

PPHA 35540

How to Change the World: The Social Science of Policymaking in International Development

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Fall 2025 Syllabus

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Course Description

So you want to make the world a better place, but how? So much policy fails. So many good intentions go awry. Why? What makes for good policy? What makes it bad? This is a class on the social science of policy-making—the lessons from economics, political science, sociology, and anthropology, plus the practical experiences of practitioners. We will focus on policy-making in a global context, especially international policy and development. While we will look at international organizations, the focus is on national and local development strategies and domestic policymakers and institutions.

This is also a course about learning to read and write well. Readings each week will be heavy and difficult, but rewarding. There will be also weekly writing assignments that involve critical reviews of books, papers, and ideas.

Prerequisites

There are no requirements for the class. Any Masters student or advanced undergraduate is welcome to join the class. A class on economic development is highly recommended, such as the MPP class taught by Alicia Menendez or Eduardo Montero.

Course Objectives

By the end of the quarter, my goal is that students have learned to:

- Read social science more efficiently
- Write more briefly, clearly, and persuasively
- Think critically about what they read
- Think in a nuanced way about policy-making and social change

There are also some specific lessons and insights. I hope students will:

- Broaden their concept of development beyond economic progress
- Understand limits facing outsiders, elites, and states in social and economic change
- How to design policy in an uncertain, complex world
- Some of the special challenges of policy in fragile settings

Course Structure

Each week we will:

- Read a book or a collection of articles
- Discuss and debate the ideas in class
- Submit a written assignment related to your quarter-long project *or* complete a short 15-minute handwritten quiz in class as a reading reflection

Required Materials

Most of the readings are articles or books where a PDF version are hyperlinked on the syllabus. They will also be available on the course website. In addition to this, however, there are a handful of required books you will need to buy and read in full. I link to the Amazon versions because they are cheaper than ordering through the UChicago bookstore. I have also asked the library to hold copies on reserve, but I suspect there will be no more than 1–2 copies on reserve and this is a large class. These books are some of the best and most classic contributions to development, and so they are a great investment.

- Ferguson, James. 1990. *The anti-politics machine: Development, depoliticization, and bureaucratic power in Lesotho*. Cambridge University Press.

- Kelkar, Vijay, and Ajay Shah. 2019. *In Service Of The Republic: The Art And Science of Economic Policy*. Penguin Random House India.
- Tendler, Judith. 1997. *Good Government in the Tropics*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Rodrik, Dani. 2008. *One Economics, Many Recipes: Globalization, Institutions, and Economic Growth*. Princeton University Press.

The following book you may want to buy, but UChicago Library also offers access through its VPN service:

- Scott, James C., 2020. Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed. [[Amazon link](#)] [[UChicago access](#)] Yale University Press.

Instructions for VPN access are [here](#).

Final project

You will write a 2500–3500 word that chooses a policy problem and:

1. Diagnoses the problem
2. Analyzes the problem through some of the frameworks developed in the readings and class (e.g. the PDIA toolkit; our analyses of market/social/political failures; thinking through the authorizing environment, bureaucratic hurdles, and principal-agent challenges)
3. Assesses past attempts to solve the problem, either successes and failures
4. Proposes alternate ways to approach the problem based on the lessons in the course

I will send detailed instructions on the final assignment to the class. But good papers will:

- Use the readings and concepts and tools from the class
- Draw extensively from a wide literature on your country/policy of choice
- Be well-organized and clearly written
- Be well researched and persuasive
- Be dense with ideas

Original ideas are great, but a thoughtful and critical synthesis of existing sources and ideas is also a core skill I want you to develop.

Several of your assignments throughout the quarter will be related to this policy proposal. These will help you refine your policy problem and solution approach, while also helping you evaluate whether you need to reframe or change your problem/topic.

Final papers will be due at the end of exam week, to give us time to grade before the due date for graduating students.

Weekly written assignments

In-class reading reflections Several times during the quarter we will use the first 15 minutes of class to answer a short essay prompt (handwritten). The prompt will draw on that day or week's readings.

