The Politics of Poverty

Political Science 4017
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Tues, Thurs 9:00-10:20
244 Lockett
Office Hrs: by appointment
Monday 9-11
Thursday 1:00-2:30

The purpose of this course is to introduce poverty as the key to understanding some of the most important problems facing our county. The class will start by defining public policy and its origins. We will then move to a discussion of how we define poverty, its causes, and our choice of solutions. Because poverty has been defined as a problem worthy of national government attention since the 1930s, any discourse on poverty is inherently a political one.

Course Requirements

You are expected to come to class prepared to participate in the discussion of the day’s reading assignment. This means that you should read the day’s assignment prior to class. A three-hour course is associated with nine total hours of work per week.

There is no textbook for this course. All of the class readings can be downloaded from the Moodle website or found via a link on the Moodle website. An * next to a class date indicates a reading assignment. All students must abide by the Student Academic Honor Code. Cheating will not be tolerated. All electronic devices (cell phones, iPads, laptops, etc) must be placed inside a zipped backpack during exams. Failure to place electronic devices inside a zipped backpack will be considered cheating.

Exams

There are three exams in the course. Each exam is worth 120 points and will consist of forty multiple choice questions (2 points each) and four short answer questions (10 points each). You must bring a scantron to class for the exam. Exams are not cumulative. Make-up exams may be taken in emergency situations (illness, death in the family, etc.). If an exam is missed, I should be notified within 24 hours (unless you are locked up or in a coma) of the exam’s scheduled time in order to discuss the makeup exam.

Quizzes

There will be 8 pop quizzes or homework assignments scattered throughout the course. Each quiz or assignment is worth 20 points. Only 5 quizzes/assignments will count towards your grade so if you take all 8, I will count the best 5 of the 8 grades. Quizzes may consist of information from previous class lectures or the assigned reading. THERE ARE NO MAKEUPS ON QUIZZES/HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENTS without a doctor’s note, an obituary, or a University excuse.

Group Legislative Project:

You will be placed in a group of 4-5 students. As a group, you will produce a position paper on a bill being considered by the Louisiana Legislature. The Legislature will be in session from March 14th to June 6th. In early February, your group will be assigned its bill. Each group must produce a position paper that includes the following:

- Description of the bill
- Description of the policy problem the bill is addressing
- Why does this legislator care about this problem?
- Is this problem specific to Louisiana or are other states experiencing (have experienced) the problem? What actions have they taken? Is this the first time the legislature has considered action on this problem? If not, give a brief history of previous attempts to deal with the problem.
- What is the “treatment” or mechanism by which the legislation will fix the problem?
- Does your group think this is a good solution? If there is dissent among members, each side should present its argument.
- Executive Summary (one page) that addresses each of the aforementioned topics

The position paper is worth 120 points. It should be typed, double spaced using 12 Times New Roman font and be between 15 and 20 pages in length with one inch margins. Graphs and charts should be used when possible to convey information. Ten bonus points will be given to the group if a member attends a committee hearing and offers testimony in support or opposition to the bill.
Honors Option
For honors students who would like to take the course for Honors Credit, please see me to be assigned one of the books listed on the syllabus. You will produce a 7-10 page summary of the book’s major findings and do a book presentation for the class.

Bonus
Each of you starts out with 5 bonus points. These 5 points are yours to lose. You may lose some or all of these points for the following offenses.

- Emailing me and asking me questions that can be answered using the syllabus or that can be answered using LSU’s website. Some examples are “Where is your office?” “When are your office hours?” “When is the final?”
- Emailing me some form of the following questions: “Can you give me a B? If you don’t, I’ll lose my TOPS,” or “Can you give me a [insert grade]? I won’t graduate without it.”

Grading Scale

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Readings Schedule and Topic Outline

Section One: What is public policy? What is poverty?

January 14th
Syllabus

January 19th*
Why should you care about poverty? What is public policy?

January 21st*
Behavioral Assumptions

January 26th*
What is poverty?
Rector, Robert. “How Poor Are America’s Poor: Examining the ‘Plague’ of Poverty in America”
http://www.economist.com/node/17961878

Homework Due: Fill out budget assignment and bring to class. Play the game at
http://playspent.org/ At the bottom of the budget assignment page fill in the amount of money you had left or the day you ran out of money.

January 28th*
Research Methods: DO NOT PANIC!
Berry, William and Mitchell Sanders. 2000. Chapter One from Understanding Multivariate Research: A Primer for Beginning Social Scientists.

February 4th*
Research Methods: DO NOT PANIC!
Berry, William and Mitchell Sanders. 2000. Parts of Chapters Two and Three from Understanding Multivariate Research: A Primer for Beginning Social Scientists.

February 6th
Income Inequality: Documentary Inequality for All by Robert Reich

February 11th*
Income Inequality and Economic Mobility
http://www.pewstates.org/uploadedFiles/PCS_Assets/2012/Pursuing_American_Dream.pdf

Homework Due: Complete the understanding regression assignment.
February 16th*
Poverty and the Brain

February 18th*
Is the Playing Field Really Level?
Scarcity and the Brain, Chapters 7 and 8.
*Honors Option: presentation on the book Scarcity and the Brain by Mullainathan and Shafir

February 23rd*
Exam One

Section Two: Policy Solutions to the Problem of Poverty

February 25th*
The U.S. Tax Code: Who Really Pays Taxes
“Policy Basics: The Earned Income Tax Credit”
“Policy Basics: The Estate Tax”

March 1st*
Social Security and the Elderly
“Policy Basics: Top Ten Facts about Social Security”
“Can the Rich and Famous Save Social Security?”

March 3rd*
Health Care in the United States

http://kff.org/health-reform/video/youtoons-obamacare-video/

March 8th*
Food Stamps
“Policy Basics: Introduction to SNAP”
http://www.salon.com/2014/01/19/what_i_learned_from_a_week_on_food_stamps_paul_ryan_couldnt_be.any_more_wrong/

*Honors Option: presentation on the book Snap Matters: How Food Stamps Affect Health and Well Being by Bartfield, Gunderson, Smeeding and Ziliak

March 10th*
AFDC and TANF

March 15th*
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

March 17th*
Poverty and Education: Finding the Way Forward.

March 29th*
Economic Diversity and Education
Kahlenberg, Richard. “Turn Around Schools That Work”

March 31st
EXAM II
Section Three: How do race and poverty intersect in America?

April 5th
Race and Welfare: News Media and Race

Honors Option: The Mass Media and the Dynamics of American Racial Attitudes by Paul Kellstedt

April 7th*
Banking Practices and Pay Day Loans Reading TBA

April 12th*
Immigration
Garand, James, Ping Xu, and Belinda Davis. “Immigrants and Eroding Support for the Welfare State.”

Homework Due: Harvard Implicit Attitudes Tests (race)

April 14th*
Race and Welfare: Distributing Discipline

*Honors Option: presentation on the book Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform by Schram, Soss, and Fording

April 19th*
Crime and Poverty

April 21st
Lagniappe

April 26th
Presentations

April 28th
Presentations

May 3rd
Final Exam (Tuesday) 10-12