GEORGIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

School of Public Policy

PUBP 4200: Social Policy Issues

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This syllabus contains an overview of the nature of the course, the expectations for students, and helpful resources offered by Georgia Tech. Note that this syllabus is subject to change at the discretion of the instructor with reasonable notice (> 24 hours) provided to students. SUBJECT TO CHANGE.

Course Description

This course explores the issues facing society and when and how policy can effect change. Social policy focuses on addressing the inefficiencies, inequalities, and opportunities that exist across society. In our class, discussions will be motivated by the issue of social mobility and economic opportunity. Throughout the course, we will examine how social issues shape social mobility through topics such as labor markets, education, housing, health care, and family policy. In doing so, we will examine theoretical, practical, empirical, and political explanations of social issues and the implications of policy choices.

Importantly, we will place considerable weight on critically evaluating social policy arguments, relying on empirical evidence when available, to suggest how policy scholarship can drive change. When appropriate, we will explore frontier methods of policy analysis to guide our thinking about what "works" in social policy. Our focus is on social policy within the context of the U.S., although we may compare contexts across countries.

Course Goals

The goal of this course is to engage students with a range of social policy topics and debates, push students to build their toolkit for evaluating social policy arguments, and discuss the merits of social policy levers. Students can expect to read, digest, and discuss materials from politicians, media coverage, policy advocates, and scholars, with particular emphasis on published research. For each topic, students will engage directly with published papers and reflect on how the findings affect their understanding of the policy issue. The course introduces topics including, but not limited to:

- Economic Opportunity and Social Mobility
- Labor Markets, Labor Unions, and the Future of Work
- Minimum Wages, Universal Basic Income, and the Distribution of Income
- K-12 and Higher Education
- Place-Based Policy and Housing Affordability
- Health Insurance
- Family Policy and Child Welfare

By the end of the course, it is expected that you will be able to:

- Explain common social issues and the policies built to address them.
- Identify the costs and benefits of social policies.
- Describe approaches for evaluating the impact of social policies.
- Read a published policy paper and explain how its findings bear on a policy debate.
- Discuss current issues in designing, evaluating, and implementing social policy.
- Write your own social policy memo.

Course Topics

The course is organized into topic units. Each unit pairs lectures and discussion with a set of readings, and each reading unit will include a quiz (see Assessment Descriptions). A detailed weekly schedule with assigned readings will be posted on Canvas. The units, and examples of the materials we will engage with, are listed below. Guest speakers from the policy community will join the class when possible.

Unit	Topics	Example Materials
1. Foundations	What is social policy; analytic thinking about wicked problems; regression review and causality	*Wicked Problems* Ch. 2; Wheelan Chs. 11-13
2. Opportunity and Social Mobility	Is the U.S. still a land of opportunity; measuring mobility; directions for policy	Chetty et al. (2014); Opportunity Insights materials
3. Labor Markets and the Future of Work	Skills and labor demand; labor policy and labor unions; AI, automation, and the future of work	Autor (2014); Autor (2010)
4. Income Support and the Distribution of Income	Minimum wages; universal basic income; inequality and the distribution of income	Hoynes and Rothstein (2019); Vivalt et al. (2024); Miller et al. (2024)
5. K-12 Education	School spending; teacher performance pay	Baron (2022); Baron et al. (2025)
6. Higher Education	The returns to college; access and affordability; student loan forgiveness	Chetty et al. (2017); Hamilton Project (2017); HAIL program; Catherine and Yannelis (2023); Dinerstein et al. (2025)
7. Place-Based Policy and Housing	Housing markets and inequality; housing vouchers and Moving to Opportunity; affordable housing and rent control; homelessness	Diamond et al. (2019); Moving to Opportunity studies
8. Health Insurance	Access to coverage; public insurance programs; health and economic security	Posted on Canvas
9. Family Policy and Child Welfare	Supports for families with children; the child welfare system	Posted on Canvas

Texts and Prerequisites

Prerequisite(s): PUBP 3201 (Introduction to Social Policy) or instructor permission. This course draws on concepts covered in an introductory statistics sequence; students should be familiar with regression and the basic ideas of causal inference (e.g., randomized controlled trials). ECON 2106 is suggested, but not required.

Required Reading: There is no required textbook for this course. Weekly readings will be uploaded to the respective Canvas modules. In most instances, students should expect to read the entirety of what is provided. Some readings will specify which portion to focus on (e.g., the introduction of an academic article or the recommendations section of a policy memo).

Suggested Text(s):

Naked Statistics
Author: Charles Wheelan; ISBN-13: 978-0393347777
This short book is a suggested supplement for the course. Learning how to digest statistics is a crucial part of your training as a public policy scholar, and Wheelan's book is an excellent place to build intuition for statistical methods. Any edition will suffice.