The goal of these reflections/quizzes is to incentivize reading and understanding the material. There are many ways to prepare for these—to read each article/book and make notes; to collaborate with a small group to make and review and discuss summaries together; or to use AI to help summarize and understand key readings. AI or group work-sharing might be a helpful tool but will not be a substitute for reading yourself.

Take-home assignments Several times during the quarter you will be required to hand in a short worksheet or commentary *the evening before class*. See the syllabus for the specific weeks. This will give me and the TA time to skim a selection of them before we meet. These assignments are designed to move your quarter-long policy project and final essay ahead, and apply that week's readings or tools to your policy question. You may use AI as a tool for research and idea generation, but you should not have AI write your assignment (nor, generally, will it do a good job with the types of take home assignments we will perform). See the AI policy below.

Additional comments

- There will be 9 weekly written assignments between the in-class quizzes/reflections and the take-home assignments
- We drop your 2 worst grades, and so you can skip/miss 2 or you can hand in all and we will drop your worst grades
- Your TA will generally do most grading, with input from me, and graded assignments will generally be handed back within 2 weeks of submission.

Grading Policy

Your grade will have three components:

- 33% for the quality of participation in class (asking and answering questions, high quality of commentary, ability to engage civilly with other students, ability to listen to other views, not dominating the conversation, ...)
- 33% for the weekly assignments
- 33% for the final project

Pass/Fail option To earn a passing grade, students taking the course pass/fail must attend class regularly, participate actively, complete and submit all assignments, earning passing grades on all.

How to get a good grade First of all, for most of you, no one will ever look at your grades again for as long as you live, so don't worry about the grade. I am happy to have you switch to Pass/Fail if you need to. For the rest of you, I do not grade on a curve, but your work will be evaluated relative to the quality of your peers in the class. All that said, there is a simple way to excel in this class:

- Read the readings. I think reading and writing are the main way we all change how we understand the world and influence others. Virtually every reading in this course is one that deeply influenced my own perspective and that of many others.
- Think critically about what you read. Every paper and book is wrong in some way. Usually it has major flaws or oversights. Your job is to figure out what the problems are and the limits of the argument. For the rest of your career, approach every paper or book with the idea that your job is partly to figure out why it is wrong.
- Make notes and think about your essay answers along the way. You will have some of the essay questions quite early. When reading the readings and taking class notes, write down your ideas and thoughts in real time.
- Given that we may only be interacting 9–10 times, it's especially important that you join class. Of course, everyone falls sick, has family circumstances, or has religious observances. It's best if you can let me know in advance. You will not be penalized.
- Hand in all assignments.
- When writing something: Organize, organize, organize. Even in a short assignment, make a plan for your answer, or the point you want to make. Have a clear structure. Use subheadings liberally. Enumerate your arguments ("I have two objections. First, ..."). Paragraphs should be about a single idea. The main point should come in the first sentence and the rest of the paragraph should be supportive, add detail, continue the theme.

- When writing something: Revise, revise, revise. Most of the time you can make the point in half the words. Most of the time you can strengthen your piece by dropping your weakest arguments.
- While organization, clarity and brevity all help, fundamentally I'll be evaluating you on the depth, thoughtfulness, and persuasiveness of your written work. There are many ingredients into that, but reading widely and critically is the first and most important step. Often the best grades go to the students who have evidently put in the most time.

Late policy The late penalty is generally one grade level per day (e.g. from an 9/10 to an 8/10). I can waive the penalty if you have a timely, legitimate, and documented excuse.

- If you are missing classes or have a late assignment because of sickness or religious observance (e.g. Ramadan), we can accommodate you. If predictable, please alert the TA by email in advance. Please make specific arrangements for extensions of any assignments.
- Do not wait until weeks after a missed assignment to talk to us. I especially advise against waiting to contact us until the last week of classes or after final grades have been submitted. It is easier to accommodate timely requests.

