

ECON 490 Social Insurance

Course Syllabus

Credits: 3 Undergraduate; 4 Graduate with additional assignments

Semester: Fall 2026

Meeting Times & Location: Mondays and Wednesdays 12:30PM - 01:50PM, 32 Psychology Building

Instructor: PROF. ELIZABETH T. POWERS

Email: epowers@illinois.edu

Office Location: 211 DKH

Office Hours: Mondays 2:30-3:30 and Tuesdays 10-11 a.m. Office hours will also be available via Zoom whether I am physically present in my office or not. Changes in office hours will be announced on Canvas. Email me if you must meet at another time.

Communication: I communicate with students via University email, Canvas, or in person. I do not read or respond to electronic communications from non-University email addresses and platforms.

NOTICE TO ALL STUDENTS

This is a hands-on course. All of the activities and graded elements in this course take place *during class*. ***Students must commit to coming to every class.*** Due to the nature of this course, students who miss multiple classes will be asked to withdraw.

General Information

Credits: 3 Undergraduate; Can be taken for graduate credit with additional assignments.

Course Meets Requirements: Major electives

Semester: Fall 2026

Meeting Times & Location: Course meets at 32 Psychology Building from 12:30-1:50, MW.

Exam Times & Location: There is no midterm. The final will be in person, time and place to be announced later.

Exam Proctoring: Exams are in-person.

TA Information: Zhuo Chen, zhuo8@illinois.edu.

Missed assignments: There are no make-up opportunities. Exceptions are made when the absence is for an approved, documented reason, such as illness. However, see above note about withdrawals.

Exam Conflicts follow the Student Code Procedures:

Notify me at once at epowers@illinois.edu if you have an exam conflict or have missed an exam. Make-up exams will be offered in circumstances consistent with the student code.

Student Code Evening/Midterm/Hourly Exams: http://studentcode.illinois.edu/article3_part2_3-202.html

Student Code Final Exams: http://studentcode.illinois.edu/article3_part2_3-201.html

Course Description

It has been said that the US government is “an insurance company with an army,” with almost half of U.S. federal spending allocated to the aged, disabled, and health care. This course covers the economic rationales for such policies, their design and implementation, and current policy and political debates on their value, scale, and scope. Class meetings include hands-on workshops in which students conduct original data analyses of topical issues and debates. Students who have taken the course will understand the economic rationales for social insurance and means-tested programs, be knowledgeable about specific programs, and gain experience conducting empirical policy analyses that couple statistical software with AI-assisted methods.

Prerequisites

ECON 102, ECON 202, ECON 203, ECON 302.

Learning Outcomes

- **Analytical Skills/Problem-Solving:** ECON 490 students will effectively visualize, conceptualize, articulate, and solve complex problems or address problems that do not have a clear answer using microeconomic and macroeconomic theory, data, and statistical tools.
- **Critical Thinking:** ECON 490 students will apply economic analysis to evaluate specific policies and proposals, compare countervailing arguments for and against policies, and assess the role played by assumptions in arguments that reach different conclusions to a specific economic or policy problem.
- **Quantitative Reasoning:** ECON 490 students will understand how to apply empirical evidence to economic arguments. Specifically, they will learn how to obtain relevant data, develop empirical evidence using appropriate econometric techniques, and interpret their findings.
- **Specialized Knowledge and Practical Application:** ECON 490 students will develop deeper analytical, critical, and quantitative skills in specialized areas of public policy.
- **Interdisciplinary Knowledge, Diverse Issues, and Global Consciousness:** ECON 490 students will broaden their global and disciplinary knowledge, enhancing their understanding of the world around them both within economics and beyond.

Required Materials

This course does not use a textbook. Most readings will be from nonprofit and government organizations. Journal articles will also be assigned. Readings will be announced in class and on Canvas. Pay-walled journal articles are available from [JSTOR](#) or through the [University Library](#).

