Course Description

In this course, we examine the economic roles of government and the tools that governments use to fulfill these roles. We will start with the questions: Under what circumstances is it possible for governments to improve on the outcomes that would occur in their absence? And how do we decide whether one outcome is better than another? The course will continue with an examination of the performance of governments in the United States. The primary questions addressed will be: What policies do governments pursue? How do they spend money to achieve the goals of these policies? How do they raise the money that they spend? And what sorts of undesired “side-effects” might result from taxation and expenditure policies?

Instructor Information

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Office Hours: M 4-5pm, Tu 3-5pm

Readings

The required textbook for the course is:


Earlier editions of the same textbook are likely to be adequate, though you will need to check the references I make to pages, figures, problems, etc.

I anticipate covering the entire textbook, spending about one class on each chapter. Unless otherwise stated in class, you should assume that the next class will cover the next chapter in the text.
Course Moodle Page
Course information and documents will be available on the course Moodle page. Announcements will be posted on the page and those that are time-sensitive will be sent by e-mail.

Examinations
There will be two midterm examinations, one about midway through the semester and another on the final day of class. The second midterm is not cumulative and will test material covered since the first midterm. Both exams will include questions that require some combination of prose, diagrams, and simple math to answer. I will provide practice exams to help you prepare for the midterms.

Please also see the notes in the “Academic Integrity” section, below, regarding my expectations during exams.

Each midterm exam will count for 35% of the final course grade.

Research Paper
Students must complete an original research paper on any topic related to public economics.

The bulk of your paper should be a positive analysis that addresses Jonathan Gruber’s “Four Questions of Public Finance” as they pertain to your topic (see pp. 3-10 of the textbook). In particular:

• What is the economic justification for government involvement?
• What policies are available to the government?
• What would be the likely impact of these policies?
• Is there anything about the structure of our political system that might make implementation of some of these policies more difficult than others?

The final part of your paper should be normative and essentially take the tack: “Given all of the above, here is what I think we should do and why.”

In your paper, you should draw on multiple sources, including at least one article from an economics journal, relevant to your topic. (If you have any question whether one of your sources fulfills this criterion, please ask me.) Bear in mind that sources that have been peer-reviewed are more reliable than those that have not. Be careful to reframe and synthesize the analysis of your sources in your own way. References to sources should be provided in accordance with the standards used by the American Economic Review. Examples can be found at the following link:
http://www.aeaweb.org/sample_references.pdf

The paper should be 10 to 15 pages long (double-spaced, 12 point font), excluding references, tables, and figures.

Over the course of the semester, you will pass in three items related to this paper:

1. By March 29 at 5:00pm, you should submit (via Moodle) a one half to one full page description of your topic, explaining why it is interesting and relevant to this course. Late submission will result in a one grade reduction in your paper grade (e.g. an A- becomes a B+). Particularly poor submissions will also reduce the paper grade by one grade.

2. By April 19 at 5:00pm, you should submit (via Moodle) a 2-3 page document in which you provide tentative, short answers to each of Gruber’s four questions. This should not be an essay, but four distinct answers labeled with numbers 1 through 4. Details are not necessary at this point, but I would like to see that you are developing a good sense of the material relevant to your topic. You should also include a list of at least five references you used in formulating your answers. Late submission will result in a one grade reduction in your paper grade (e.g. an A- becomes a B+). Particularly poor submissions will also reduce the paper grade by one grade.

3. By May 17 at 5:00pm, you should submit (via Moodle) your final paper. Late submission will result in a one grade reduction in your paper grade (e.g. an A- becomes a B+). Submission more than 24 hours after the deadline will result in a failing grade unless previous arrangements have been made.

Note: All documents submitted via Moodle should be in pdf format. Please save your documents as pdf’s before submitting them.

Please also see the notes in the “Academic Integrity” section, below, regarding my expectations for the paper.

The research paper will account for 30% of the final course grade.

**Grading**

To summarize the above material, the final grade will be determined from the problem sets, examinations, and research paper using the following weights:

- First Midterm Exam - 35%
- Second Midterm Exam - 35%
- Research Paper - 30%
Class Attendance and Participation

Attendance of lectures is required and participation in discussions is strongly encouraged. Anything covered in lecture may be included on the examinations.

Key Dates

Examination Dates:
- Midterm 1: To be determined by class vote
- Midterm 2: Wednesday May 8, in class

Research Paper Dates:
- First Submission Due: March 29, 5pm
- Second Submission Due: April 19, 5pm
- Final Paper Due: May 17, 5pm

Academic Integrity

Wesleyan University has an honor code, which can be viewed at:

http://www.wesleyan.edu/studentaffairs/studenthandbook/standardsregulations/studentconduct.html

It is expected that students will abide by the honor code during this course.

Exams are open book. Calculators are allowed. The only items that are not permitted during the exams are those that can be used for communication, e.g. mobile phones. Students will be asked to sign the honor code pledge on each exam.

The research paper will necessarily draw on the work of others, but the paper’s wording and the manner in which multiple sources are synthesized to make an argument should be original. I recommend that all students read the section of the Student Handbook that describes plagiarism:

http://www.wesleyan.edu/studentaffairs/studenthandbook/standardsregulations/plagiarism.html

All research papers will be subjected to analysis by plagiarism detection software (i.e. turnitin.com). Any suspected violations of the Honor Code will be referred to the Wesleyan University Honor Board.
Students With Disabilities

It is the policy of Wesleyan University to provide reasonable accommodations to students with documented disabilities. Students, however, are responsible for registering with Disabilities Services, in addition to making requests known to me in a timely manner. If you require accommodations in this class, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible, so that appropriate arrangements can be made. The procedures for registering with Disabilities Services can be found at:

http://www.wesleyan.edu/studentaffairs/disabilities/studentguide.html