Re-grading policies Feel free to discuss your grades with me to get clarification. If, following such a conversation, you feel that an error was made, please submit a re-grade request in writing, by email, within two weeks of the assignment being handed back. Please include an explanation or justification for the re-grade request.

A poor way to ask for a re-grade is to simply lobby non-specifically for a better grade, or to explain there is some reason you need to maintain a certain grade level. A good way to ask for a regrading is to substantively discuss why you thought you answered the question well, ask for clarification, and if a mistake was made we can correct it. Or, if you have a legitimate medical or related excuse, please follow the instructions above.

What to do if you're having problems

I'm committed to helping everyone pass the class, in a way that you still learn the materials and gets the work done. If you find yourself unable to join a class or complete an assignment for physical health, mental health, or other personal reasons, just let me know. Here is what I suggest if a problem comes up:

- As soon as possible, email me and *copy your student services advisor*, with a note about the missed work and an explanation. *I hold everything in the strictest confidence.* But if you would like to explain the situation to your advisor only and have them contact me directly without the personal details, that is fine too.

- I don't really care when you put in the effort, so long as you find the time to read and reflect on the material in the course. In general, I will identify a way for you to make up an assignment. This will often be an extension of the deadline. If we discuss answers in depth the following class, it may be that I ask you to submit an essay on a different question.
- In extreme cases, students have sometimes taken time over the break or subsequent quarter to finalize the assignments and the class.
- Try not to tell me last minute. Advance notice is always a good policy.

Developing reading & writing skills

This is a highly reading and writing intensive course. I know this can be especially challenging for students who speak English as a second language. At the same time, it's an essential skill. One goal of mine is for you to learn to read more efficiently and write more effectively. We will talk about strategies in class, and you should feel free to ask me for feedback.

For those who want some additional help, Harris has some resources for students who feel they need help developing their academic reading and writing skills.

- For a reading assessment (and academic skills assessment in general), the best option at the University would be the [Academic Skills Assessment Program \(ASAP\)](#).
- We also have the [Harris Writing Program](#), which does not particularly focus on reading, but might indirectly help students get a better grasp of the written word and academic text comprehension.
- [The English Language Institute](#) also offers workshops and courses to help ESL students. Some are free, some are not.

Harris Policies

Academic Integrity

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.

The University's policies regarding academic integrity and dishonesty are described [here](#). It is worth explicitly stating the University's approach here: "It is contrary to justice, academic integrity, and to the spirit of intellectual inquiry to submit another's statements or ideas as one's own work. To do so is plagiarism or cheating, offenses punishable under the University's disciplinary system. Because these offenses undercut

the distinctive moral and intellectual character of the University, we take them very seriously.”

The Harris School’s policies are available in the Harris Student Handbook Canvas site.

- The Academic Honesty and Plagiarism section expresses the main principles.
- Detailed guidelines for more specialized student work (e.g., problem sets including computer code) are offered in the section titled Harris Integrity Policy for Problem Sets Involving Code.
- Harris’s specific procedures for handling suspected violations of these policies are available in the section Harris Procedures for Allegations of Plagiarism, Cheating, and Academic Dishonesty and are also re-produced as an Appendix to this document.
- 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 penalty for students who have committed academic dishonesty.
- Other penalties for violations could be imposed instead, alone or in combination, including a zero grade on the assignment or a failing grade in the course.

AI policy

AI tools are not prohibited in this class, and you may find it a useful tool complement to the readings, or for research help with your policy assignment. But I do have some strict guidelines.

For those speaking English as a second language, AI tools have the advantage of letting you write in your native tongue and translate, or polish your style and grammar. While AI is great for this, please disclose it when you do so. There is always a risk that using these features can lead your submission to be flagged as AI-produced using AI detection tools, even if the text is substantially yours. Combined with a superficial answer, or mistakes that AI commonly makes in this material, there is a risk of having the essay returned to you to be redone (at minimum). Thus, I recommend writing on English and not using AI to correct or polish your language. We do not penalize grammar errors or spelling or style in that sense.

