Lessons From Policies That Went Wrong

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Lectures: Tuesdays and Thursdays at 2:40-4:00 pm
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Course Description: Effective policies require a good understanding of the setting they aim to regulate. Knowing what are some of the possible unintended consequences can help to plan for them in the policy design stage. Behavioral responses of those that are affected by the policy can reduce its effectiveness, and even result in outcomes that are the opposite of the original goal. In this course, we will review different policies that did not succeed in achieving their intended targets or had unintended consequences because they did not fully consider what will happen in their aftermath. We will cover policies across a wide range of outcomes: health, energy and environment, development and aid, education, violence reduction, and labor markets. The goal is to understand what went wrong in each case, and to generalize lessons for future policymaking. The bottom line of this course is not that policies are always doomed to fail, but that there is quite a bit to learn from policies that did not work out as well as intended. For each policy, we will start with the original problem it was trying to solve, cover some general theory and intuition around its proposed approach, and study a paper that empirically evaluated its impact. This course assumes some working knowledge in microeconomic theory and econometric analysis. No textbook is required for this course. The assignments are designed to be flexible enough to allow you to focus on your topics of interest, as well as to develop items you can include in your portfolio which you could present to potential employers.
Goals:

- Develop critical thinking skills regarding public policies and the papers that evaluate them.
- Understand general concepts that when ignored can prevent a policy from achieving its goals.
- Strengthen skills of writing for an audience of policy makers.
- Strengthen visualization skills of raw data.

Requirements & Grading:

- 15% Reading responses.
- 15% Graph replication.
- 15% Problem sets.
- 15% “Red Team” presentation.
- 20% Critical policy analysis paper (Midterm).
- 20% Final exam.

Course Requirements

Reading Responses (3 required)

Throughout the course you will need to submit 3 reading responses. You may choose the papers from the reading list (below). Each response has to be about a different paper. The reading responses should be submitted before we cover the paper in class. This means you need to pay attention to the syllabus and notice when we are about to cover a paper you want to use for your submission. 2 out of the 3 responses should be submitted before the midterm paper is due (TBD). The last response is due by TBD. You should submit your own individual reading responses. Reading responses are graded on a scale of 0-10. Submission of the reading responses will be on Canvas.

Each submission should be up to 1-page in length (see formatting guidelines below), and should include:

- A short summary of the paper (no more than 1 paragraph, worth 20% of the grade).
- Two original comments about the paper (worth 40% each). For example:
− Things you liked or did not like about it.
− A personal experience relevant to the paper.
− Something you think the paper did not address well.
− What did the paper help you understand about policymaking.

• Avoid simply summarizing the paper.

• Be concise. Writing more than one page will result in points taken off.

Graph Replication/Updating Assignment (1 required)

Throughout the course we will review many figures in the papers we will cover. I want you to better understand these figures and how to create them. For this assignment, you will need to choose one of the papers, choose one of its figures (from either the main text or the appendix of the paper), and either replicate it using a different source of data, or update it with newer data. I advise you to focus on descriptive graphs and not graphs that show regression results. To allow you to choose a figure you find most interesting this assignment is due by the TBD. You may work on this individually, or in groups of up to 3. This assignment will be graded on a scale of 0-10. Submission will be through Canvas.

Your submission needs to include two separate pieces:

• One page with the graph and one paragraph of text which explains the graph.

• Documentation of where you got the data, what you used to create the figure (submit either the code or spreadsheet in which you created it), the original graph (with a reference to the paper and page number where it appears), and how your version differs from the original graph (in terms of interpreting the different or updated data).

Grading of this assignment is based on:

• Layout of the figure. Make sure there are proper labels, with units of measurement where applicable. Annotate data points or events on the graph to highlight important features of the data (40%).

• Explanatory text. The 1 paragraph of text should help in reading and understanding the graph, while delivering its main message (20%).

• Comprehensive documentation. I should easily be able to understand how to create a similar figure like yours. Make sure to include the source of the data and the steps you took in preparing the figure (40%).
Problem Sets (2 required)

There will be two problem sets you will need to complete. Each one will cover an empirical estimation method and research design. The idea is to develop your intuition regarding the methods we will see used most often in the papers we review. Each submission will be individual, meaning you should work on your code individually. The first problem set will be due on 10/16/2019 and the second problem set will be due on 11/13/2019. Each problem set will be graded on a scale of 0-100. Submission will be through Canvas.

