Course Description

The task of policy analysis is sometimes viewed as a technician’s task—a matter of using analytical tools to figure out the most effective way to achieve policy goals. That is certainly an essential part of policy analysis, but it is important to be aware of what it leaves out. It leaves out any attempt to say which goals public policy should try to serve in the first place. To care about public policy is to care about whether policies are good or bad. But good or bad in what sense, in what respects, according to what perspectives or values? These questions are not answered once and for all when nations are founded. They are a constant part of public policymaking, and finding better ways to answer them is often the most important thing anyone can do to improve public policy. Sometimes, of course, we can trace the failures of public policy to failures of technology—to our inability to identify effective ways of pursuing policy goals that no one doubts are the right ones. But often the failures of public policy result from something more fundamental—from our inability to identify what the goals of public policy should be in the first place, or from the incomplete or inadequate ways in which we have understood them. These failures arise when we have paid too little attention to values like justice, rights, and equality, or when we have failed to understand those complex and contested ideals in appropriate ways.

Values, Ethics and Public Policy focuses on some of the many ways in which these political and moral values come into play in public policy. The course seeks to develop students’ abilities to think in a reflective and sophisticated way about the moral and ethical dimensions of public policy and to articulate (both verbally and in writing) the ethical aspects of available policy alternatives. It also aims to introduce students to a variety of moral frameworks and considerations that are frequently relevant to contemporary policy debates. To that end, the course is divided into five sections, each of them focused on a different value that plays an important role in public policy—individual welfare, rights, liberty, justice, and accountability. We will usually spend some time at the beginning of each section discussing basic concepts and arguments related to the relevant value. We’ll then move on to consider a few important policy debates in which that value (among others) plays an important role; these debates will give us practice in thinking about and using the general concepts and extending them where necessary.

Reading Materials

Electronic versions of all of the reading materials can be found online in the course Canvas site. The “Files” section has separate folders that contain the readings for each class session. Many of the topics we are covering are currently active subjects of policy debate, so I may update the readings as the semester goes on. I will alert you ahead of time if I need to make changes.
Class Participation

Class time will be devoted primarily to discussion. Regular attendance and participation in class discussions is expected of all students. Students will be expected to have completed and reflected upon the readings prior to class and to have given thought beforehand to emails about upcoming class discussions. You will also sign up for three short blog posts over the course of the semester, which should be completed by 9AM on the day we discuss your chosen topics. These blog posts will often provide jumping-off points for our class discussions, so please read them before class. Class participation (including your blog posts) is worth 30% of your grade.

An important goal of this course is to provide opportunities for you to develop your skills in engaging in difficult conversations about ethical issues in public policy. In the policy world, such conversations occur quite frequently and are impossible to avoid. Disagreement about core values, moral convictions, and the proper role of government in society will likely occur daily in class. In such conversations, we should all strive to be open-minded, listen fully to others and consider their perspectives, and be professional and respectful in our remarks and contributions to the discussion. It is perfectly fine—indeed, it is essential—to express contrary opinions and perspectives and to challenge one another. But it is inappropriate to personalize differences of opinions, or to engage in rude, insulting or hostile behavior during our discussions and debates. The goal is to have lively and respectful exchanges, modeling the types of debates and dialogues that are productive in professional practice.

For many sessions, students will be designated in advance to jumpstart and help facilitate the class discussion. (You will soon receive a short email survey asking for your preferences about the sessions you’d like to help lead; please respond by Thursday, 9/5 at 5:00 PM.) Please see the “Class Discussions” handout on Canvas for more information about these “discussion leader” roles in class. To make it possible for us to have in-depth discussions in which everyone participates, we will break the class into two groups several times during the semester.

Technology in the Classroom

In order to ensure an environment conducive to discussion, please do not use the internet during class time. I prefer that you take notes by hand. You may use your laptops to access the course readings, but you should disable your wireless connection at the beginning of class after you have opened electronic copies of the day’s readings. Put your phone away. Please do not use your phone, computer, tablet, owl, walkie-talkie, or other communications device to send or receive messages during class.

