Goals of the course

It’s hard to find a time when there have been more fierce or more fundamental debates about government’s relationship to its citizens—and what government ought to do for its citizens. But at the core of these struggles lie fundamental ideas, some of which have been around for a very, very long time. In some cases, the ideas have roots that stretch back thousands of years. If we want to understand the big battles, and if we want to influence how they are resolved, we need to understand the big ideas at their core.

This course will explore the big ideas of public policy through the lens of big thinkers who have struggled for years—often centuries and millennia—to resolve them. There are big questions of politics, economics, history, and ethics at the core. In the course, we’ll sift through the biggest debates of modern times to find the deep and enduring issues on which they’re based. This will help us understand the issues better, debate them more effectively, understand how others might approach them differently, and in the end make us all better equipped to work to advancing solutions.

The fundamental approach of the course will be connecting big policy questions, big ideas, and big thinkers—and improving our ability to promote effective answers. We’ll approach the course in this way:

• Examining big questions in public policy: How big should government be? How much should it worry about income inequality? How should values shape policies?
• Looking at the big ideas: We’ll identify the big ideas at the core of these big questions, and we will study some of the leading big thinkers who advanced these ideas.
• Exploring how to answer these questions: We’ll put the big ideas, the big thinkers, and the big questions together. And then we’ll hone our ability to put forward persuasive answers, in both oral presentations and written memos.

We will work through these questions through lectures, in-class exercises, and discussion sections—“big idea labs”—that will explore the big public policy issues explored in the course.
Learning outcomes

On completing the course, students will be able to:

• Identify the major questions and issues at the foundation of the big public policy debates in the United States—and the world.
• Understand the big ideas in these debates, and the sources that the big debaters rely on to explore, understand, and advance their arguments.
• Understand the basic concepts and approaches that lie at the core of public policy debates—which issues are new, and which issues are enduring—in some cases, for thousands of years.
• Weave together the approaches of many disciplines that bear on these public policy challenges, including politics, economics, history, and the ethical dimensions of public affairs.
• Use these approaches to improve their skills in critical thinking, both to assess the policy arguments made by others and to strengthen their ability to advance their own views.
• Frame views on important public policy challenges and communicate those views effectively, in oral and written forms.
• Acquire a foundation of the basic, enduring questions, so that they will be able to understand better the fundamental issues shaping their lives, research these issues themselves, and act as strong and effective citizens, in the university and in society.

Course requirements

We will meet twice a week in large groups for lectures and in-class exercises. The class will also be broken up into small-group discussion sections. Within each discussion section, students will break up into small work groups of about 4-5 students each. Each work group will carry one of the colors in the Maryland state flag—and of the university’s colors as well: Red, Black, White, Yellow.

Assignments. The course grade will be determined as follows:

• “Big idea labs” (45 percent). At three times during the semester, each of the work groups (Red, Black, White, Yellow) will develop a “big idea” exercise and will be responsible for leading the discussion section. For example, the work group might stage a debate between students in the section about alternative strategies for reducing income inequality or shrinking the size of government. The work group might work with students to create a 90-second video dramatizing a solution to an important puzzle, or to create a social media campaign to define and answer a big question. The nature of the exercise is up to each group. Each group should work in advance with the discussion
section leader to develop the exercise, and the discussion section leader will assist the team in ensuring that the exercise makes the very best use of the time available. In addition, each student in the work group will submit a two-page double-spaced analysis of the week’s “big idea” reading. The analysis will connect the reading to a current public policy puzzle. The analysis will be due no later than 5:00 pm on the day before the discussion group’s meeting. The discussion leader will grade and return these analysis papers within a week of their submission.

- **Mid-term exam** (20 percent). There will be an exam at the course’s half-way point, to help students assess the course readings to that point of the course.
- **Final exam** (25 percent). The final exam will be cumulative and will be used to assess the students’ mastery of the great thinkers and big ideas explored in the course.
- **Class participation** (10 percent). Students will be assessed on their contributions to the work of the discussion sections.

**Group work.** Because participants in public policy almost never work alone, we’ll form work groups early in the course. I encourage you to discuss the course readings and the assignments with the members of your work group (and, if you like other students in the class as well). In fact, you are not only *allowed* but *encouraged* to discuss all of the course assignments (except for the final exam) with your colleagues before handing them in.

The principal ground rule is that the work on all individual written assignments must be yours. You should be especially alert to standards of plagiarism: words written by others, even if sentence fragments, in any source, must be cited. (If you have questions about this practice, please contact me.) I also encourage you to rely on “peer editing”—sharing drafts of your written work with your colleagues, getting their suggestions for improvement, and incorporating their feedback in your final draft. No one—no one!—gets it right on the first draft!

**Policy on assignment deadlines.** Assignments are due at the date and time assigned. Late assignments will not be accepted, except with the advance permission of the instructor and then only in cases of illness or serious family emergency. (“Serious family emergency” does not include work for jobs or other courses!)

**Course materials**

We will be reading the following books, and they are recommended for purchase:

[forthcoming]
Other materials will be available online and on the course’s website. From time to time through the course, additional readings will be assigned and distributed electronically.

Course outline

1) Introduction
   a) What is “public policy”? Why do we need to understand the “big ideas” and great thinkers who have helped frame it? Why is a deep dive into the historic and ethical roots of these big ideas so important?

2) Government
   a) Why do we have government? Thomas Hobbes argued that life was “nasty, brutish and short” John Locke considers the unruly “state of nature” that requires a law to govern it.
      i) Thomas Hobbes, The Leviathan
      ii) John Locke, Second Treatise on Civil Government

3) Democracy (two weeks)
   a) When people have created government, democracy is a popular—but not the only—choice. What is the role of democracy—and its challenges?
      i) Plato, The Republic (excerpts)

4) Community
   a) Democracy builds on community. What values make it it thrive?

5) Liberty
   a) An argument for government has long been making it possible for individuals to have the freedom to thrive. What is the connection between government and liberty?

6) Markets
a) And: when it comes to liberty, it’s been more important in supporting private commerce than anything else. What role do markets play in promoting the common good? And what arguments have been made against market power?

7) Midterm exam

8) Rationality
   a) We all want to make the best decision. But what does the “best” decision look like? What does rationality mean?
      i) Alice Rivlin, *Systematic Thinking for Social Action*

9) Equality
   a) The combination of liberty, markets, and rationality often produces inequality—both of opportunity and of results. How much does society have an obligation to worry about this? What can and should it do about it?
      i) Arthur Okun, *Equality and Efficiency: The Big Tradeoff*

10) Bureaucracy
    a) One of the great inventions of humankind has been government—and one of the critical elements of government has long been bureaucracy. But we also worry about how big government and its bureaucracy is. How should we assess its role and power?
       ii) John DiIulio, *Bring Back the Bureaucrats*

11) Nonprofits
    a) An alternative to governmental institutions for advancing the public good is the nonprofit organization. How do they work—and to what degree can they act effectively as instrument for the public welfare?
       i) (reading to come)

12) Leadership
    a) Individual leaders are often crucial for resolving the many challenges at the core of these big ideas. What role can—and should—leaders play
       i) James Macgregor Burns, *Leadership* (excerpts)

13) God
a) Fundamental values shape debates about public policy. Nothing is more fundamental than the question of whether—and to what degree—religious values ought to play a role in shaping public policy. Should religious beliefs shape policy?

i) “Leviticus,” from the Old Testament. There is a variety of online sources, including:


14) Conclusion

a) How should we best resolve differences among competing ideas?