DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE: POLICY, POLITICS, AND PERFORMANCE

www.bsos.umd.edu/gvpt/oppenheimer/dj/

In this course, students explore how to evaluate (and analyse) public policy. The seminar tries to push students to integrate ethics, philosophy of knowledge, measurement, and some social statistics for purposes of policy evaluation. Evaluation of policy must begin with some understanding of the problems: the facts. But it also needs the philosophical examination of what’s right. To do this, we look at an important public policy problem: “What is distributive justice, and how does US social policy stack up?” We begin by pursuing the characteristics of the distribution of income and wealth in a few democracies. Along the way, we consider what one can expect to find in the way of distributional patterns in a democratic setting. This is followed by the views and definitions of distributive justice among contemporary philosophers. Various empirical approaches to the understanding of distributive justice will also be considered. Thus, the beginning of the seminar is concerned with the empirical and ethical nature of distributive justice.

The second half of the course involves students in serious (team) data analysis research: the evaluation (empirical and ethical) of an economic distributive pattern in the United States related to public policy. The research is to be based on a data set which will be distributed for that purpose.

The small course size is meant to engage the students in dialogue, and a number of aspects of this course will emphasize this. First, because this is not a lecture course, students will be expected to participate in discussion, and this participation will count toward one’s grade. All reading is to be done before the class for which it is assigned to insure informed discussion. There will be at least one pop quiz (each worth 25 points) in each of the first 4 Parts (with a high probability of more than 1 quiz on statistics) of the seminar. Second, there are other means of dialogue: on the web we have both a web site, www.bsos.umd.edu/gvpt/oppenheimer/dj/ (with details about the course) and will have a chat room, that all students should use to continue, and even to generate the arguments in the class.

Students will have a number of written projects that can be thought to be the platform for the final research project of the semester. There is no final examination. These are the written assignments: First, each student must write up what they consider to be a major problem in American income distribution: due on 2/16. Second, students will define a notion of distributive justice which conforms to their own value structures: due 3/16. Third, each student will write a paper on normative aspects of a distributive policy of their choice: due 4/12. The final written project will often partially be a team project: an evaluation of the performance of a public policy in the achievement of distributive justice in the United States (research idea / designs due: 4/18, [stat tests] 5/2, with the final paper due: May 18, noon. All papers are to be handed in electronically to both the professor and the TA by noon on the due day. Spelling and grammar count. Good form (e.g. bibliographies, footnotes, etc.) is required. In assigning grades to team projects, the individual and team will be graded. Individual grades will be the group grade, weighted by the individual’s relative contribution to the team as reported by team members. The project must require some statistical analysis, and a research design: both are required as separate assignments. The project will require an evaluative comparison of the empirical and normative nature of the distributive impact of a policy such an aspect of social security, welfare, or housing policy. Thus, over the course of the semester, the student will have selected a problem, a philosophical position, and then an aspect of the policy area to evaluate using the student’s own chosen principles of distributive justice as a measuring rod.

The prerequisites are GVPT 100 and 241 (although they can be waived for good reason). Students will be required to use statistical software such as SPSS and be seriously familiar with word processing, etc. Other courses in philosophy or political philosophy, sociology, and statistics might be useful, but are neither required nor presumed.

GRADING AND REQUIREMENTS

GRADES: The grades in the course will NOT be curved. You get what you earn. The scale is 0 - 100: 0-39 = F, 40 - 54 = D, 55 - 69 = C, 70 - 84 = B; 85 and above is an A. The grade will be developed from the graded aspects of the course. This includes participation: graded on the basis of their participation (and hence attendance) in class. In class grades will be 0 - 5 (0 for any unexcused absence, 2 is for sitting there, 6-10 is for quality work / participation in the class). Also all quizzes, papers, etc. will be graded. The formula for grading is (your grade = 0.3
I will try to meet any extraordinary needs of any student. Such needs can arise out of either preexisting or new conditions. All students should ask themselves if they have any special pre-existing condition which should be considered by us in the grading (or other procedures) in the course. Such conditions may include personal, social, physical, emotional or other impairments. Students who wish pre-existing conditions to be properly considered must inform me NO LATER THAN 2/13. When relevant, the student must submit some degree of documentation regarding the condition, and a personal statement of how it impacts in the academic performance in the course, in writing. If a newly arising condition develops during the course, official and personal documentation WILL be required. Further, whenever possible, the student is obligated to inform me of the conditions as they arise, and not after the consequences (e.g. missed exams) occur.

Disputed grade procedures: No grade can be disputed unless your quizzes or papers accompany your protest. The protest must be in writing: typed and must specify precisely why you think the grade was in error. All protests should be handed in within one week of the grade being returned to the student.

No papers handed in for other courses will be accepted for credit in this seminar unless there has been a prior (very unlikely) agreement to that explicitly worked out with the instructor.

Regarding citations:

All material ought to be cited e.g. (Rawls, 1993, p. 39) or casually (e.g. “As Rawls (1993) says on p. 39, ...). But then there must be a bibliography: e.g. “Rawls, John (1993) Political Liberalism. Columbia University Press.”

I fully enforce all university honesty guidelines.

