

## Public Policy 495 Syllabus

**Irrational Actors: Psychological Approaches to Decision Making**  
**Tuesdays & Thursdays, 1:00-2:20PM**  
**Weill Hall 1210**  
**Winter 2020**

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Office Hours: Thursday, 2:30-4:30pm or by appointment

### Course Description

Classic economics is based on the idea of rational actors: people making decisions that maximize their own utility based on their preferences. However, most psychological models of behavior don't assume that people are particularly rational. Some even claim that the vast majority of our decisions are not based on conscious preferences and deliberate choices, but are instead influenced by factors that are invisible to us. For example, why is that people who are desperately trying to save money end up splurging on unnecessary purchases? How is that people who don't think of themselves as racist—and even go out of their way to reject racist beliefs—can still act in biased ways against racial minorities? Why is it so often the case that the arguments we remember best are the ones that happen to fit with our existing beliefs?

Many psychological and behavioral economic models have been created to explain the myriad ways that people act irrationally. In this policy seminar, we will examine some of the ways in which people are “predictably irrational” and the implications of this irrationality for policy. We will review research from behavioral economics and psychology to explore how factors such as heuristics, implicit attitudes, social norms, self-serving biases, and emotions can shape our decisions – often in ways we're not even aware of.

### Course Objectives

This section of PubPol 495 has the primary objective of increasing your knowledge and understanding regarding decision-making. This course will also help you to develop writing and critical thinking skills in the context of policy analysis by requiring you to: a) build skills, rhetorical strategies, and knowledge of writing genres/formats essential for policy writing; b) produce complex, analytical, evidence-based arguments that are tailored for specific (generally hypothetical) audiences, e.g., policy makers or the general public; and c) respond meaningfully to critical feedback from your professor and/or your peers through revision.

## **Text:**

Required: Daniel Kahneman (2011) *Thinking, Fast & Slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, NY.

Optional: David Halpern (2016) *Inside the Nudge Unit: How Small Changes Can Make a Big Difference*. Ebury Press, London, UK.

All other readings will be on Canvas. They will include excerpts from popular books and textbooks, academic articles, news reports, and videos. The syllabus and assignments are subject to change – the syllabus on Canvas will always be the most updated version.

## **Grading and Evaluation**

Class participation and attendance: 10%

Article presentation: 10%

Short policy memos: 60% (15% each)

Final policy memo: 20%

## **Class participation and attendance**

*Attendance:* This is a small and discussion-heavy course, and I expect you to attend all of the classes. Attendance will be taken every day. You may miss two classes for any reason, and you do not need to give a reason for those classes. Any unexcused absences beyond these two classes will affect your grade. Absences beyond those two classes may be excused with written documentation of UM-related activities, job interviews, or illness. However, you will still be expected to meet all expectations for the course.

If you miss a class, it is your responsibility to get class notes and any assignment updates from your fellow students before the next class. It is also your responsibility to get any assignments to the instructor **before** the day of the absence, otherwise they will be considered late. **Missing an in-class presentation without an excused absence will result in a failing grade for that assignment.**

*Lateness:* I understand that sometimes life happens and you may arrive a few minutes late. However, arriving late is disruptive and disrespectful to your fellow students who arrived on time. Therefore, chronic lateness will be noted and will affect your grade.

*Laptops & Cell Phones:* I will (grudgingly) permit the use of laptops and tablets in the classroom. Electronic devices can be helpful for easy access to the readings and note-taking, but they should be used only for activities related to this class. **However, research consistently shows that students who use laptops/tablets during class learn less and perform poorer in the class.** Despite even the best intentions, screens can be distracting to you and to those around you. Therefore, I reserve the right to ban laptop use if I notice people using them in class for unrelated purposes. Cell phones should be turned off and stored away from your desk and lap: **I take off participation grade points every time I notice texting.**

*Participation:* This is an active seminar course and I expect you to be present to class in both body *and* mind. You are encouraged to ask questions and make substantive contributions to class discussions. To facilitate class discussions, you are expected to show up to class having completed any readings assigned for that day.

I also expect that you will listen and respond respectfully to your classmates' contributions. This means actively engaging with their viewpoints rather than just waiting for your next chance to talk. Some of us are more comfortable than others about speaking in class, so encouraging your fellow students to have their voices heard is vital. There will also be opportunities to write ideas rather than say them out loud.

### **Assignments (See handout for more details on assignments)**

*Discussion Comments:* To facilitate class discussions, you must post one discussion comment about each day's readings to Canvas before the start of class. See handout for more details.

*Article presentations:* Each student will present one article to the rest of the class in a 10-minute oral presentation. See handout for more details.