While AI can be a useful research tool, the at-home assignments and the final cannot reasonably be produced by AI. Certainly not very well. Using AI to write your assignments will generally earn you a bad grade, and is also a violation of the academic honesty policy described above.

The instructor and the TA reserve the right to use AI detection software. Potential academic integrity violations will vary on the circumstance, but can generally range from receiving a zero on an assignment, to losing grade levels in the final grade, or to failure of the course.

If your submission sounds like AI, or no more original than an AI produced, you may be asked to resubmit the assignment with penalties.

Disability Accommodations

The University's policies regarding students with disabilities are available [here](#). Students who have disability accommodations awarded by the University Student Disability Services Office should inform the Harris Dean of Students office by the end of the first week of class. The Harris Dean of Students Office will work with the student and instructor to coordinate the students' accommodations implementation.

Harris students are not required to submit their accommodations letter to the instructor. Students from other divisions in the University must submit their accommodations letter to either the instructor or the Harris Dean of Students Office.

Students who do not yet have formal accommodations in place but who feel they need accommodations on a temporary or ongoing basis should contact the Harris Dean of Students Office or Student Disability Services.

It is also worth noting that teaching in a remote environment may generate other questions and issues related to providing accommodations to students with disabilities. Some suggestions are available [here](#).

Weekly Topics and Readings

The readings focus on the *how* of doing policy, not the *what*. I assume some familiarity with development theory and the major debates in development economics. Ideally, students will have taken the core Economic Development class taught in the Harris IPD certificate.

Thus, I don't teach **growth models**, and I've omitted some of the most influential books of the past two decades, including: **Poor Economics** by Banerjee and Duflo; **Why Nations Fail** by Acemoglu and Robinson; **The End of Poverty** by Sachs; or Easterly's **Elusive Quest for Growth** and **White Man's Burden**. These are books you should be familiar with if you are taking the IPD certificate at Harris.

The first week of class will be a chance to figure out who is taking the course and collective interests. I am always open to suggestions. So please regard the schedule and reading list below as tentative and subject to change.

1 Introduction

1.1 Anti-politics machines (Sept 30)

Readings James Ferguson's *The Anti-Politics Machine*, despite centering around cattle raising in a tiny country (Lesotho) became one of the most famous and influential books on international development. I strongly recommend you buy and read **the whole book**. However, for the purposes of the first class:

- **Required:** Read this summary article: Ferguson, James. 1994. The Anti-Politics Machine. *The Ecologist* 24(5). [In Canvas]
- **Required:** Read Chapter 5 of the book [In Canvas]
- **Recommended:** Chapters 2 and 9 [In Canvas]

1.2 The Life You Can Save? (Oct 2)

In-class assignment Short answer question on Week 1 readings

Readings

- **Required:** *New York Times* excerpt from Singer, Peter. 2010. **The Life You Can Save: How to Do Your Part to End World Poverty**. Random House Incorporated.
- **Required:** Read the **Introduction** and skim **Chapter 1** of Autesserre, Séverine. 2014. "Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention." Cambridge University Press.

2 Seeing like a state

2.1 Book discussion (Oct 7)

Readings

- **Required:** Introduction and Chapters 1 and 10 (plus one chapter/case study in chapters 2–9) of Scott, James C., 2020. *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. Yale University Press. [Note: *The full text is online* through the UChicago Library/VPN]
- **Recommended:** Some summaries and reviews of the book:
 - Paul Seabright. 1999. *The Aestheticising Vice*, London Review of Books 21(11), p.26–27 [A critical book review of Scott’s book]
 - Brad DeLong’s [review](#)
 - [Slate Star Codex review](#) or [podcast](#)
- **Recommended:** Sections 21–24 of Popper, Karl. *The poverty of historicism*

2.2 Policy project discussion (Oct 9)

At-home assignment By the *evening before class*, submit 2–3 initial ideas for your quarter-long policy project. This should be 1–2 pages long maximum. For more information on the quarter-long project, see the instructions and guidelines above. **Be prepared to discuss your ideas in class.** I may call on you to discuss one of them.