Graded Items

Grades are on a plus/minus scale. An A+ grade is only awarded in exceptional cases. Rubrics are provided for exams and assignments. I reserve the right to curve individual and final grade distributions. The graded elements are 5 debates (50%), 10 fact sheets (30%), and a final (20%),

Debates (50%): There are 5 debates. The topics are (1) “Resolved: The U.S. Spends too much on its safety net”, (2) “Resolved: “Eligibility for safety net programs should be expanded” (3) Resolved: The nutrition programs have failed, (4) “Resolved: Social Security is going broke”, and (5) “Resolved: The time for Universal Income is now”. **THE NUMBER OF DEBATES AND THEIR PLACEMENT IN THE CLASS SCHEDULE IS SUBJECT TO CHANGE PENDING 10TH-DAY ENROLLMENTS.**

Fact Sheets (30%): These are 1-2 page briefings describing a program, particular aspects of a program, or an important issue or proposed change pertaining to a program.

Final Exam (20%): An in-person final consists of multiple choice, true/false-explain, short answer, and/or definitions. The time and place are TBA.

ASSIGNMENT DUE DATES

ASSIGNMENT	DUE
Debate #1 "Resolved: The U.S. Spends too Much on its Safety Net"	Week 2
Debate #2: "Resolved: "The Safety Net Programs Should be Expanded"	Week 6
Debate #3: "Resolved: The Nutrition Programs have Failed"	Week 8
Debate #4: "Resolved: Social Security is Going Broke",	Week 11
Debate #5: "Resolved: The Time for Universal Income is Now".	Week 15
Fact Sheet #1: Who needs means-tested programs?	Week 3
Fact Sheet #2: Take-up or Workfare	Week 5
Fact Sheet #3: SNAP Reciprocity	Week 7
Fact Sheet #4: Recent SNAP Policy Change(s)	Week 8
Fact Sheet #5: Recent Medicaid Policy Change(s)	Week 9
Fact Sheet #6: Understanding the ACA	Week 10
Fact Sheet #7: Incentives in the (OAS)DI system	Week 12
Fact Sheet #8: Incentives in the OAS(DI) system	Week 13
Fact Sheet #9: How Medicare works	Week 14
Fact Sheet #10: History of Universal Income	Week 15
Final Exam	TIME AND PLACE TO BE ANNOUNCED

Academic Integrity

It is my responsibility as an instructor to uphold the academic integrity policy of the University, which can be found here: http://studentcode.illinois.edu/article1_part4_1-401.html. According to the Student Code, "It is the responsibility of each student to refrain from infractions of academic integrity, from conduct that may lead to suspicion of such infractions, and from conduct that aids others in such infractions." Academic dishonesty may result in a failing grade for the course. Every student is expected to review and abide by the Academic Integrity Policies. Ignorance is not an excuse for any academic dishonesty. Do not hesitate to ask the instructor(s) if you are ever in doubt about what constitutes plagiarism, cheating, or any other breach of academic integrity. **Read the full Student Code at the following URL: <http://studentcode.illinois.edu/>**

I use the FAIR system for suspected violations of academic integrity. The [direction to instructors](#) on Academic Integrity may be helpful. Penalties for violating the student code can be severe. FAIR findings of an integrity violation are reported on a students' transcript for a period of years, disadvantaging them in future situations where a transcript is required.

USE OF AIDS FOR QUIZZES AND EXAMS

All quizzes and tests must be taken without any reliance on external sources of any kind, including class material (i.e., the internet, Canvas website, readings, notes, AI, etc...). Classmates may not confer with each other during exams or discuss the content of exams with a student who has not yet taken an exam.

USE OF AI

AI is an important productivity tool in this class. AI is not to be used during exams, nor uncritically in place of learning and thinking for yourself. Each instance of inappropriate AI use will constitute an academic integrity violation.

Attendance

(<https://studentcode.illinois.edu/article1/part5/1-501/>). The Office of the Dean of Students (<http://odos.illinois.edu/>) assists students in navigating the Student Code and course policies. Students who will be absent for an extended period of time should communicate with the Office of the Dean of

Students. I report excessive absences to this office. It is your responsibility to note all class meeting times and due dates.

Students with Disabilities

It is the student's responsibility to follow DRES procedures to obtain accommodation (disability-related academic adjustments and/or auxiliary aids). *Students must notify me that they seek accommodation no later than the second week of instruction.* You must also contact Disability Resources and Educational Services (DRES) as soon as possible but no later than the first two weeks of instruction. To contact DRES, visit 1207 S. Oak St., Champaign, call 333-4603 (V/TTY), or e-mail a message to disability@illinois.edu. The DRES Website is www.disability.illinois.edu/.