*Policy memos:* Assignments include four short and one long policy memos that should take the rough format of a strategy memo. See handout for more details.

If you are new to policy writing, please refer to the Ford School Writing Center's excellent examples and guides: <https://fordschool.umich.edu/intranet/writing-center>.

*Handing in Assignments:* For draft memos, bring a hard copy to class on the day it is due. Submit final policy memos as Word documents in Canvas by the start of class on the day they are due.

Give yourself plenty of time to submit each assignment. Canvas tells me exactly when your assignment was submitted, and you will be penalized even if it is a few minutes late. If you miss class because of a pre-scheduled activity, you are still required to submit any assignments before the start of that class.

*Late Policy:* I will subtract 10% for assignments submitted after the start of class, and another 10% for each additional 24 hours thereafter that an assignment is late. Assignments that are more than 3 days late will not be accepted. If you miss class because of sickness, you should email me before the assignment is due to get an extension, in which case the assignment will be due within 3 days of the day you were sick or absent.

### **Academic Honesty and Learning Environment:**

*Ford School Academic Expectations:* If you haven't already, familiarize yourself with the academic expectations of the Ford School: <http://fordschool.umich.edu/academics/expectations>. This link contains more details about plagiarism, learning differences, and use of technology.

*Plagiarism and References:* I take plagiarism very seriously. Familiarize yourself with UM's guide to academic integrity and plagiarism here: [www.lib.umich.edu/academic-integrity/understanding-academic-integrity-and-plagiarism-students](http://www.lib.umich.edu/academic-integrity/understanding-academic-integrity-and-plagiarism-students). You can use the citation style of your choice (APA, MLA, etc), as long as you are consistent and citing your sources. When in doubt, add a citation and a reference even if you are just referencing an idea (that is, even if you do not quote directly the source). Make sure the sources you are referencing are reputable (aka, not Wikipedia, not a blog). **You may (and are encouraged to!) discuss the course and readings with classmates outside of class. However, all written assignments and article presentations should be your work and your work alone.**

*Writing Help:* In addition to the feedback you will get from me and from your peers, I encourage you to work with the Ford School's writing tutors. You can make these appointments online, using the following link: <http://www.fordschool.umich.edu/writing-center/>

*Class Notes Policy:* Any notes from the course (both the ones that I provide and the ones that you take) may not be posted on a web site, made available for file sharing, or distributed in any medium (print or electronic). The only exception is to provide a copy to a student in the class who has been absent from class.

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

*Student Mental Health and Well-Being Resources:* The University of Michigan is committed to advancing the mental health and wellbeing of its students. A variety of issues, such as strained relationships, increased anxiety, alcohol/drug problems, and depression, directly impact students' academic performance. If you or someone you know is feeling overwhelmed, depressed, and/or in need of support, services are available. For help, contact [Counseling and Psychological Services \(CAPS\)](#) and/or [University Health Service \(UHS\)](#). For a listing of other mental health resources available on and off campus, visit <http://umich.edu/~mhealth/>

*Ford School Inclusivity Statement:* Members of the Ford School community represent a rich variety of backgrounds and perspectives. We are committed to providing an atmosphere for learning that respects diversity. While working together to build this community we ask all members to:

- share their unique experiences, values and beliefs
- be open to the views of others
- honor the uniqueness of their colleagues
- appreciate the opportunity that we have to learn from each other in this community
- value one another's opinions and communicate in a respectful manner
- keep confidential discussions that the community has of a personal (or professional) nature
  - use this opportunity together to discuss ways in which we can create an inclusive environment in Ford classes and across the UM community

## Class Schedule and Outline

### Background

#### Class 1 (Jan. 9): Introductions

**Homework due:**

- None

#### Class 2 (Jan. 14): Rational actor assumptions

*What do we mean by “irrational”? How does this compare to economic models of “rational” actors?*

**Homework due:**

- Reading
  - Thaler & Sunstein (2008) Nudge – Introduction
  - Kahneman (2011) Thinking Fast and Slow – Conclusion chapter (Econs and Humans section)

#### Class 3 (Jan. 16): The history of psychological insights in policy

*What are “nudges” and how did they come to be integrated into policy?*

**Homework due:**

- Reading
  - Halpern (2016) Inside the nudge unit – Chapters 1 & 2
  - White House (2015) Fact Sheet: President Obama Signs Executive Order (SBST)
  - Jachimowicz (2017) Can Trump resist the power of behavioral science’s dark side?

#### Class 4 (Jan. 21): System 1 and System 2

*The FAST and SLOW of thinking fast and slow.*

**Homework due:**

- Reading
  - Kahneman (2011) Thinking Fast and Slow - Chapters 1 & 2
  - Thaler & Sunstein (2008) Nudge – Chapter 2
- Article Presenter: TBD
  - Presenter’s article: Diemand-Yauman et al (2011) Fortune favors the bold

### Section 1: Heuristics

#### Class 5 (Jan. 23): Gaining, losing, and staying the same

*People tend to go with the status quo. And when things change, losses weigh more heavily than gains.*

**Homework due:**

- Reading
  - Halpern (2016) Inside the nudge unit – Chapter 3
  - Kahneman (2011) Thinking Fast and Slow – Chapters 26 & 27
- Article Presenter: TBD
  - Milkman (2012) Policy bundling to overcome loss aversion

#### Class 6 (Jan. 28): Three flavors of heuristics: Availability, Anchors, and Representativeness

*Dozens of heuristics have been identified over the years, but these are often considered the big three.*

**Homework due:**

- Reading
  - Kahneman (2011) Thinking Fast and Slow - Chapters 11, 12, 14
- Article Presenter: TBD
  - Presenter's article: Epley & Gilovich (2006) The anchoring-and-adjustment heuristic

**Class 7 (Jan. 30): Solutions to heuristics/peer review**

**Homework due:**

- Reading
  - None
- Assignment
  - Draft of Policy Memo 1 due

**Section 2: Invisible Influences**

**Class 8 (Feb. 4): Social norms**

*Other people's beliefs and behaviors affect our own decisions.*

**Homework due:**

- Reading
  - Cialdini et al (2003) Crafting normative messages to protect the environment
  - Halpern (2015) Inside the nudge unit – Chapter 5
- Article Presenter: TBD
  - Presenter's article: Nolan (2008) Normative social influence is underdetected
- Assignment
  - Policy Memo 1 due

**Class 9 (Feb. 6): Priming & Mimicry**

*Can our decisions really be controlled by things we don't even notice?*

**Homework due:**

- Reading
  - Kahneman (2011) Thinking Fast and Slow – Chapter 4
  - Yong (2012) Nobel laureate challenges psychologists to clean up their act
  - Chartrand & Lakin (2013) Antecedents and consequences of human behavioral mimicry
- Article Presenter: TBD
  - Presenter article: Smith-Genthôs et al (2015) The tongue-tied chameleon

**Class 10 (Feb. 11): Habits**

*Willpower isn't all it's cracked up to be, so how can we create surroundings that foster better habits?*

**Homework due:**

- Reading
  - Wood & Neal (2016) Healthy through habit
  - Duhigg (2008) Warning: Habits might be good for you
- Article Presenter: TBD
  - Presenter article: Wood et al (2005) Changing circumstances, changing habits

**Class 11 (Feb. 13): Negative Emotions**

*How are decisions shaped by negative emotions?*

**Homework due:**

- Reading
  - Lerner et al (2015) Emotion and decision making
  - Slovic (2007) Psychic numbing and genocide
- Article Presenter: TBD
  - Presenter's article: Cameron & Payne (2011) Escaping affect

**Class 12 (Feb. 18): Positive Emotions: Happiness, Joy, and Well-being**

*How do positive emotions affect our decisions? Why are we so bad at making decisions that will help us achieve well-being?*

**Homework due:**

- Reading
  - Kahneman (2011) Thinking Fast and Slow – Chapters 37 & 38
  - Fredrickson (2003) The value of positive emotions
- Article Presenter: TBD
  - Presenter's article: Van Boven & Gilovich (2003) To do or to have?

**Class 13 (Feb. 20): Solutions to invisible influences/peer review**

**Homework due:**

- Reading
  - None
- Assignment:
  - Draft of Policy Memo 2 due

**No Class Feb 25<sup>th</sup> (Prof. Raimi at SPSP conference)**

**Homework due:**

- Assignment:
  - Policy Memo 2

**No class Feb 27<sup>th</sup> (Prof. Raimi at SPSP conference)**

**Homework due:**

- Assignment
  - Choose topic for final paper. What is the policy/societal issue that you want to address using behavioral tools? See Assignments document for guidelines on final paper topics. Start pulling together some background research for your final memo to explain why this is an issue worth addressing.
  - Sign up for office hour appointment if you are struggling to find a good topic.

**No classes week of March 3 and 5<sup>th</sup> (UM Winter Break)**

**Homework due:**

- Relax!

