation.

- Midterm 1 (20%): Wednesday, July 5
- Midterm 2 (20%): Wednesday, July 26
- Final exam (30%): Wednesday, August 16
- Participation (30%): ongoing

Technology Policy

Students are required to do all of the readings assigned for the course. They may choose whether to print off readings, or read them from a computer or tablet. The instructor will allow students to use laptops and tablets in class, so long as they are only using them for the purposes of class and wireless/data connections are turned off. This is to prevent unnecessary distractions for other students and facilitate discussion. The instructor reserves the right to change this policy, including banning laptops and tablets, should students violate the policy. *Phones are not allowed under any circumstance and should not be seen or heard from the minute students walk into class until they leave.*

Makeup Policy

As for the scheduled exams, there will be no makeups barring dire circumstances or medical emergencies with the student or his/her immediate kin. Makeups require valid documentation in hardcopy. Please note that most occasions that can prevent exam participation *are* anticipated: a conflict in schedule, illnesses, automobile malfunctions, traffic congestion, bad weather. If the student suspects that any of these issues can lead to missing the exams or deadlines, s/he should inform the instructor *as far ahead of time as possible*. Failure to report will result in no makeups. **Important**: An advance notice that students miss exams or deadlines due to (family) vacation trips will not warrant makeups.
Policy on Grading Appeals

I will be very happy to explain how I have graded your exams if you have any questions about the criteria. If you wish me to reconsider the grade, please prepare a typed statement of at least one paragraph on each point you would like me to reconsider that explains why you believe you merit more points and submit it to me within one week of the exam being returned to you. Appeals that simply ask for more points will not be considered. Please note that reconsidering a grade may result in an increase or decrease from the original grade.

Academic Conduct and Plagiarism

Under no circumstances will cheating and/or plagiarism be tolerated. A suspected instance may be immediately examined and necessary disciplinary actions may ensue. For further detail about the University of Washington’s policy on academic conduct (honesty and integrity), see here. For the University’s policy on plagiarism, see here.

Students with Disabilities

If students have a disability and believe they will need academic adjustments (accommodations, modifications, or auxiliary aids and services) in this course, they should ensure that they coordinate through the University’s Disability Services Office (DSO). Academic adjustments are requested through the DSO, not directly from the instructor.

Course Text

No purchase required. All readings are available on Canvas and all assigned podcasts are linked to this syllabus. All podcasts and videos are required unless otherwise noted. Note that the instructor reserves the right to change assignments as deemed appropriate, with announcement. Changes will most likely involve adding new podcasts and newspaper articles.

Course Schedule

Week 1. Rational Choice I: Basic assumptions

Monday, June 19

Readings: None.

Podcasts:

Wednesday, June 21

Readings: (in this order)


Podcasts:


Week 2. Rational Choice II: Further explorations

Monday, June 26

Readings:


Podcasts:


Wednesday, June 28

Readings:


Podcasts:


   This episode features a real, moving story of a kidney exchange where the donor and the recipient discuss their own lives.

**Optional Further Readings:**


**Optional podcasts for further explorations:**

1. EconTalk. 7/6/2015. **Alvin Roth on Matching Markets.**

2. EconTalk. 9/19/2015. **Tina Rosenberg on the Kidney Market in Iran.**

   Iran is the only country in the world that legally allows kidney sales.


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**Week 3. Public goods provision and property rights**

**Monday, July 3**

**Readings:**


**Videos:**

   Learn Liberty. 7/1/2011. **Negative Externalities and the Coase Theorem.**

**Podcasts:**

1. Planet Money. 6/5/2015. **Episode #630: Free Parking.**

2. BBC The Inquiry. 10/26/2015. **How Do You Save the Rhino?**

   The Inquiry has recently won the **Best Current Affairs Podcast** in the 2017 British Podcast Awards.

**Optional further readings:**


**Optional podcasts for further explorations:**

1. EconTalk. 10/29/2007. **Yandle on the Tragedy of the Commons and the Implications for Environmental Regulation.**

2. Planet Money. 7/22/2015. **Episode #640: The Bottom of the Well.**
Wednesday, July 5
Midterm 1

Week 4. Game theory

Monday, July 10

Readings:


Podcasts:

1. Freakonomics Radio. 6/10/2010. Why the World Cup is an Economist's Dream.

Wednesday, July 12

Readings:

Review the Jackson piece for Monday.

Week 5. Authoritarianism

Monday, July 17

Readings:


Podcasts:

EconTalk. 2/12/2007. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita on Democracies and Dictatorships.

Wednesday, July 19

Readings:


Videos:
Week 6. Ethnicity and ethnic politics

Monday, July 24

Readings:


Wednesday, July 26

Midterm 2

Week 7. Development I: Poverty, inequality, and the great aid debate

Monday, July 31

Readings:


Podcasts: (in this order)


Wednesday, August 2

Readings:


Podcasts:

EconTalk. 2/11/2008. Easterly on Growth, Poverty, and Aid.

Week 8. Development II: The great aid debate continued & Universal Basic Income

Monday, August 7

Readings:


Podcasts:


Optional podcasts for further explorations:

1. BBC The Inquiry. 6/13/2016. *Are We Really About to End World Poverty?*

Wednesday, August 9

Readings:


   For the background and follow-up of this debate, see the following articles (optional readings available on Canvas or via the links). Each one is very short:


Podcasts:

1. Freakonomics Radio. 4/13/2016. Is the World Ready for a Guaranteed Basic Income?
2. EconTalk. 1/16/2017. Michael Munger on the Basic Income Guarantee.

Optional podcasts for further explorations:

1. BBC The Inquiry. 12/19/2016. Should We Give Homeless People Homes?

Week 9. Development III: Randomized control trials (RCTs)

Monday, August 14

Readings:


Videos:


Optional further readings:


Optional podcasts for further explorations:


Wednesday, August 16

Final exam