“Red Team” Presentation

You will be randomly assigned into groups of 3-4 people at the beginning of the quarter, and each group will be assigned one of the modules. You will need to work together on a presentation of no more than 15 minutes, which critically review a certain aspect as depicted in my slides. Meaning, your goal will be to present counter arguments and evidence to one of the papers, or several, covered in the module, and the arguments I make about them. The emphasis here is to provide more nuanced information for us to have a discussion about. I will provide you with the slides in advance, and will coordinate with you about when you would want to present your 15 minutes during either the Tuesday or Thursday class. This assignment is graded on a scale of 1-10, based on the following components:

- Logical structure of arguments.
- Well-sourced information.
- Staying within the 15 minutes time-frame.
- Providing added angles and nuance to the policy discussion.

Midterm Paper (due by TBD 11:59 PM)

Your midterm paper submission will be a 2-pages position paper of evaluating a currently discussed policy. This will be an opportunity to apply the critical evaluation of public policy we develop in the course and will provide you with yet another piece for your portfolio. You will need to choose a recent policy from the last year or two (if there is some other policy you very much want to cover be sure to check with me first). Write a well researched and well referenced position paper about the problem the policy is meant to address, the main mechanisms and instruments the policy will use, and points in favor and against the policy. You each need to submit your individual paper. Submission will be through Canvas. This assignment is graded on a scale of 0-100. The paper is graded based on the following components:
• Clear explanation of the problem the policy is addressing (20%).

• Clear explanation of the policy, how it works, how will it be enacted (20%).

• Including important numbers that are relevant to the policy (quantifying the current problem, estimated costs and benefits, order of magnitudes, etc.) (20%).

• Evaluation of the strengths and weakness of the policy. What features of the policy are setting it up for success or failure (40%)?

**Final Exam (TBD, Room 0010)**

The final exam will be a multiple choice exam where each question will have the following structure: An accurate and true statement about the material we covered in class will appear in squared brackets, “[].” Following the statement, there will either be a question or an additional statement followed by a question. The goal is to place the emphasis on understanding the material we covered and not on memorizing it. I will provide you with sample questions prior to the exam. This final exam will be graded on a scale of 0-100.

**Formatting Guidelines**

For each of the assignments you turn in, please use the following formatting:

• 1 inch margins.

• 12 points font size.

• Single spaced text.

• Any title or subtitle should be in bold.

**Policy on Late Submissions**

Any late submission will be penalized by 20 points for each day past the due date. The schedule is extremely flexible and with minimal planning ahead you should not have any trouble meeting the few deadlines defined above. As such, deviations from those deadlines are designed to be very costly.
ADA Student Accommodations

Any student who believes they may need assistance should inform the Office of Student Disability Services by the end of the first week of class. Once you have received an accommodation letter, it should be presented to the course instructor immediately.

For more information please visit: https://disabilities.uchicago.edu/

Academic Policies & Requirements

All University of Chicago students are expected to uphold the highest standards of academic integrity and honesty. Among other things, this means that students shall not represent another’s work as their own, use impermissible materials during exams, or otherwise gain an unfair academic advantage. All students suspected of academic dishonesty will be reported to the Harris Dean of Students for investigation and adjudication. The disciplinary process can result in sanctions up to and including suspension or expulsion from the University. In addition to disciplinary sanctions, the student will receive a grade of 0 on the exam or assignment in question and cannot earn higher than a B- in the course, regardless of their performance on other assignments and exams. At the instructors’ discretion, the student may receive a failing grade for the course regardless of their performance on other elements of the course.

Please review in detail the policies found here. Also, make sure you review the student manual regarding academic honesty policies. The manual is available here.
Schedule

Module 1: Public Policies & Systems Thinking

Introduction to the course and some big ideas about why policies sometimes work and sometimes they do not.

Readings:


Module 2: Urban Housing Markets & Interventions

Evaluating policies that aim to control housing prices and reduce urban poverty.

Readings:


- Diamond2018-op

Module 3: Promoting Education in Low Income Countries

Increasing human capital accumulation in low income countries is a key challenge. This week we study how different strategies performed. Readings:


Module 4: Violence & Policy

Violence is sometimes used as a policy instrument, and at other times it is an unintended consequence of policy. We review papers that examine these relationships. Readings:


**Module 5: Environmental Pollution**

We study how ambient pollution levels can increase (or fail to decrease) following policy measures. Readings:


**Module 6: Targeting Energy Efficiency Goals**

A wide range of policies aim to increase energy efficiency in electricity use and fuel use, yet we often find large differences between what we though will happen and what ends up happening. Readings:


**Module 7: Unintended Behaviors & Health**

We study several unintended consequences of policies in health that did not anticipate a strong behavioral response.

Readings:


Module 8: Regulating Labor Markets

Trying to correct distortions in wages and employment can sometimes backfire and make things worse than they were to begin with.

Readings:

  


Module 9: Public Finance

We conclude with several different policies that ended up creating new problems.

Readings:

