

ECONOMICS 4999
Public Choice Economics
Fall 2010

Professor: Billy Mertens
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Office Hours: M 1:00 – 5:00; W, F 11:15 – 11:45; and by appointment.

Course Overview:

Public choice economics can be defined as the analysis of decision-making in non-traditional market settings, specifically political market settings, using economic models. Essentially, the individual utility-maximizing agent that acts in economic markets also acts in the political arena. Therefore, any policy outcomes are the product of interactions among individuals in political markets. In this framework, it is apparent that governmental decisions are the result of rational optimizing behavior, even if they do not lead to policies that maximize national welfare. The public choice field can be roughly divided into two subfields, institutional political economy and social choice theory. The former takes a look at the role of institutions in government outcomes from a positive (in the economic sense) point of view. The latter examines how different voting procedures affect incentives and thus results in a normative (welfare-oriented) sense.

The issues we discuss are complex but they do lend themselves extremely well to critical thinking and rational inquiry, which are the guiding principles of this course. Our goal is to become and remain informed about the issues related to public choice economics and, even more importantly, acquire the ability to think about complex issues in a logical objective manner. Thinking critically is what permits us to differentiate between the illogical and the sensible, between the misleading use of statistics and anecdotal evidence, and the reasonable presentation of information.

This is an upper level undergraduate course that demands a lot of work (reading and writing), but that work should result in a good understanding of the topic and fulfillment from learning. The course is designed to meet a student's "critical thinking" graduation requirement, and as a result, the structure of the course will differ from the lecture/homework/test format that is typical of classes at CU. The class will focus on student participation and student presentations. Grades are largely based on the quality of presentations and participation in the discussions of the material presented.

[A more detailed outline of covered material is posted separately.](#)

Prerequisites:

Students must have completed ECON 2010, 2020 and 3070. I assume that you did not only take the class, but also that you understand and remember the content. It is also helpful to have some understanding of simple econometric analysis. The prerequisites must be strictly enforced.

Grading:

Class participation and attendance	20%
Article critique and presentation	15%
Term paper	20%
Presentation of term paper	10%
Exam 1	20%
Quiz	10%
Final exam	5%

I adhere strictly to the University guidelines on Incompletes (“An IF is given only when students, *beyond their control*, have been unable to complete course requirements. A substantial amount of work must have been *satisfactorily completed* before approval for such a grade is completed.”). Bad grades, unsatisfactory performance, too many credit hours, work conflicts, etc. are not reasons for an incomplete.

Article Presentations and Critiques, and Class Participation:

For the first few weeks, I will lecture and present papers, but after that you will divide into small groups for the presentation of papers each class. Your group will present one paper over several weeks of class. By working in groups and by noticing the grading rules (which we will discuss on the first day of class) for the group presentations, you may gain extra insight into the theory of collective action and how well-made constitutional rules (or in this case, course rules) can increase social welfare. The groups presenting a paper will have studied them in great detail, but I expect the rest of the class to have read all of the papers and be ready to discuss them (you will have some written requirements as well) – your participation grade will depend on this. Rude and counter-productive behavior such as texting and having your laptop open during class discussion will *severely* damage your participation grade.

Term Papers and Presentations:

Each student will be required to choose a topic and examine it in a public choice setting. This leaves open a broad range of subject matter from which to choose, so you must submit a first-choice topic to me by September 17th and you must have an approved topic by September 29th. Your paper must emphasize the public choice aspects of the situation you are analyzing, and should most importantly be an analytical (NOT narrative) study. No paper should be longer than 15 pages (double spaced). Feel free to meet with me on a regular basis to discuss your paper. In addition to writing the paper, you will also be asked to present your topic to the class. This should help you with your analysis, and you will have from 2 to 3 weeks after your presentation to polish your paper before turning it in.

Plagiarism is an academic offense and any student caught cheating or plagiarizing will be sanctioned. If you are unsure or uncertain about what constitutes either cheating or plagiarism, please consult me or the University of Colorado Catalog. To insure a level playing field on this front, all papers will be submitted to turnitin.com.

Exams and quizzes:

There will be one exam and two quizzes. Tests will consist of short-answer questions and some longer problems. The exams will not be cumulative, but the material does build on itself so it is important to understand all of the concepts as we go. **Exams will be given in class on the days listed. Do NOT miss an exam. There will be NO makeup exams, and NO EXAMS WILL BE DROPPED!!**

Exam Schedule:

Exam I: Wednesday, October 6th

Quiz 1: Friday, November 5

Disabilities

If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, please submit a letter to the instructor from Disability Services in a timely manner so that your needs may be addressed. Disability Services determines accommodations based on documented disabilities. Contact: 303-492-8671, Willard 322, or

<http://www.Colorado.EDU/disabilityservices>

Religious holidays

A comprehensive calendar of the religious holidays most commonly observed by CU-Boulder students can be found at <http://www.interfaithcalendar.org/> Review this list and the class syllabus. After reviewing the syllabus, please see the instructor if you believe that you need an accommodation for religious reasons. The instructor should be notified within the first two weeks of classes. Campus policy regarding religious observances states that faculty must make *reasonable* accommodation for them and in so doing, be careful not to inhibit or penalize those students who are exercising their rights to religious observance. For more information see

http://www.colorado.edu/policies/fac_relig.html

Code of Behavior

Students and faculty each have responsibility for maintaining an appropriate learning environment. Students who fail to adhere to behavioral standards may be subject to discipline. Faculty have the professional responsibility to treat students with understanding, dignity and respect, to guide classroom discussion and to set reasonable limits on the manner in which students express opinions. See policies at <http://www.colorado.edu/policies/classbehavior.html> and at

http://www.colorado.edu/studentaffairs/judicialaffairs/code.html#student_code

Policy on Sexual Harassment

The University of Colorado Policy on Sexual Harassment applies to all students, staff and faculty. Sexual harassment is unwelcome sexual attention. It can involve intimidation, threats, coercion, or promises or create an environment that is hostile or offensive. Harassment may occur between members of the same or opposite gender and between any combination of members in the campus community: students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Harassment can occur anywhere on campus, including the classroom, the workplace, or a residence hall. Any tT.Sbding.t 4pc and betl.8 Tc --23.53s to all students, s