

PPHA 30300, Philosophical Foundations of Public Policy

Winter, 2025

Instructor Scott Ashworth

Class meetings Monday and Wednesday, 3:00–4:20 in Keller 1022.

Communication Please use the Message function on the Canvas site to communicate with me. I will do my best to answer your message within 24 hours (48 hours over the weekend).

Office Hours TK

TA Matthew Stadnicki

TA Communication Please use email to communicate with Matt. His address is mstadnicki@uchicago.edu

TA Office Hours TK

Course Description

“Evidence-based policy making” sounds like a slogan everyone can get behind. But one of its central components, cost-benefit analysis, has been subject to severe philosophical questioning. How can value pluralism and expertise coexist in policymaking? Does cost-benefit analysis ignore important ethical concerns? We will introduce each of these debates, and apply the lessons to live policy debates.

Prerequisite Micro 1 and AP 1

Course Goals

The goal of this course is to lay bare the assumptions of some standard policy-analysis tools, including cost-benefit analysis and market analysis via supply and demand. The approach is slow, building up one by one the implicit and explicit assumptions supporting those practices. At each step, I will point out what issues are settled by the assumption in question, and discuss some alternative ways the development could have continued.

I'm not trying to convince you that these tools are good or bad.¹ Instead, I want to give you a map of the conceptual landscape surrounding them. At almost every turn, there is more complexity than is apparent either in textbook treatments or popular discussion. I want to lay a foundation for critical reflection about what trade-offs you are being asked to make in practice. This should be valuable in whichever particular policymaking roles you occupy—as citizens and, for many of you, as policy professionals.

Reading

All readings will be available on the course website. You should have the relevant reading close to hand for each class meeting—we will be referring to the texts during class discussions.

I am writing a textbook for this course. For most topics, we will be using draft chapters of that book, available here. This file will be regularly updated as I revise sections.

The reading list below is subject to change. Any revisions to the readings will be announced in class and on Canvas.

¹This is not to say I will be completely neutral. There are a few sections where you will have no doubt where I stand.

Schedule

Foundations

Jan. 6: Introductory meeting; Facts and Values

Susan Dynarski, “For better learning in college lectures, lay down the laptop and pick up a pen”. Please read this **before** the first class meeting. As you read, keep these three questions in mind:

1. What position is Dynarski arguing for?
2. What is her argument for that position?
3. What are the normative presuppositions of that argument?

Start reading ch. 1 of the textbook (at least through the section “Normative Presuppositions”).

Jan. 8: Consequences and Decisions

Finish ch. 1 of the textbook.

Jan. 13: The Value-Free Ideal for Science

Start reading ch. 2 of the textbook (at least through the section “Inductive Risk”).

Jan. 15: Challenges to the Value-Free Ideal

Finish ch. 2 of the textbook.

Jan. 20: MLK Day—class meets Friday this week instead

Jan. 22: Roles for Experts in Policymaking

Alfred Moore, “Three Models of Democratic Expertise”

Exchange between Jason Furman and Liran Einav and Amy Finkelstein, in the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*

Jan. 24 More on Advice

Itzhak Gilboa, Maria Rouziou, and Olivier Sibony, Decision Theory Made Relevant: Between the Software and the Shrink

Sonmez, Minimalist Market Design: A Framework for Economists with Policy Aspirations, selections

Jan. 27: Dominance and Efficiency

Start ch. 4 of the textbook.

Jan. 29: Weights and Decision-Making

Finish ch. 4 of the textbook.

H. Spencer Banzhaf, “Objective or Multi-Objective?: Two Historically Competing Visions for Benefit-Cost Analysis”

Toby Ord, “The Moral Imperative Towards Cost-Effectiveness”

Feb. 3: Aggregation: Pure Distribution

Feb. 5: Aggregation: Tradeoffs

Feb. 10: The Value of a Statistical Life

Read ch. 6 of the textbook.

To restore the value of every American in environmental decisions, and for other purposes, S.3494, 110th Cong. (2008)

W. Kip Viscusi, “The Devaluation of Life”

Marion Fourcade, “The Political Valuation of Life a Comment on W. Kip Viscusi’s ‘The Devaluation of Life’ ”

Feb. 12: Well-Being

Start reading ch. 7 of the textbook.

Feb. 17: Behavioral Policy Analysis

Finish reading ch. 7 of the textbook.

Feb. 19: Pareto Efficiency and Blocked Exchanges

Read ch. 8 of the textbook.

Feb. 24: Compensation Criteria

Joseph Persky, “Cost-Benefit Analysis and the Classical Creed”

Uwe E. Reinhardt, “Reflections on the Meaning of Efficiency: Can Efficiency Be Separated from Equity?”

