

Economics 4221
Political and Public Choice Economics
Spring 2024

Instructor: Dr. Billy Mertens

Office: Econ 12 and Zoom: <https://cuboulder.zoom.us/j/5838330659>

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Email is by far the best way to contact me. I check my email and respond (if time) two times every weekday. Once in the morning (typically between 8:30 and 9am, but sometimes earlier). There is typically not enough time to respond to all emails during that time, so I try to respond in the afternoon. I typically do not check emails at other times or over the weekend, but there are some exceptions such as exam times. We can set up times to Zoom over the weekend if you give me plenty (2 weeks) of advance notice.

Web: canvas.colorado.edu

Office Hours: T 12:15 – 2:15pm in person (Econ 12), R 1:15 – 2:15pm on Zoom

Course Description:

Political and 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 looks 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.

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 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 political and 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.

Prerequisites:

Students must have completed ECON 3070 and ECON 1088 (or its equivalent). 3818 is recommended but not required. It is NOT sufficient to take these courses concurrently. You not only need to have taken the class, but you must also understand and remember the content. The prerequisites must be strictly enforced – if you did not do well in 3070, it will be difficult to do well in this course!

While this is not a micro-theory course, economics without theory is not economics. You will need micro theory to understand and explain some of the topics. Some of the theory and terms you will need to know include: the *theory of the firm*, the *theory of the consumer*, *efficiency*, when

the market equilibrium will and won't be efficient, *market failure*, types of market failures, and corrections for market failure.

A strong math background will make this course easier. Math involves rigor and a way of thinking that facilitates economic thinking. In addition, graphs and simple mathematical descriptions of economic problems provide insights that would be difficult to convey with only words.

Readings & Required Materials:

1. All readings for this course (there are a lot) come from Economics Journals and will be posted on Canvas.
2. You will need a 4-function or financial (not a graphing) calculator for some exams.

Policy on Cheating:

If you are suspected of cheating, I will immediately and without notification forward your case to the honor code office. This is actually the fairest way to proceed. In these instances, if I took it upon myself to make the decision of whether you violated the honor code, there could be bias involved. The honor code council has both students and faculty members, and they are trained to deal with these types of situations. I will accept the honor code decision as final. If the honor code finds that you did not violate the code, then there will be no repercussions, and all grades will be entered based on your submitted work. If you are found to have violated the honor code (see below), by both the honor code council and I, you will automatically fail the course!

Material from a Missed Lecture: If you miss a class, *you are responsible* for obtaining notes from a classmate and reading the relevant material in the articles. I encourage you to come to my office hours to discuss the material you missed, but only after you have reviewed the relevant material and prepared specific questions.

Class format

This class will be slightly different from many of your usual classes. Some terms for our class format might be “relatively learner-centered” or “semi-rotated”. Research on learning supports the use of these systems, and if I were to ignore them, I would be utilizing outdated and even defective teaching methods. For example, current research demonstrates that repetition helps strengthen neuronetworks and thus, increases long-term learning. Frequent problem solving, reviews and cumulative exams are all effective methods of beneficial repetition. Other research-backed effective systems are outlined below.

A Note on Learning Systems and Assessments

Please note that all exams will be semi-cumulative, and we will spend at least a little time reviewing for each exam and even more time going over the exams in class (on Zoom). A little more detail on learning systems is given below:

Learning systems:

1. Lecturing: explaining difficult material not easily learned on your own with text, groups, etc.
2. Exams: exams should be learning tools as well as assessment tools! We will go over each exam in depth in class. Reviewing exams is one area where in-class discussion and explanation are most effective.
3. Group-Led-Discussions: we will cover both classic and more recent relevant articles from scholarly journals. The more creative you can be with these, the more you will get out of them (and the better will be your grade). Finding interesting ways to engage the class in discussion of these articles will teach you critical skills that will not only solidify the current information but will also aid in your learning for other classes. Presentation of material is one of the most instructive learning systems because:
 - a. *If you are going to inform others about what you know, you must first fully understand it yourselves. If you cannot explain a concept to others you may not fully understand it yourself.*
 - b. *You must research the topic, which may expose you to new ideas and sources of material. These sources could help in other coursework.*
 - c. *Most “real-world” careers require some form of presentation skills.*
 - d. *You will start to learn how to defend specific points of view in front of others. This is a critical professional skill!*
 - e. *You learn to organize information in a clear & concise way. Your audience will want to hear the most relevant information in the most clear and understandable fashion.*
 - f. *It helps you learn presentation tools, formats and devices.*
 - g. *You learn how to practice presentations and fit information into a set time period (very important in business).*
 - h. *You can discern what it takes to teach others.*
 - i. *It will teach you how to respond to critical questions in front of others.*
 - j. *You will learn to analytically and reasonably justify a specific economic rationale.*
4. Group scholarship: we will work some practice problems in groups, which can help your understanding of the material whether you already understand it well or are struggling a bit. The Group-Assignment dates are listed in the course outline – do **not** miss these days!
5. Discussion: discussing the articles we cover will help make the information more concrete and add to long-term learning.
6. Self-study: reading the articles, reviewing your notes, and solving problems.

Assessment systems:

1. Cumulative Exams: shown to improve learning more than virtually every other technique. As noted above, exams are a part of the learning process, not just a part of assessment – we will go over every exam (except, unfortunately, the final) in class (on Zoom). *It is important to review and relearn the material as we build upon that information. This increases long-term learning!* There will be three exams and a cumulative final. All exams are somewhat cumulative, and the material does build on itself, so it is important to understand all the concepts as we go.
2. Group-Led Discussion: these are graded to give incentives for high quality discussions.
3. Quizzes on Article Readings: to motivate actually reading the articles. Since this is an upper-level course involving much discussion, your quiz grade can be improved by your efforts to add to that discussion. This is a “be here” class. If you put in the effort, you will do well. If you prefer a class where you can just get the notes, skip a lot of classes, and take some tests, then another course would be more appropriate.
4. Group assignments will account for part of your grade (see below).

More Information on Assessment:

Exams

There will be three cumulative exams and a cumulative final. These will be given in class on the days listed. No exams will be dropped. To be fair to everybody, I will not answer ANY questions during exams (even about typos) – this puts everyone on equal footing during the exams. Tests will consist of short-answer questions and some longer problems. The exams will all be cumulative, and the material does build on itself, so it is important to understand all the concepts as we go. **Exams will be given in class on the days listed. If you miss an exam with a valid excuse (e.g., illness), then the weight of your final will be increased. Please do Not feel the need to try and reschedule an exam no matter the reason you miss one. We simply reweight the final in all circumstances. If you know in advance that you will miss an exam, sometimes we can arrange for you to take it a day or two early. Note that the exam dates below are not tentative – exams will be given in class on the days listed. NO EXAMS WILL BE DROPPED!!**

Exam Schedule: *all exams will be taken in class!*

Exam 1: Thursday, February 15th

Exam 2: Thursday, March 21st

Exam 3: Thursday, April 25th

Final Exam: Wednesday, May 8th at 4:30pm in our usual classroom

Final Exam Conflicts

Official University Policy states that: If you have three or more final exams scheduled on the same day, you are entitled to arrange an alternative exam time for the **last** exam or exams scheduled on that day. To qualify for rescheduling final exam times, you must provide evidence that you have three or more exams on the same day, and arrangements must be made with your instructor no later than the standard last day to drop a course.

Group Assignments:

These cooperative learning exercises (detailed above) are extremely important. The group assignment dates are listed in the course outline. It is important not to miss these days without an excused absence. The object of these assignments is to work together and engage your brains in the learning process. The goal is NOT to try and finish the assignments quickly, or in most cases, to even finish them at all. You will receive a passing score of 90% just for being present and working on the in-class problems with your group. Additionally, I will sometimes have a random member of a random group demonstrate a problem at the board, and if you are a member of the group that presents, it can raise your grade for that assignment. **You receive a grade for these assignments by being present on the day we begin the assignment. We will often work on these over the course of two class periods, and while it is important to be present the 2nd day as well, the group assignment credit is given only on the first day of the assignment (which is also the day listed in the course outline).**

Group-Led Article Discussions, Quizzes and Participation

We will review several relevant academic articles on different issues in political and public choice economics. You will be required to understand these articles, and you will work in teams to present and lead a discussion on one of the articles. When you are not in the discussion-leading group you are still expected to have read the article and there will be a short quiz.

Fortunately, the fields of public choice and political economy have some journals that are very 'readable' at the undergraduate level. Your goal with the group-led discussions is to make one article of your choosing very understandable to the class. The class will have read the article (there will be a short quiz on the readings that will count toward the final grade), so it is your job to make the paper even more clear, and primarily to motivate a successful discussion about the article. **You should try and answer questions as the author would. It is not your job to critique the article – all articles have already been critiqued by PhD referees before being published. However, if you find follow-up articles that critique the paper it is fine (and even encouraged) to cite those articles.** The groups leading the discussion will have studied their paper in great detail, but I expect the rest of the class to have read all of the papers and be ready to discuss them – rude and counter-productive behavior such as texting and having your laptop open during class discussion will severely damage your own presentation grade.

I have a list of articles from which you can choose, or you may choose one of your own. If you choose your own, then I suggest you find a paper published in the journal *Public Choice*. Be sure **not** to choose an editorial or something that is mostly an econometric study. I must approve all paper choices.

The class will take a ~10-minute quiz at the beginning of the hour to be sure everyone is ready to discuss, and during that time, you will set-up and prepare your discussion (you get 125% for that day's quiz!). Participation/discussion on GLD days will add to your quiz grade. You may use hand-written (not photocopied) notes for the quizzes.

The discussion leaders should be able to keep the class engaged in discussion for at least 40 minutes. **You will be graded down if you cannot keep the class engaged in an interesting and informative discussion about the paper for that time. If you choose to have an activity or game as a part of your GLD (a very good idea), it is important to have that activity portray what is being explained in the article (there should not be much uncertainty, unless the paper calls for it).** I will usually also discuss some major points of the paper after the GLD, or on the following class day. More guidance for the GLDs is posted separately.

If you are not leading the GLD that day, then **you cannot use any form of electronic device during Group-Led Discussions (it is rude to those leading the activities). If you use them on those days, you will automatically receive negative participation points.** If you are expecting an important call or text, then simply put your phone on vibrate, sit near the door, and step out when the call/text comes through.

There will also be quizzes on some days that we will be covering already posted notes. On those days, you should read the notes in advance and be ready to discuss the topics involved. **On all quizzes, I use the No-Nonsense rule, meaning that if you did not do the required reading, it is better for you to simply state that than to try and guess your way through the quiz.**

Grading:

Group Assignments	10%
Article Quizzes (& Participation)	10%
Group-Led Discussion	10%
Exam 1	16%
Exam 2	17%
Exam 3	17%
Final exam	20%

I adhere strictly to the University guidelines on Incompletes (“An I 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.

Grading Scale:

Your Score	Grade
92% to 100%	A
90% to 91%	A-
88% to 89%	B+
82% to 87%	B
80% to 81%	B-
78% to 79%	C+
72% to 77%	C
70% to 71%	C-
68% to 69%	D+
62% to 67%	D
60% to 61%	D-
Below 59.5%	F

Additional Notes:

Classroom Behavior

Students and faculty are responsible for maintaining an appropriate learning environment in all instructional settings, whether in person, remote, or online. Failure to adhere to such behavioral standards may be subject to discipline. Professional courtesy and sensitivity are especially important with respect to individuals and topics dealing with race, color, national origin, sex, pregnancy, age, disability, creed, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, veteran status, political affiliation, or political philosophy.

For more information, see the [classroom behavior policy](#), the [Student Code of Conduct](#), and the [Office of Institutional Equity and Compliance](#).

Requirements for Infectious Diseases

Members of the CU Boulder community and visitors to campus must follow university, department, and building health and safety requirements and all applicable campus policies and public health guidelines to reduce the risk of spreading infectious diseases. If public health conditions require, the university may also invoke related requirements for student conduct and disability accommodation that will apply to this class.

If you feel ill and think you might have COVID-19 or if you have tested positive for COVID-19, please stay home and follow the [guidance of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) for isolation and testing](#). If you have been in close contact with someone who has COVID-19 but do not have any symptoms and have not tested positive for COVID-19, you do not need to stay home but should follow the [guidance of the CDC for masking and testing](#).

Accommodation for Disabilities, Temporary Medical Conditions, and Medical Isolation Disability Services determines accommodations based on documented disabilities in the academic environment. If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, submit your accommodation letter from Disability Services to your faculty member in a timely manner so your needs can be addressed. Contact Disability Services at 303-492-8671 or dsinfo@colorado.edu for further assistance.

If you are sick and will need an excused absence, unless you are incapacitated, you must notify me immediately (by email) in order to obtain that excused absence status. Also see [Temporary Medical Conditions](#) on the Disability Services website.

Preferred Student Names and Pronouns

CU Boulder recognizes that students' legal information doesn't always align with how they identify. Students may update their preferred names and pronouns via the student portal; those preferred names and pronouns are listed on instructors' class rosters. In the absence of such updates, the name that appears on the class roster is the student's legal name.

Honor Code

All students enrolled in a University of Colorado Boulder course are responsible for knowing and adhering to the [Honor Code](#). Violations of the Honor Code may include but are not limited to: plagiarism (including use of paper writing services or technology [such as essay bots]), cheating, fabrication, lying, bribery, threat, unauthorized access to academic materials, clicker fraud, submitting the same or similar work in more than one course without permission from all course instructors involved, and aiding academic dishonesty.

All incidents of academic misconduct will be reported to Student Conduct & Conflict Resolution: honor@colorado.edu, 303-492-5550. Students found responsible for violating the [Honor Code](#) will be assigned resolution outcomes from the Student Conduct & Conflict Resolution as well as be subject to academic sanctions from the faculty member. Visit [Honor Code](#) for more information on the academic integrity policy.

Sexual Misconduct, Discrimination, Harassment and/or Related Retaliation

CU Boulder is committed to fostering an inclusive and welcoming learning, working, and living environment. University policy prohibits [protected-class](#) discrimination and harassment, sexual misconduct (harassment, exploitation, and assault), intimate partner violence (dating or domestic violence), stalking, and related retaliation by or against members of our community on- and off-campus. These behaviors harm individuals and our community. The Office of Institutional Equity and Compliance (OIEC) addresses these concerns, and individuals who believe they have been subjected to misconduct can contact OIEC at 303-492-2127 or email cureport@colorado.edu. Information about university policies, [reporting options](#), and support resources can be found on the [OIEC website](#).

Please know that faculty and graduate instructors have a responsibility to inform OIEC when they are made aware of incidents related to these policies regardless of when or where something occurred. This is to ensure that individuals impacted receive an outreach from OIEC about their options for addressing a concern and the support resources available. To learn more about reporting and support resources for a variety of issues, visit [Don't Ignore It](#).

Religious Accommodations

Campus policy regarding religious observances requires that faculty make every effort to deal reasonably and fairly with all students who, because of religious obligations, have conflicts with scheduled exams, assignments or required attendance. **Let me know if you have any religious obligations, have conflicts with scheduled exams, assignments or required attendance within the first week of class and we will make arrangements.** See the [campus policy regarding religious observances](#) for full details.

Mental Health and Wellness

The University of Colorado Boulder is committed to the well-being of all students. If you are struggling with personal stressors, mental health or substance use concerns that are impacting academic or daily life, please contact [Counseling and Psychiatric Services \(CAPS\)](#) located in C4C or call (303) 492-2277, 24/7.

Free and unlimited telehealth is also available through [Academic Live Care](#). The Academic Live Care site also provides information about additional wellness services on campus that are available to students.

If you are sick and will need an excused absence, unless you are incapacitated, you must notify me immediately (by email) in order to obtain that excused absence status.

Any University policies that are in conflict with my own policies will supersede my policy!

A reply from one student to another on the discussion board for one of my colleague's online classes: "If you read the course syllabus you will find the answer to your questions. If you do not understand what you read, I recommend you read multiple times. After reading the syllabus if you still have questions come back and I will try to help you as much as possible."