### Section 3: Judging Other People

#### Class 14 (Mar. 10): Stereotypes and implicit attitudes

*What are implicit vs. explicit attitudes? What are stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination?*

##### **Homework due:**

- Reading
  - Plous (2003) The Psychology of Prejudice, Stereotyping and Discrimination
  - Take three IAT tests on Project Implicit. Note your scores and what the researchers say about them. You must take:
    - Gender-Career IAT
    - Race IAT
    - Third IAT of your choice
- Article Presenters: TBD
  - Presenter article: Norton et al (2006) Playing the political correctness game

#### Class 15 (Mar. 12): Implications of implicit attitudes

*Why do implicit attitudes even matter and what can we do about them?*

##### **Homework due:**

- Reading
  - Gladwell (2005) Blink – Chapters 3 & 6
  - Chapman et al (2013) Physicians and implicit bias
- Article Presenter 1: TBD
  - Presenter's article: Shih et al (1999) Stereotype susceptibility
- Article Presenter 2: TBD
  - Presenter's article: Reuben et al (2014) How stereotypes impair women's careers

#### Class 16 (Mar. 17): Political judgment

*How do we think about people who disagree with us? Could we be wrong about them too?*

##### **Homework due:**

- Reading
  - French (2019) America's most educated, engaged citizens are making politics worse
  - van Prooijen & Krouwel (2019) Psychological features of extreme political ideologies
- Article Presenters: TBD
  - Presenter article: Waytz et al (2014) Motive attribution asymmetry for love vs. hate

#### Class 17 (Mar. 19): Groupthink

*Two heads are better than one....except when they're not.*

##### **Homework due:**

- Reading
  - Forsyth (2010) Group dynamics – Chapter 11: Decision making
  - Sunstein & Hastie (2014) Making dumb groups smarter
- Article Presenter: TBD
  - Presenter's article: Postmes et al (2001) Quality of decision making

#### Class 18 (Mar. 24): Solutions to judging others/peer review



**Homework due:**

- Reading
  - None
- Assignment:
  - Draft of Policy Memo 3 due

**Section 4: Self-Serving Biases****Class 19 (Mar. 26): Confirmatory biases**

*People are really good at motivated reasoning: they seek out and remember things that fit their preexisting beliefs.*

**Homework due:**

- Reading
  - Kunda (1990) The case for motivated reasoning
  - Kahneman (2011) Thinking Fast and Slow – Chapters 19 & 20
- Article Presenters: TBD
  - Presenter's article: Taber & Lodge (2006) Motivated skepticism in political beliefs

**Class 20 (Mar. 31): Overconfidence**

*"Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average"*

**Homework due:**

- Reading
  - Kahneman (2011) Thinking Fast and Slow – Chapters 23 & 24
  - Dunning (2011) The Dunning-Kruger effect
  - Lovallo & Kahneman (2003) Delusions of success
- Article Presenter: TBD
  - Presenter article: Hall & Raimi (2018) Belief superiority and knowledge
- Assignment:
  - Policy Memo 3 Due

**Class 21 (Apr. 2): The bias blind-spot**

*Think you're not biased? You're wrong, but you're not alone.*

**Homework due:**

- Reading
  - Pronin (2007) Perception and misperception of bias in human judgment
  - Pronin & Schmidt (2013) Claims and denials of bias and their implications for policy
- Article Presenter: TBD
  - Presenter's article: Hansen et al (2014) People claim objectivity ...

**Class 22 (Apr. 7): Justifying the self and the system**

*What happens when we find ourselves acting against our own interests or morals?*

**Homework due:**

- Reading
  - Jost et al (2004) A decade of system justification theory
  - Norton & Ariely (2011) Building a better America—one wealth quintile at a time

- Article Presenters: TBD
  - Presenter's article: Kay et al (2005) Victim derogation and victim enhancement

**Class 23 (Apr. 9): Dishonesty and corruption**

*Why you should be suspicious of the "few bad apples" defense.*

**Homework due:**

- Reading
  - Ariely (2009) Predictably Irrational Chapters 13 & 14
- Article Presenter: TBD
  - Presenter's article: Bersoff (1999) Why good people sometimes do bad things

**Class 24 (Apr. 14): The perils of power**

*Policymakers wield a large amount of power and influence. What does that do to their decisions?*

**Homework due:**

- Reading
  - Galinsky et al (2015) Power (Required: P. 429-443 "Focus on consequences" and "Moderators of power" sections. The rest is optional)
  - TEDx Video: Piff (2013) Does money make you mean?
- Article Presenters: TBD
  - Presenter 1's article: Smith et al (2008) Lacking power impairs executive functions
  - Presenter 2's article: Lammers et al (2010) Power increases hypocrisy

**Class 25 (Apr. 16): Solutions to self-serving biases/peer review day**

**Homework due:**

- Reading
  - None
- Assignment:
  - Draft of Policy Memo 4 due

**Class 26 (Apr. 21): Wrap Up**

**Homework due:**

- Assignment:
  - Policy Memo 4 due (1 page)

**Final Papers due by April 28<sup>th</sup> at 5:00 pm**