Exams must be taken at the scheduled time. It is the student's responsibility to schedule the exam with DRES and to insure that DRES notifies me at least two weeks ahead of the exam date. Students failing to abide by these parameters may not be allowed to take the exam with accommodation.

Religious Accommodations

The University's policy is to reasonably accommodate its students' religious beliefs, observances, and practices that conflict with a student's class attendance or participation in a scheduled examination or work requirement, consistent with state and federal law. Students must request a reasonable accommodation for their religious belief, observance, and practice in advance of the conflict to allow time for both consideration of the request and alternate procedures to be prepared. Not requesting an accommodation reasonably in advance of the conflict may result in a delay or denial of the accommodation.

A reasonable accommodation for a religious belief, observance, and practice is defined as a change that allows the student to participate in their religious belief, observance, and practice and which does not fundamentally alter the educational requirement or place an undue hardship on an instructor, department, or office.

Use [this form](#) to request religious accommodation.

Emergency Response Recommendations

Emergency response recommendations can be found at the following website: <http://police.illinois.edu/emergency-preparedness/>. I encourage you to review this website and the campus building floor plans website within the first 10 days of class. <http://police.illinois.edu/emergency-preparedness/building-emergency-actionplans/>.

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

Any student who has suppressed their directory information pursuant to Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) should self-identify to the instructor to ensure protection of the privacy of their attendance in this course. See <http://registrar.illinois.edu/ferpa> for more information on FERPA. Student information and records will not be released to anyone other than the student, unless the student has provided written approval or as required by law. More information may be found here: http://studentcode.illinois.edu/article3_part6_3-602.html.

Sexual Misconduct Reporting Obligation

The University of Illinois is committed to combating sexual misconduct. Faculty and staff members are required to report any instances of sexual misconduct to the University's Title IX and Disability Office. In turn, an individual with the Title IX and Disability Office will provide information about rights and options, including accommodations, support services, the campus disciplinary process, and law enforcement options. A list of the designated University employees who, as counselors, confidential advisors, and medical professionals, do not have this reporting responsibility and can maintain confidentiality, can be found here: <http://www.wecare.illinois.edu/resources/students/#confidential>.

Other information about resources and reporting is available here: <http://wecare.illinois.edu/>.
Note that I am a mandated reporter.

Student Support

The Counseling Center is committed to providing a range of services intended to help students develop improved coping skills in order to address emotional, interpersonal, and academic concerns. Please visit their website to find valuable resources and services: <https://counselingcenter.illinois.edu/>.

Counseling Center Information: 217-333-3704

Location: Room 206, Student Services Building 610 East John Street, Champaign, IL

Appointment: Scheduled for same day, recommend calling at 7:50 a.m.

McKinley Mental Health Information: 217-333-2705

Location: 3rd Floor McKinley Health Center 1109 South Lincoln, Urbana, IL

Hours: 8 a.m. – 5 p.m., Monday through Friday. Appointment: Scheduled in advance.

Emergency Dean: The Emergency Dean may be reached at (217) 333-0050 and supports students who are experiencing an emergency situation after 5 pm, in which an immediate University response is needed and which cannot wait until the next business day. The Emergency Dean is not a substitute for trained emergency personnel such as 911, Police or Fire. If you are experiencing a life threatening emergency, call 911. Please review the Emergency Dean procedures: <http://odos.illinois.edu/emergency/>

Academic Assistance

Students are encouraged to seek out resources to help reach their full academic potential. It is better to reach out early in the semester, not only in times of trouble. My office hours are a time to discuss the course and get help and clarification.

Academic Dates and Deadlines

Students should make note of important academic dates for making changes to their courses. <https://registrar.illinois.edu/academic-calendars>

Please check with your academic department regarding specific procedures and policies.

Drop class in Self-Service without “W”: October 16, 2026

Submit credit/no credit request: October 16, 2026

Fall Break: November 21-29

Instruction ends: December 9, 2025

Final exams: December 11-17 (weekdays), 2025

Course Schedule

Schedule changes will be announced in class and on Canvas.

