

Public Economics

Dr. Ryan Safner

devF21.classes.ryansafner.com

Course: ECON 410 Fall 2022

Room: Rosenstock 101

Meets: MW 2:40–4:05 PM

Email: safner@hood.edu

Office: Rosenstock 110

Hours: MW 10:00–11 AM & by appt

“What’s so great about democracy other than it’s democratic?” – Gordon Tullock

“Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others that have been tried from time to time.” – Winston Churchill

The Public Sector in most modern liberal democracies accounts for about $\frac{1}{3}$ of gross national product, and various fiscal and regulatory policies strongly influence the remaining $\frac{2}{3}$. How does “the government” make decisions, enforce laws, and provide the goods and services it is expected to? How does it interact with the rest of the economy? A major part of this course is exploding the black box that we call “government” to examine and model the various political agents: voters, politicians, bureaucrats, interest groups, and how they interact with one another to yield public policy and achieve their separate goals.

The major analytic framework used in this course is commonly known as “public choice:” the application of economic modeling (optimization and equilibrium) to study *non*-market decision-making. Markets use prices and voluntary exchanges to allocate scarce goods among competing uses based on individual preferences. Many other aspects of modern life do *not* rely on prices or voluntary exchanges; the primary arena we explore is *politics*—the realm of collective decision-making where a *single choice* is made for *everyone*. A simple summary of what we will be doing in this course is expanding and exploring answers to the question: **how do we choose in groups?**

Our primary focus will be the government of a modern liberal democracy, particularly the United States since 1789. In many ways, this is a more rigorous complement to your classic high school or college Civics course, but you will soon discover, it will at times emphasize key civic virtues of American governance, and at other times gore sacred cows and contradict popular myths.

As a 400-level course, I intend to treat this course as a *seminar*. **This implies a significant amount of reading, writing, and discussing, on your part, requiring you to take ownership of your own learning.** Against my strong instincts to lecture, this class will primarily be discussion-based and focused heavily on required readings for each meeting. Each class meeting, I will put our readings into context and provide some elaboration of key insights for 20-30 minutes, then the remainder will be open discussion. I have optimized the readings to give you something approachable and manageable each class. As such, I expect you to have done the readings.

This course assumes you have basic knowledge of how a market economy works at the micro- and macro- levels, hence, the **prerequisites** for this course are **ECON 205 and ECON 206; ECON 306 strongly recommended.**

1 Course Format (and Covid)

As of Fall 2021, all students are expected to be on campus except those with special approved exemptions. As such, this course will be taught **in-person** and **synchronously** until or unless otherwise announced.

You are expected to come to class except due to medical reasons or other legitimate conflicts. Watching videos are not a substitute for attending class.¹ Please see the **attendance policy** for more.

¹On average, even for students who complete all assignments, those that do not regularly attend class suffer by a full letter grade, (Levitt 1993).

In any event that we are unable to meet in person, I will hold class meetings at the same day/time live on Zoom, and post all recorded lectures via Panopto on Blackboard, and all assignments will be submitted online (often via Blackboard).

1.1 Learning During a Global Pandemic

While we have made some progress in returning to normal, this remains a unique semester and a lot of things are still awful right now. None of us signed up for this. None of us are really okay, we're all just pretending for everyone else.

Many of you may be dealing with hardships at home and at work, and are generally juggling many more problems than usual. Everyone's future plans have been completely put on hold or cancelled to a large degree.

I am prioritizing us supporting each other as human beings during this crazy era, and will try to use simple, accessible solutions that make sense for the most people, and above all, to be flexible.

If you tell me you're having trouble, I will do whatever I can to help, and not judge you or think less of you. I hope you will extend me the same courtesy.

You never owe me personal information about your health (mental or physical). You are however always welcome to talk to me about things that you're going through. If I can't help you, I usually know somebody who can.

I want you to learn a lot from this course, but it is more important for you to remain healthy, balanced, and grounded during this crisis.

I reserve the right to change any part of this syllabus and course, at my discretion, with proper advance warning.