3 Iterative, adaptive policy

3.1 Book discussion (Oct 14)

Readings

- **Required:** Part I (Chapters 1–5) of Andrews, Matt, Lant Pritchett, and Michael Woolcock. 2017. *Building State Capability: Evidence, Analysis, Action*. Oxford University Press. *Chapter 5 is especially important.*
- **Required:** Download and look through the authors’ [PDIA toolkit](#) [Also in Canvas].

3.2 Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (Oct 16)

At home assignment By the *evening before class*, submit:

- Worksheets 1 and 2 from the PDIA toolkit (above) on Canvas, applying them to your primary policy problem (for the semester long project).

- Revisit Figures 5.1 and 5.2 in the book. Briefly discuss how your problem lines up in terms of the 4 analytic questions (Figure 5.1) and what kind of problem you are addressing (Figure 5.2).

You should feel free to create your own Word or Google document to answer the questions. Formatting is not important, content is.

Readings

- **Required:** Chapter 6 of Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock, especially
- **Recommended:** Chapters 7–9 of Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock
- **Recommended:** This [PDIA podcast series](#) (12 episodes, about 10-15 minutes each)

4 Can autocracy work?

4.1 Competitive authoritarianism (Oct 21)

Readings

- **Required:** Xu, Chenggang. 2011. [The Fundamental Institutions of China's Reforms and Development](#). Journal of Economic Literature 49(4): 1076–1151.
- **Required:** Chang-Tai Hsieh [Crony capitalism with Chinese Characteristics](#) YouTube video of a BFI & IMF talk (52:15). Paper version is [here](#) [Also in Canvas].
- **Recommended:** Wang, Shaoda, and David Y. Yang. 2025. [Policy experimentation in China: The political economy of policy learning](#). Journal of Political Economy 133(7).
- **Recommended:** Ang, Yuen Yuen. 2020. [China's Gilded Age: The Paradox of Economic Boom and Vast Corruption](#). Cambridge University Press.

4.2 Alternatives to dictatorship (Oct 23)

In-class assignment Short answer question on Week 4 readings

Readings

- **Required:** Bardhan, Pranab. 2002. [Decentralization of Governance and Development](#). Journal of Economic perspectives 16(4): 185–205.
- **Recommended:** Chapter 7 of Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock (on authorizing environments)

5 The liberal-democratic approach

5.1 Book discussion (Oct 28)

Readings

- **Required:** Kelkar, Vijay, and Ajay Shah. 2019. *In Service Of The Republic: The Art And Science of Economic Policy*. Penguin Random House India.
 - Critical chapters include those in Parts II and IV
- **Recommended:** [Podcast interview with the authors by Shruti Rajagopalan](#)

5.2 Applications to your project/policy (Oct 30)

At-home assignment Kelkar and Shah argue that all policy problems should be defined in terms of the market failure at work, that policy can correct. In class 5.1, we discussed these and also addressed political and social failures. *The evening before class*, submit a roughly 2–3 page (double-spaced) analysis of your policy problem through this lens. What market, social or political failures contribute to this policy problem?

In class, I will call upon some of you to discuss your assignments, and how the material we are reading has shaped your thinking.

6 Bureaucracies

6.1 International bureaucracies (Nov 4)

Readings

- **Required:** Read Chapters 1 and 2 and one of the later cases in Barnett, Michael, and Martha Finnemore. *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics*. Cornell University Press, 2004.
- **Recommended:** Gibson, Clark C., Krister Andersson, Elinor Ostrom, and Sujai Shivakumar. 2005. *The Samaritan's Dilemma: The Political Economy of Development Aid*. Oxford University Press. [Here is a one chapter summary](#).

6.2 Local bureaucracy (Nov 6)

In-class assignment Short answer question on Week 6 readings

Readings

- **Required:** McDonnell, Erin Metz. 2017. [Patchwork leviathan: How pockets of bureaucratic governance flourish within institutionally diverse developing states](#). American Sociological Review 82(3): 476-510.
- **Recommended:** Blum, Jurgen R. and Rogger, Daniel, 2021. [Public Service Reform in Post-Conflict Societies](#). The World Bank Research Observer, 36(2), pp.260-287.

7 Good government

7.1 Decentralization? (Nov 11)

Readings

- **Required:** Chapters 1 and 2 and (recommended) one later chapter/case study of Tendler, Judith. 1997. [Good Government in the Tropics](#). Johns Hopkins University Press.
 - **Required:** Ostrom, Elinor. 2001. [Decentralization and Development: The New Panacea](#). In Challenges to Democracy, 237-256. Palgrave Macmillan.
 - **Recommended:** Honig, Dan. 2019. [The Power of Letting Go](#). Stanford Social Innovation Review.
- See also this [YouTube presentation](#)

7.2 Microeconomic approach (Nov 13)

In-class assignment Short answer question on Week 7 readings

Readings

- **Required:** Chapter 10 and Conclusion of Duflo, Esther, and Abhijit Banerjee. [Poor Economics](#). PublicAffairs, 2011.
- **Required:** Skim Finan, Frederico, Benjamin A. Olken, and Rohini Pande. [The Personnel Economics of the Developing State](#). Handbook of Economic Field Experiments 2 (2017): 467-514.

8 Economic approaches to policy change

8.1 Macroeconomic paths (Nov 18)

In-class assignment Short answer question on Rodrik chapters

Readings

- **Required:** Chapters 1–5 of Rodrik, Dani. 2008. *One Economics, Many Recipes: Globalization, Institutions, and Economic Growth*. Princeton University Press.
- **Recommended:** Evans, P.B., 1995. *Embedded autonomy: States and industrial transformation*. Princeton University Press.

8.2 Micro to macro change: Guest speaker Michael Kremer (Nov 20)

I will do a “fireside chat” and class Q&A with University of Chicago Professor (and Nobel Laureate) Michael Kremer, focusing partly on his role in bringing microeconomic evidence to bear on international development, but also on his experiences using research and advocacy to create real policy change: the development of new vaccines; the building of evidence-to-scale organizations such as USAID DIV and Evidence Action; and programs to scale interventions such as Deworm the World and Precision Agriculture.

Readings: To be determined

9 Evidence-based policy change

Assignment: By Nov 30, please submit a 3–4 page (double spaced) outline of your final paper, plus references you plan to use (not included in the page limit).

9.1 Iterative adaptation and learning in a humanitarian organization: Guest speak Jeannie Annan (Dec 2)

Class activity: Jeannie Annan, PhD, is a Senior Vice President at the International Rescue Committee, and serves as their Chief Research and Innovation Officer, leading the agency’s efforts to design, test, and scale life-changing solutions for people affected by conflict and disaster. Jeannie co-founded the Airbel Impact Lab, a team of researchers, designers, behavioral scientists and analysts working with technical experts, frontline staff and partners to find high impact and scalable products and services in more than 30 crisis-affected countries around the world.

Jeannie will give a brief presentation of her work and then we will do a mix of “fireside chat” and class Q&A, focusing on how IRC and Airbel have approached defining key policy problems, how they approach finding solutions, and the challenges of changing practice in a large organization and the humanitarian sector at large.

Readings: To be determined

9.2 The economist as political plumber (Dec 2)

Readings:

- **Required:** Lant Pritchett presentation on [RCTs in Development Slides](#)
- **Required:** Rodrik, Dani. 2008. [The New Development Economics: We Shall Experiment, But How Shall We Learn?](#)
- **Recommended:** Kapur, Devesh and Subramanian, Arvind. 2021. [The Absent Voices of Development Economics](#)

10 Exam week: Final paper due

To give you enough time to work on them, our final papers are due **no later than December 12**. Note: In order to provide enough time to grade them, we are unlikely to complete all grading by Dec 16 (the date at which grades are due for students graduating in the fall). If you are not graduating in the fall, but would like to have your final course grade by December 16, please submit your final paper no later than **Dec 9**.