

The Politics of Inequality

Overview

This class examines how and why economic inequality in the United States has grown over time. It explores the relationship between inequality and politics from multiple angles. This includes how inequality affects democracy, how people perceive inequality, and how perceptions of inequality influence the kind of equalizing policies people support (or not). It will identify different economic changes that have affected people with low, medium, and high incomes and how they worked together to create new patterns of inequality. The same policies or social changes won't necessarily fix all of the factors that have contributed to rising inequality, and the same group of people who would like to fix one aspect of inequality aren't always as concerned about fixing other parts. By critically examining the politics of inequality in this way, the class will push the limits of what research has been able to tell us about why inequality has grown and what we can do about it.

Grade Breakdown

- Attendance/participation: 30%
- Short "anticipation" and reflection writing assignments: 25%
- Midterm paper draft: 15%
- Final paper: 30%

Attendance and Participation

Lectures and class discussions are important parts of learning the ideas this class covers. Attendance and participation will count equally for this part of your grade. I will take attendance at the start of each class. You'll get one free unexcused absence. Missing more than one meeting will be penalized because the semester is so short. I will excuse additional absences if you communicate a valid need to miss a meeting ahead of time.

Participation will also be graded. I will give you a form to assess your own participation in discussion at the end of each class meeting and use your answers on it as the basis of your participation grade. Not everyone is equally comfortable speaking in front of the full class, so there will be opportunities to earn your full participation grade both by contributing directly to discussion and by encouraging others to do so. I will not necessarily follow your self-assessment for your participation grade if it does not line up with my perception of your engagement in the meeting. Please see me in my student hours if you are struggling to participate fully in class meetings.

Anticipation and Reflection Writings

You will submit short (2-3 paragraph) writing assignments at the start and end of each of the four parts of the course. The "anticipation" assignments will ask you what you already know about the topic and what you think we may cover in our meetings about it. It is completely valid to pull from your experiences when writing these, and I encourage you to do so. The reflection assignments will ask you how your understanding of the topic has changed and whether your expectations for the material we covered were met. If what we covered didn't affect what you think about the topic, you should say why not. It may be that you already understood the concepts we covered. If so, how did you gain that

understanding? You may have good reasons to disagree with the arguments we engaged with. If so, what do you think they're missing?

The anticipation papers will not be graded on the details of how you understand the topic or what you expect the coming part of the class to cover. Instead, they will be graded based on your effort to consider where your expectations come from. They may be from personal experience, classes you've taken or things you've read, or what other people, whether media figures or friends, have said. The reflection papers will be graded based on two things. First, how you relate your reflection to your anticipation paper. Second, how accurate your references to the material we covered are. The first "anticipation" assignment will be due before the second meeting. After that, anticipation and reflection papers will be due before the first meeting on each new part of the class.

Final paper and midterm draft

You will write one full paper (5-8 double-spaced pages) for this class. It will summarize your understanding of an aspect of inequality we cover in the class, both from you already knew about it and what you've learned in the class, then consider how it may be meaningfully addressed by political solutions. This includes both what kind of solutions are likely to have the largest impact and what the obstacles to implementing them might be.

You'll write this paper in two parts. The first part will be a midterm draft identifying an aspect of inequality you're concerned about and explaining what you know about it and its causes. This will be worth a smaller part of your grade than the final paper. It will be graded based on the accuracy of your description of the material we covered in the class and how well you related the class material to your broader understanding of inequality.

The final paper should incorporate feedback I give you on the first draft while also expanding it to consider solutions to that kind of inequality. The final paper will be graded on how well you incorporate my feedback, the accuracy of your description of material from the second half of the course, and your argument for why a your solution is a good one.

Sensitive/Personal Topics and Discussion Guidelines

We will discuss topics in the class that may be, and probably are, important to you personally. This means it is important to have these discussions, but it also makes them harder and more emotionally demanding. If someone expresses a position or opinion that conflicts with your own and seems wrong, it is important to try to understand that person's perspective and to attempt to engage in a way that is productive for both of you before reacting negatively. At the same time, it is important to be careful to speak in ways that are respectful to others and inclusive of their experiences.

Schedule

All course readings will be available on the course site.

Part 1: Inequality Overview and Causes

Class #1, The problems of bottom-end inequality

Kenworthy, Lane. 2014. *Social Democratic America*. Oxford University Press. [Chapter 2]

Class #2, Inequality in the middle part 1

Western, Bruce, and Jake Rosenfeld. 2011. "Unions, Norms, and the Rise in U.S. Wage Inequality." *American Sociological Review* 76(4):513–37.

McCall, Leslie, and Christine Percheski. 2010. "Income Inequality: New Trends and Research Directions." *Annual Review of Sociology* 36(1):329–47.

Class #3, Inequality in the middle part 2

Goldin, Claudia and Lawrence F. Katz. 2008. *The Race Between Education and Technology*. Cambridge: Belknap Press [Chapter 3]

Class #4, Top-End Inequality

Piketty, Thomas, and Emmanuel Saez. 2006. "The Evolution of Top Incomes: A Historical and International Perspective." *The American Economic Review* 96(2):200–205.

Frank, Mark W. 2009. "Inequality and Growth in the United States: Evidence from a New State-Level Panel of Income Inequality Measures." *Economic Inquiry* 47(1):55–68.

Part 2: How Inequality Influences Politics

Class #5, Do people see and care about inequality?

McCall, Leslie. 2013. *The Undeserving Rich: American Beliefs about Inequality, Opportunity, and Redistribution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [Chapter 3]

Class #6, Who does the government listen to?

Gilens, Martin. 2012. *Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America*. Princeton University Press. [Chapter 3]

Part 3: How Can We Make Things More Equal?

Class #7, Support those in need

Kenworthy, Lane. 2014. *Social Democratic America*. Oxford University Press. [Chapter 3]

Class #8, Expand education

Goldin, Claudia and Lawrence F. Katz. 2008. *The Race Between Education and Technology*. Cambridge: Belknap Press [Chapter 9]

Class #9, Soak the rich

Piketty, Thomas, Emmanuel Saez, and Stefanie Stantcheva. 2014. "Optimal Taxation of Top Labor Incomes: A Tale of Three Elasticities." *American Economic Review: Economic Policy* 6(1):230–71.

Part 4: Is There Support for Solutions to Inequality?

Class #10, When does inequality feel unfair?

McCall, Leslie, and Lane Kenworthy. 2009. "Americans' Social Policy Preferences in the Era of Rising Inequality." *Perspectives on Politics* 7(3):459–84.

Trump, Kris Stella. 2020. "When and Why Is Economic Inequality Seen as Fair." *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* 34:46–51.

Class #11, What parts of inequality do people care about?

Cavaillé, Charlotte, and Kris Stella Trump. 2015. "The Two Facets of Social Policy Preferences." *Journal of Politics* 77(1):146–60.

Class #12, Seeing inequality clearly

Kuziemko, Ilyana, Michael I. Norton, Emmanuel Saez, and Stefanie Stantcheva. 2015. "How Elastic Are Preferences for Redistribution? Evidence from Randomized Survey Experiments." *American Economic Review* 105(4):1478–1508.