2 Course objectives

By the end of this course, you will:

- Understand the incentives of different participants in a liberal democracy, particularly voters, politicians, bureaucrats, regulators, and special interest groups
- Understand the processes by which *actual* public policy gets made by *actual* people
- Understand the difference between constitutional-level rules and political rules and the importance of each
- Explain current events and public policies in terms of individuals accomplishing separate political goals through political exchanges
- Recognize the analytical and practical similarities and differences between individuals acting in markets and non-market institutions
- Understand and explain real world differences in outcomes and in operations between political, cultural, economic, and social institutions in different societies
- Overcome the nirvana fallacy

Given these objectives, this course fulfills all three of the learning outcomes for [the George B. Deplaine, Jr. School of Business Economics B.A. program](#):

- Use quantitative tools and techniques in the preparation, interpretation, analysis and presentation of data and information for problem solving and decision making [...]
- Apply economic reasoning and models to understand and analyze problems of public policy [...]
- Demonstrate effective oral and written communications skills for personal and professional success[...]

My standard disclaimer: This class may challenge many of your existing beliefs and conceptions about how the world works, and how it should work. This is the most important and exciting part of a liberal arts education. This does *not* mean that I want to make you to see everything "my way." In fact, if you come out of this class thinking exactly like me, then I have probably failed you as a teacher. To the best

of my ability, I keep my opinions to myself unless relevant for purposes of discussion, and I respect and invite you to reach your own conclusions on all matters.

If at any point you find yourself struggling in this course for any reason, please come see me. Do not suffer in silence! Coming to see me for help does not diminish my view of you, in fact I will hold you in *higher* regard for understanding your own needs and taking charge of your own learning. There are also some fantastic resources on campus, such as the [Center for Academic Achievement and Retention \(CAAR\)](#) and the [Beneficial-Hodson Library](#).

See my [tips for success in this course](#).

3 Required Course materials

You can find all course materials at my **dedicated website** for this course: publicS21.classes.ryansafner.com. Links to the website are posted on our Blackboard course page. Please familiarize yourself with the website, see that it contains this [syllabus](#), guides for your [reference](#), and our [schedule](#). On the schedule page, you can find each module with its own class page (**start there!**) along with all related readings, lecture slides, practice problems, and assignments.

My lecture slides will be shared with you, and serve as your primary resource, but we have several books that you are required to buy and read for class discussions. I will discuss more about textbooks and materials in the first day.

3.1 Books

There are two books that we will roughly be following in parallel, both available at the bookstore (or you can find them on Amazon, ebay, etc). You may choose to purchase used or old versions, but be aware that content and ordering may slightly vary across versions.

1. Holcombe, Randall G, 2016, *Advanced Introduction to Public Choice*, Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, ISBN: 978-1-78536-206-4
2. Buchanan, James M and Gordon Tullock, 1999, *The Calculus of Consent: The Logical Foundations of Constitutional Democracy*, Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, Inc. ISBN: 978-0865972186²

The first book is the closest thing to a “textbook,” as it provides a good introduction to the background theory for every lesson. We will only have required reading assignments from it a few times this course (which I will make available on the website). However, I recommend that you read the (very short) chapters associated with each topic as we move through the course on your own.

The second book is one of the monumental books that is largely credited with revolutionizing the study of public economics that, in part, won James Buchanan the 1986 Nobel Prize in Economics. The entire book is [free online](#), but as one of the classics in public economics, I highly recommend you purchase it and read beyond our required chapters at some point.

Both books are quite cheap, and can be found both at the Hood Bookstore or online retailers like Amazon and eBay.

I have no financial interest in requiring you to purchase either book.

3.2 Articles

Throughout the course, I will post both required and supplemental (non-required) readings that enrich your understanding for each topic. Check *frequently* for announcements and updates to assignments, readings, and grades.

²Link to free PDF version. If you wish to purchase a hard copy, note this can also be found in several equivalent versions: [Volume 3 of the Collected Works of James Buchanan](#) and [Volume 2 of the Collected Works of Gordon Tullock](#)

Grade	Range	Grade	Range
A	93–100%	C	73–76%
A–	90–92%	C–	70–72%
B+	87–89%	D+	67–69%
B	83–86%	D	63–66%
B–	80–82%	D–	60–62%
C+	77–79%	F	< 60%

4 Assignments and Grades

Your final course grade is the weighted average of the following assignments. You can find general descriptions for all the assignments on the [assignments page](#) and more specific information and examples on each assignment’s page on the [schedule page](#).

Frequency	Assignment	Weight
NA	Participation (Average)	30%
1	Policy Paper	30%
2	Midterm	20%
1	Final	20%

Each assignment is graded on a 100 point scale. Letter-grade equivalents are based on the following scale:

See also my [Grade Calculator](#) app where you can calculate your overall grade using existing assignment grades and forecast “what if” scenarios.