AVAILABILITY OF INSTRUCTOR:
- Both the TA & I will do our best to be available to help you with the material. But you must be sufficiently aggressive to let me know when you are having problems. Make sure you note my telephone numbers, office hours, and office numbers at the top of the syllabus.

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Those office hours are for you. Use them.

READING MATERIALS:

Students are expected to have available (which usually means purchase) the following BOOKS:


OTHER READINGS

A reading packet of xeroxed materials is available from Bel Jean’s and should include those items on the syllabus preceded by a “*X*”. Some material is available on electronic Reserve - they are preceded by a “*E*”. Some things are on the website *W*.

Classes: Jan 25, 30; Feb 1, 6, 8, 13, 15, 20, 22, 27; Mar 1, 6, 8, 13, 15, 20, 22, 27, 29; Ap 3, 5, 10, 12, 17, 19, 24, 26; May 1, 3, 8, 10

READINGS & OTHER ASSIGNMENTS

DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE: POLICY, POLITICS, AND PERFORMANCE
PART I: THE REALITY OF INCOME AND WEALTH DISTRIBUTION
(4 WEEKS) (1/25 - 2/20):

Readings & Assignments:

Week 1: on individual decisions and how it has come to effect income distribution:

Week 2: An overview on current governmental policy.
2. Goodin, et. al. Ch. 2, 5 through 8 (skim Chapter 6) and look at appendix re the measures when confused.
5. Individual and collaborative reports of NY Times, Wash Post, etc. further update of findings on poverty and mal-distribution in the US. Findings, citations, posted on web board and reported & discussed in class.

Week 3: How governmental policy is subject to change.

+ LAB INTRODUCING STAT SOFTWARE (SPSS) PROGRAM & DATA SET

Written Assignment #1 (20 Points): Due 2/15:
Using the assigned reading write a paper of totaling no more than 5 pages identifying a particular social or economic policy on some aspect of the distribution of income in the U.S that you are concerned about. Explain why you believe this to be an important problem. Do this with explicit reference to what you got out of the readings.
To narrow the topic properly, you should develop your essay using some specific cuts through the material [examples: one of the following: family or social structure (c.f. Levy, Thomson); historical patterns for levels of support (c.f. Levy, Thomson, Goodin); contrasting roles of individual (micro) decisions, market forces (c.f. Levy, Goodin); or national patterns of welfare policies in different societies (c.f. Goodin); or the general macro economy (c.f. Levy)].

Week 4: An Example - Income Distribution

+ LAB INTRODUCING STATISTICS

HOMEWORK 1 due 2/22.

PART II: THE THEORY OF WHAT'S JUST (3.5 WEEKS): 2/22 - 3/15

Readings:

Week 1 +: Justice in the Pattern of Distribution?

Week 2 & 3: Justice in the Procedures of Distribution?

+ LAB ON DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

HOMEWORK 2 due 3/20 emailed before class:
Recommended:


Written Assignment #2 (40 points) due 3/16 (a Friday!) Or 3/27:

Using your understanding and evaluation of Rawls and Nozick to generate and support your points, write a paper of no more than 6 pages, explicitly giving a framework for the principle of justice in property and income distribution that you believe in. Specifically tell us “How do you deal with the large scale injustices of previous acquisitions of property (i.e. slavery, Indians, etc.) in your theory and why?”
Explain your position carefully. Give full credit to the assigned readings where relevant.


Week 1: Theory and Reality - Is Judgement Still Possible?

1. Inferential Thinking: Generalizing From the observed few to the big picture: Phillips, How to Think About Statistics. Chapter 7-9.
3. Goodin, Part III.
   + LAB ON *t*-TESTS

HOMEWORK 3 due 4/6.

Recommended:


PART IV: HOW AND WHAT TO MEASURE AND JUDGE (4 WEEKS): 4/5 - 5/3

Week 1: An example of a policy: read up a bit re your choice of area

More inferential tools: Statistics

1. Phillips, continue Chap. 6 & 10 - this is the subject of class discussion.

Recommended readings: health

3. *W* Medical Costs and Bankruptcies

Written Assignment #3 (25 points) due 4/12:

Look at the Codebook and think about the variables that are there. Write a paper specifying a policy problem (note that these next papers could all be seen as drafts of your final project) which you wish to study about fairness in distribution that can be done with the data available. What constitutes fairness here? Tell what would constitute evidence regarding performance of the fairness issue as it relates to the policy you are interested in. (Max = 2 pages.)

Written Assignment #4 (50 points) due 4/26 by class

Tell us how the problem you identified in the last paper can be tackled with the data set you have. Discuss the variables (from the data set) and how they will be used (i.e. what statistical tests you plan to use, and why).

Week 4: More on testing hypotheses of relationships:

Schroeder, Larry D. et al., Chap. 1-4 (as needed and useful for your projects).

Written Assignment #5 due (100 points) 5/2 (a Wednesday):

What is the possible statistical significance of your findings?

Part V: Research & Final Reports (1 Week): 5/8 - 5/10

Final Reports (200 points) due (SENIORS: 5/15 or by permission 5/18; OTHERS: 5/18)

Team evaluation reports due 5/20.