Writing Assignments

The course requirements include three writing assignments, due on October 12, November 14, and December 14. The first two assignments will be worth 20% of your grade each, and the last will be worth 30%. As in all university classes, use proper citation in all your written work; plagiarism can be cause for expulsion. If you have any questions about what plagiarism is (in brief: acknowledge all your sources and enclose all words that aren’t yours in quotation marks), see http://www.lib.umich.edu/academic-integrity
For further information about academic expectations, accommodations, and resources for student-well being and mental health in this class and elsewhere in the Ford School, please visit http://fordschool.umich.edu/academics/expectations. Because of the nature of the topics we discuss in this course and the way we will discuss them, the Ford School’s Statement on Inclusivity merits especially close attention. The diverse perspectives and experiences that you and your classmates bring to class are an invaluable resource for our discussions and your learning. Be open to and respectful of the contributions that others make.

**Accommodations for Students with Disabilities.** If you believe you need an accommodation for a disability, please let Professor Thacher know at your earliest convenience. Some aspects of the course may be modified to facilitate your participation and progress. As soon as you make me aware of your needs, I can work with the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) office to help determine appropriate academic accommodations. Any information you provide will be treated as private and confidential.

**Schedule of Class Sessions and Reading Assignments**

**September 5**  
**Introduction to the course**

**September 10**  
**Thinking about Ethics**


1. Welfare

**September 12**  
**Utilitarianism**

*Utilitarianism in Theory*  

Utilitarianism in Practice


September 17 Benefit-Cost Analysis

OMB, Circular A-4, pp. 1-3, 9-12, 18-24.


September 19 Risk Assessment


2. Rights

September 24  The Concept of Rights


*Human Rights and Social Justice*


September 26  The Rights of Refugees

*What Rights Do Refugees Have?*


*Who Are Refugees?*


October 1  Free Speech for Nazis


*Charlottesville*


*Free Speech as an Organizational Priority*

“ACLU Case Selection Guidelines: Conflicts Between Competing Values or Priorities”


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**October 3**

**Rights and War**


Articles about the Iraq war on Canvas

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**October 8**

**Drone Warfare**


Barack Obama, Speech on Drone Policy, May 23, 2013


3. Liberty

October 10  Liberty

*Three Concepts of Liberalism*


*The Problem of Paternalism*


News reports on Michigan helmet law repeal on Canvas


October 15  No Class – Fall Study Break

October 17  Nudging


October 22  
**Drugs and Liberty**

*Civil Commitment for Substance Abuse*  


*Harm Reduction*  


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October 24  
**Guns, Booze, and Junk Food: The Ethics of Pigovian Taxes**


Mary Wisniewsk. “Chicago’s Cook County OKs Gun Tax to Defray Costs of Violence”, *Reuters*, Nov 2, 2012


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October 29  
**Nurse Home Visitation**

Katherine Boo, “Swamp Nurse”, The New Yorker, Feb 6, 2006, pp. 54-65


4. Justice

October 31 Justice


November 5 The Distribution of Educational Resources


Michigan education finance materials on Canvas

November 7 Climate Justice


Henry Shue. “Global Environment and International Inequality,” *International Affairs*, vol. 75 (1999), pp. 531-545

Statement by President Trump on the Paris Climate Accord, June 1, 2017


November 12 **Racism and Reparations**


November 14 **No Class**

November 19 **Family Leave**

Anne Alstott. “What We Owe to Parents”, *Boston Review*, April/May 2004


November 21  **Work Requirements in Social Welfare Policy**


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5. Accountability

November 26  **Lying**


“Ethical Problems in Public Careers: Lying” (KSG Case)

November 28  **Ethics for Analysts**

*The Ethics of Data Analysis*


*The Ethics of Data Dissemination*


December 3  **Personal Values and Public Service**

*Should I Really Work Here?*


*Guerilla Government*


December 5  **Whistleblowing and Leaking**


December 10  **Accountability for Organizational Wrongdoing**


Flint water crisis materials (pdf on Canvas)