These grades are firm cutoffs, but I do of course round upwards (≥ 0.5) for final grades. A necessary reminder, as an academic, I am not in the business of *giving* out grades, I merely report the grade that you *earn*. I will not alter your grade unless you provide a reasonable argument that I am in error (which does happen from time to time).

No extra credit is available

5 Policies and Expectations

This syllabus is a contract between you, the student, and me, your instructor. It has been carefully and deliberately thought out. (A syllabus can and will be used as a legal document for disputes tried at a court of law. Ask me how I know.), and I will uphold my end of the agreement and expect you to uphold yours.

In the language of game theory, this syllabus is my commitment device. I am a very understanding person, and I know that exceptions to rules often need to be made for students. However, to be *fair* to all students the syllabus artificially constrains my ability to make exceptions at a whim for anyone. This prevents clever students from exploiting my congenial personality at everyone else’s expense. Please read and familiarize yourself with the course policies and expectations of you. Chances are, if you have a question, it is answered herein.

5.1 Attendance

Your day-to-day classroom attendance is not graded. My philosophy is that you are all adults and must take ownership of your own learning or else you will not succeed. Some assignments may require in-class participation for credit, and an (unexcused) absence may be detrimental to your grade. Attending class is one of the strongest predictors of success.

However, as required under Hood College’s “Promise of Fall Plan,” (Ch. 2-C) **your classroom attendance will be recorded at every class meeting**. This is primarily to facilitate contact tracing.

If you know you will be absent, you are not *required* to let me know, but it is polite to give notice (Note if I do not reply to an email of yours letting me know, I am probably busy but will still see it and appreciate

your email). Your absence will be noted and recorded for the purposes stated above. If, however, we have an assignment due in class, you *must* notify me ahead of time in order to make alternate arrangements to still receive credit. Hasty ex-post attempts to notify me will generate little sympathy.

5.2 Late Assignments

I will accept late assignments, but will subtract a specified amount of points as a penalty. Even if it is the last week of the semester, I encourage you to turn in late work: some points are better than no points!

I reserve the right to re-weight assignments for students whom I believe are legitimately unable to complete a particular assignment.

5.3 Grading

I will try my best to post grades on Blackboard's Grading Center and return graded assignments to you within about one week of you turning them in. There will be exceptions. Where applicable, I will post answer keys once I know most homeworks are turned in (see Late Assignments above for penalties). Blackboard's Grading Center is the place to look for your most up-to-date grades. See also my [Grade Calculator](#) app where you can calculate your overall grade using existing assignment grades and forecast "what if" scenarios.

5.4 Communication: Email, Slack, and Virtual Office Hours

Students must regularly monitor their **Hood email accounts** to receive important college information, including messages related to this class. Email through the Blackboard system is my main method of communicating announcements and deadlines regarding your assignments. **Please do not reply to any automated Blackboard emails - I may not receive it!** My Hood email (safner@hood.edu) is the best means of contacting me. I will do my best to respond within 24 hours. If I do not reply within 48 hours, do not take it personally, and *feel free to send a follow up email* in the very likely event that I genuinely did not see your original message.

Our [slack channel](#) is available to all students and faculty in Economics and Business. I have invited all of my classes and advisees. It will not be extended to non-Business/Economics students or faculty. All users must use their **hood emails** and **true first and last names**. Each course has its own channel, exclusive for verified students in the course, and myself, by my invite only. As a third party platform, you agree to its Terms of Service. I have created this space as a way to stay connected, to help one another, and to foster community. Behaviors such as posting inappropriate content, harassing others, or engaging in academic dishonesty, to be determined solely at my discretion, will result in one warning, the content will be deleted, and subsequent behavior will result in a ban.

In addition to in-person office hours, you can also make an appointment for **"office hours"** on Zoom. You can join in with video, audio, and/or chat, whichever you feel comfortable with. Of course, if you are not available during those times, we can schedule our own time if you prefer this method over email or Slack. If you want to go over material from class, please have *specific* questions you want help with. I am not in the business of giving private lectures (particularly if you missed class without a valid excuse).

Watch the excellent and accurate video explaining office hours [on the website](#).