Computing Requirements

Students are expected to have regular access to a personal computer that meets Georgia Tech's minimum hardware and software specifications. Please review the Georgia Tech Required Computer Ownership policy for the current specifications. A computer is needed to access Georgia Tech and course websites, read course materials, and prepare written assignments.

Course Format and Enrollment

Much of the organization of this course depends on final enrollment. The components described below are planned for the semester, but their number, size, and format may be adjusted once enrollment is known. For example, the number of student-led short seminars depends on class size, and in a large class it may not be possible to hold the final policy seminars. Any such changes, and the final weight of each component, will be announced on Canvas early in the semester.

Grading

Your grade in this course will be based on the following components, each described in more detail below:

- **Participation and Discussion:** in-class discussion and student-led short seminars.
- **Monte Carlo Quizzes:** a short quiz for each reading unit.
- **Mini Papers:** a sequence of short papers building toward a social policy memo.
- **Final Policy Project:** a policy seminar, peer comments, and a final paper (enrollment permitting).

The weight of each component will be finalized once enrollment is known and posted on Canvas.

Grading Scale:
>=90: A 80-89: B 70-79: C 60-69: D <60: F

Assessment Descriptions

Participation and Discussion: Throughout the course, we will pause to reflect on readings, answer prompts about social issues, and digest potential policy solutions and pitfalls. You are expected to arrive to class prepared to actively engage with these discussions.

Short Seminars: Topics will include student-led short seminars on an assigned material (e.g., a published paper, podcast, or video). The student will prepare a short (three to six minute) seminar that sets the class up for discussion, rather than a formal talk. The student will provide three discussion questions or points and guide the class through the discussion. Assignment to seminars will be randomized, and the number of seminars will be determined by final enrollment.

Monte Carlo Quizzes: Each reading unit will include a short, hand-written quiz. The quizzes are called "Monte Carlo" quizzes because their questions are drawn at random from the unit's assigned materials, so students should be prepared to discuss any of the readings in that unit. Each quiz will consist of a small number of short-answer questions. Quizzes are open note; students may use any of their own printed or written material. Makeup quizzes will not be provided unless a university-approved excuse is given.

Mini Papers: For a sequence of related assignments, students select a social issue and at least two existing federal, state, or local policies aimed at tackling it. Students must confirm their choice with the instructor by the end of the second week of class. Each mini paper is expected to be two to three pages in length, not counting references. The mini papers are proposed as:

1. **Description:** For the chosen topic, discuss its socioeconomic, demographic, and policy context. Explain why the topic matters to society and how it affects those involved, and begin to conceptualize policy responses.
2. **Policy Identification:** Identify and describe at least two policies designed to address the chosen issue, including the costs and benefits of each and how they compare.
3. **Policy Analysis 1:** For one of the identified policies, write a two-page memo that describes the debate surrounding the policy, summarizes scholarly evidence on its effectiveness, and poses questions for policymakers.
4. **Policy Analysis 2:** Write a similar memo for another identified policy, addressing feedback from the previous assignment.
5. **Policy Memo:** Write a complete two-page social policy memo focused on one of your chosen policies. The memo should open with the policy problem, discuss the context of the issue, and briefly highlight (and advocate for) your chosen policy.

Final Policy Project: Enrollment permitting, students will present a compilation of their mini papers to the class in a professional and scholarly manner and lead a discussion on their chosen topic. The project has three parts:

- **Policy Seminar:** A 15 to 20 minute seminar. Materials must be prepared in a slide-equivalent format (PowerPoint, LaTeX, or other) and posted for the class before the seminar date.
- **Peer Comments:** A brief set of comments on another student's complete policy memo, shared with the class following that seminar as a jumping-off point for discussion.
- **Final Paper:** An eight to ten page paper that revises and synthesizes the mini papers, addresses comments and questions raised during the seminar, and offers the student's interpretation of the policy direction in a concluding discussion section.

If enrollment makes the final policy project infeasible, an alternative final assessment will be announced on Canvas.

Course Policies, Expectations, and Guidelines

Classroom Culture: Social policy issues are often contentious and can evoke an emotional response. Our discussions will be informed by data or by arguments presented within the policy arena. The guiding principle of our discussions is: never criticize the person making the argument. Ad hominem replies are never acceptable. Focus on the argument itself.

Attendance: Attendance and participation are essential to success in this course, and you are expected to attend class in person. Absences will be noted and may be accounted for in your participation grade, and any quiz given on a day with an unexcused absence will be marked as zero. Students may miss a total of two (2) classes over the semester, for any reason, without an absence penalty. Exceptions beyond that are allowed for Institute-approved absences (for example, those documented by the Registrar) and situations such as hospitalization or family emergencies (documented by the Office of the Dean of Students). In the event of an excused absence, you must reach out to the instructor to make up missed work.

Late Submissions: Late submissions will not be accepted except for Institute-approved absences and situations such as hospitalizations or family emergencies. Given the long horizon provided to complete assignments, missed deadlines can be extended by at most two days.