Feb. 26: Interpersonal Comparisons

John Broome, “The Value of Life in the Social Cost of Carbon: A Critique and a Proposal”

March 3: Cost-Benefit Analysis

Tyler Cowen, “Using Cost-Benefit Analysis to Review Regulation”

Fleurbaey and Abi-Rafeh, “The Use of Distributional Weights in Benefit-Cost Analysis: Insights from Welfare Economics”

March 5: Concluding Discussion

March TK: Final Exam, TK in Keller TK

Course Work and Evaluation

Component	Weight
Attendance	30%
Problem Sets	30%
Final Exam	40%

Student Responsibilities

There are four primary responsibilities: reading, class participation, problem sets, and a final exam.

Class Participation. Each course meeting will involve a mix of lecture, small-group exercises, and discussion. As such, regular attendance is crucial, as is active participation in exercises and discussions. Attendance must be in-person; classes will not be recorded or streamed.

I will not grade the content of your participation. Instead, I will indirectly monitor attendance and trust you to participate, not just show up. The indirect attendance measure will be a short, written reflection at the end of each class. These reflections cannot be made up if they are missed.

We have 18 class meetings. You get full credit for this component if you complete at least 15 of the reflections.

Problem Sets There will be 4 problem sets. Each will consist of a mix of short writing exercises and analytical exercises designed to give you some hands-on experience with the tools discussed in the readings.

I encourage you to talk to each other about the problems, and work together to solve them. But you must write up your solutions independently.

Final Exam. The final exam will be in person, at a time and place to be determined by the Harris Registrar.

The exam will be a mix of short answer questions and analytical problems. It will cover everything discussed in class, and everything in the assigned reading. So neither class alone nor reading alone is sufficient preparation.

Late Assignments Sometimes unexpected events make it difficult to submit a problem set on time. For this reason, you will have a pool of 3 late days to be used for any of the problem sets or the op-ed. That is 3 days total for the quarter, not 3 days per problem set. Weekend days are counted in the same way as weekdays (e.g., if the deadline is Friday and you turn it in on Sunday, that's two days late). Note that you are responsible for tracking your own late days.

Other than the late days there are no exceptions to the deadlines for any assignment, except in case of a serious emergency. If such an emergency does arise, you should contact the Harris Dean of Students Office.

Course Policies

Technology in the Classroom

Laptops and cell phones are must be put away during class. If you might need to receive a call during class for some reason, put your phone on vibrate and step out quietly as needed.

You may use a tablet if you lay it flat on the desk.

I reserve the right to deny attendance credit for students who repeatedly violate the technology policy.

Regrade Requests If you think there is any problem with the way your work has been graded, you must submit a regrade request within one week of the work being returned to you. The request must be in writing, and must be specific about what you believe is incorrect in the grading. We will regrade the entire assignment or exam—your grade may go up or go down as a result.

Academic Honesty 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 un-allowed materials during exams, or otherwise gain 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, I will impose a grade of 0 on any assignment on which a student has committed academic dishonesty.

Academic Freedom Academic freedom in a university differs from freedom of speech in the wider society; it is not the right to say just anything. It guarantees scholars—including both faculty and students—protection for their scholarly inquiry regardless of the conclusions that it reaches, while demanding respect for scholarly methods. One aspect of that is that scholars will not be sanctioned in the classroom for what happens outside of it. The other aspect is that scholars will be evaluated based on their use of scholarly methods, not on the basis of the conclusions that they reach.

What this means in a class like this: **your grade will not be affected by your speech in nonacademic settings, and it will not be affected by such things as whether the political conclusion you argue for is popular among fellow students, is shared by the TA, or is shared by the professor.** We are studying controversial and complicated questions, and you will be evaluated on the basis of such considerations as correctness of technical work, quality of argument, and quality of writing, not on the basis of the political orientation of your conclusions.

Generative AI Don’t use it. Of necessity, much of what you’ll do this quarter has been done before, by many people. As a result, tools like ChatGPT can provide answers to many of the problems you will solve. Taking advantage of

that will result in you learning nothing, which is quite a waste of your tuition dollars. In light of this, I consider using any generative AI tool in this class to be academic dishonesty, with two limited exceptions.

1. You may use AI-based translation tools to render difficult passages in the reading into your first language. Note well, this does **not** extend to the problem sets—entering problem sets into any AI system is academic dishonesty.
2. You may use generative AI tools to transform photos or scans of your handwritten lecture notes into a format such as plaintext, LaTeX, or R Markdown.

Links

- [Harris Academic Support Programs and Handbook](#)
- [Student Wellness](#)
- [UChicagoGRAD](#)
- [Harris School Policies](#)
- [University General Policies](#)
- [University Academic Policies](#)
- [Policy on audio and video recordings](#)