5.5 Netiquette

When using Zoom and Slack, please follow appropriate internet etiquette ("Netiquette"). Written communications, like blog posts or use of the Zoom chat, lacks important nonverbal cues (such as body language, tone of voice, sarcasm, etc).

Above all else, please respect one another and think/reread carefully about how others may see your post before you submit a comment. You are expected to disagree and have different opinions, this is inherently valuable in a discussion. Please be civil and constructive in responding to others' comments:

writing “*have you considered ‘X?’*” is a lot more helpful to all involved than just writing “*well you’re just wrong.*”

Posting content that is wilfully incendiary, illegal, or that constitutes academic dishonesty (such as plagiarism) will automatically earn a grade of 0 and may be elevated to other authorities on campus.

When using the chat function on Zoom or public Slack channels, please treat it as official course communications, even though I may not be grading it. It may be a quick and informal tool - don’t feel you need to worry about spelling or perfect grammar - but please try to avoid *too* informal “text-speak” (i.e. say “That’s good for you” instead of “thas good 4 u”).

5.6 Privacy

[Maryland law requires](#) all parties consent for a conversation or meeting to be recorded. If you join in, and certainly if you participate, **you are consenting to be recorded**. However, as described below, videos are *not accessible* beyond our class.

Live lectures are recorded on Zoom and posted to Blackboard via Panopto, a secure course management system for video. Among other nice features (such as multiple video screens, close captioning, and time-stamped search functions!), Panopto is authenticated via your Blackboard credentials, ensuring that *our course videos are not accessible to the open internet*.

For the privacy of your peers, and to foster an environment of trust and academic freedom to explore ideas, **do not record our course lectures or discussions**. You are already getting my official copies.

The [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act](#) prevents me from disclosing or discussing any student information, including grades and records about student performance. If the student is at least 18 years of age, *parents (or spouses) do not have a right to obtain this information*, except with consent by the student.

Many of you may be tuning in remotely, living with parents, and may have occasional interruptions due to sharing a space. This is normal and fine, but know that I will protect your privacy and not discuss your performance when parents (or anyone other than you, for that matter) are present, without your explicit consent.

5.7 Enrollment

Students are responsible for verifying their enrollment in this class. The last day to add or drop this class with no penalty is **Wednesday, September 1**. Be aware of [important dates](#).

5.8 Honor Code

Hood College has an Academic Honor Code which requires all members of this community to maintain the highest standards of academic honesty and integrity. Cheating, plagiarism, lying, and stealing are all prohibited. All violations of the Honor Code are taken seriously, will be reported to appropriate authority, and may result in severe penalties, including expulsion from the college. See [here](#) for more detailed information.

5.9 Van Halen and M&Ms

When you have completed reading the syllabus, email me a picture of the band Van Halen and a picture of a bowl of M&Ms. If you do this *before* the date of the first exam, you will get bonus points on the exam. If 75-100% of the class does this, you each get 2 points. If 50-75% of the class does this, you each get 4 points. If 25-50% of the class does this, you each get 6 points. If 0-25% of the class does this, you each get 8 points. Yes, you read this correctly.

5.10 Accessibility, Equity, and Accommodations

College courses can, and should, be challenging and bring you out of your comfort zone in a safe and equitable environment. If, however, you feel at any point in the semester that certain assignments or aspects of the course will be disproportionately uncomfortable or burdensome for you due to any factor beyond your control, please come see me or email me. I am a very understanding person and am happy to work out a solution together. I reserve the right to modify and reweight assignments at my sole discretion for students that I believe would legitimately be at a disadvantage, through no fault of their own, to complete them as described.

If you are unable to afford required textbooks or other resources for any reason, come see me and we can find a solution that works for you.

This course is intended to be accessible for all students, including those with mental, physical, or cognitive disabilities, illness, injuries, impairments, or any other condition that tends to negatively affect one's equal access to education. If at any point in the term, you find yourself not able to fully access the space, content, and experience of this course, you are welcome to contact me to discuss your specific needs. I also encourage you to contact the [Office of Accessibility Services](#) (301-696-3421). If you have a diagnosis or history of accommodations in high school or previous postsecondary institutions, Accessibility Services can help you document your needs and create an accommodation plan. By making a plan through Accessibility Services, you can ensure appropriate accommodations without disclosing your condition or diagnosis to course instructors.

6 Tentative Schedule

You can find a full schedule with much more details, including the readings, appendices, and other further resources for each class meeting on the [schedule page](#).