Technology Policy: Laptops and tablets are permitted in class for the purposes of taking notes and participating in class activities only. If you intend to use your device during class, please sit behind pen-and-paper students so that your screen does not distract the class. I have a two-strike policy for class interruption from digital audio: if your device makes noise in class, you must silence it immediately. If there is another infraction, you will surrender your device until the end of the class period. Please be respectful of your fellow students. Cell phones are prohibited in class. If you have already been asked to put your phone away, you will be asked to leave the class as a second infraction.

Generative AI Policy: Generative AI tools (such as ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, or Copilot) are a reality of modern academic life, and students may use them to support their learning and writing. These tools should enhance, not replace, your own thinking, and they must be used critically and according to academic and professional expectations. When using generative AI tools, you are expected to adhere to the following principles:

- Submitting work generated entirely or primarily by AI, without meaningful student input, is unacceptable.
- AI-generated content can plagiarize by copying uncredited material, or fabricate by inventing false citations, data, or arguments. Work found to be completed entirely by AI, or that contains fabricated or plagiarized content, will receive a zero and be reported to the Office of Student Integrity.
- You are responsible for all submitted work, regardless of how much any tool contributed, including the veracity of all statistics, claims, cited sources, and quotes.
- Per Institute policy, it is a violation of academic integrity to use AI tools without acknowledging their use.
- You will not have access to AI tools during quizzes or when presenting your seminar.

Some advice: a successful student might use AI tools to revise their own argument, develop an outline, or spot grammar mistakes. For more details on when (not) to use AI tools, see the document in the course supplemental materials.

Citations: Whenever you draw on someone else's words, ideas, data, images, or code (whether quoted directly or paraphrased), you must cite the source. This includes academic articles, books, websites, datasets, lectures, and media. Use a consistent citation style (such as APA, MLA, or Chicago) and include full references for every source you use. There is rarely a reason not to cite: if your grandparent would not recognize what you are referencing as common knowledge, use a citation.

Collaboration Policy: I encourage you to discuss readings and ideas with one another. In my view, education is a collaborative effort from instructor to student, and student to student. However, quizzes and written assignments must be completed individually.

Office Hours: My office hours are a time dedicated to YOU! Please take advantage of them. Drop in with questions about course material, get help with your assignments, think through a paper topic, or talk about social policy more broadly. No appointment is necessary. Office hours will be posted on Canvas. If my office hours conflict with your schedule, I can meet (via appointment) in person or over Zoom.

Institutional Policies

Academic Integrity: Georgia Tech aims to cultivate a community based on trust, academic integrity, and honor. Students are expected to act according to the highest ethical standards. Academic misconduct, including but not limited to plagiarism and fabrication, is a serious offense. Plagiarism occurs when someone uses another person's language, ideas, images, data, code, or other original material without proper acknowledgment. Fabrication occurs when

someone falsifies data or research material, including false citations, sources, or quotes. Any student suspected of academic misconduct will be reported to the Office of Student Integrity, who will investigate the incident and identify the appropriate penalty for violations. Review the Georgia Tech Honor Code and the Office of Student Integrity resources.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities: If you are a student with learning needs that require special accommodation, contact the Office of Disability Services (404-894-2563) as soon as possible to make an appointment to discuss your special needs and to obtain an accommodations letter. Please also e-mail me as soon as possible in order to set up a time to discuss your learning needs.

Student-Faculty Expectations Agreement: At Georgia Tech, we believe that it is important to strive for an atmosphere of mutual respect, acknowledgement, and responsibility between faculty members and the student body. The Student-Faculty Expectations articulate some basic expectations that you can have of me and that I have of you. In the end, simple respect for knowledge, hard work, and cordial interactions will help build the environment we seek. Therefore, I encourage you to remain committed to the ideals of Georgia Tech while in this class.

Campus Resources for Students: If necessary, there are a variety of resources available to you that can help you succeed in this class and at Georgia Tech. For help with academic issues, please see the Georgia Tech Library, the Communication Center, and the Center for Academic Success. For mental and emotional help, please reach out to the Counseling Center, the Division of Student Life, and the Women's Resource Center. For a full list of suggested student resources, see this document published by the Center for Teaching and Learning.

Core IMPACTS Statement: This is a Core IMPACTS course that is part of the Social Sciences area. Core IMPACTS refers to the core curriculum, which provides students with essential knowledge in foundational academic areas. This course will help master course content, and support students' broad academic and career goals.

- This course should direct students toward a broad Orienting Question: How do I understand human experiences and connections?
- Completion of this course should enable students to meet the following Learning Outcomes: Students will effectively analyze the complexity of human behavior, and how historical, economic, political, social, or geographic relationships develop, persist, or change.
- Course content, activities, and exercises in this course should help students develop the following Career-Ready Competencies: Intercultural Competence, Perspective-Taking, Persuasion.