<i>PART I: FOUNDATIONS: Welcome/Rationales/Research Resources</i>
<u>Week 1</u> 1.1 Introduction 1.2 Finding and working with data
<u>Week 2</u> Debate #1: “Resolved: The U.S. Spends too Much on its Safety Net” 2.1 Discussion and debate preparation 2.2 DEBATE #1
<i>PART II: A PROGRAM FOR THE POOR IS A POOR PROGRAM</i>
<u>Week 3</u> 3.1 Introduction to the means-tested programs; theoretical underpinnings 3.2 Working with household data. FACT SHEET #1
<u>Week 4</u> 4.1 Welfare program ‘take-up’ 4.2 Theory of in-kind programs and workfare
<u>Week 5</u> 5.1 Evidence on take-up 5.2 Is workfare realistic? FACT SHEET #2
<u>Week 6</u> Debate #2: “Resolved: “Eligibility for Safety Net Programs Should be Expanded” 6.1 Debate preparation 6.2 DEBATE #2
<u>Week 7</u> 7.1 ‘Waste, fraud, and abuse’ in SNAP 7.2 Food insecurity and nutrition policy. FACT SHEET #3
<u>Week 8</u> Debate #3: “Resolved: The Nutrition Programs have Failed” 8.1 Changes to SNAP in the BBB. FACT SHEET #4 8.2 DEBATE #3
<u>Week 9</u> 9.1 Medicaid & ACA 9.2 Who receives subsidized health care? FACT SHEET #5
<u>Week 10</u> 10.1 ACA/Medicaid changes in the “BBB”. FACT SHEET #6 10.2 SSI is the saddest program
<i>PART III: AN INSURANCE COMPANY WITH AN ARMY</i>
<u>Week 11</u> Debate #4 “Resolved: Social Security is Going Broke”, 11.1 Disability Insurance (OASDI). FACT SHEET #7 11.2 Retirement & Survivors (OASDI) FACT SHEET #8
<u>Week 12</u> 12.1 OASDI Impacts on retirement 12.2 DEBATE #4
<u>Week 13</u> 13.1 Medicare 13.2 Medicare as a Model Program. FACT SHEET #9
<i>PART IV: NEW DIRECTIONS? UNIVERSAL INCOME AND MEDICARE FOR ALL</i>
<u>Week 14</u> 14.1 Was Hilary right? From Medicare-for-All to the ACA. FACT SHEET #10 14.2 DEBATE #5
<u>Week 15</u> 15.1 Prep Debate: “Resolved: The Time for Universal Income is now”; Fact Sheet #10 on universal income.

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15.2 DEBATE #6: UNIVERSAL INCOME		
FINAL EXAM TBA		

Readings will be announced during the semester. This is an incomplete list.

READINGS

Balcerowicz, Leszek & Marek Radzikowski, 2018. "The Case for a Targeted Criticism of the Welfare State." *Cato Journal* 38,(1, Winter): 1-16.

Feldstein, Martin. 2005. "Rethinking Social Insurance." *American Economic Review*, 95 (1): 1–24.

Greenstein, Robert, 2025. *Changes in the Safety Net over Recent Decades and their Impact*. Hamilton Project, Brookings Institution. 27 pp.

RESOURCES

HR(1) a.k.a. "The One Big Beautiful Bill"

[Commonwealth Fund](#) Brief.

[The Elders Coalition](#) "Fact Sheet" with descriptions and implementation timeline.

The [Center for Budget and Policy Priorities](#) -impact on poor households; [SNAP tracker](#); comprehensive and detailed [timeline](#) of changes.

Congressional Budget Office report on [macroeconomic effects](#).

ATTACHMENT A: DEBATES

This course material lends itself especially well to debate. Indeed, the issues we study have been debated since their inceptions and show no signs of ending. The amount of empirical evidence that can be and has been generated on these topics, and that students are able to create, provides a rich source of debate material. Further, debating offers students the opportunity to develop teamwork, collaborative, presentation, and leadership skills.

Teams

All students are involved in the debate either as debaters, questioners, or finders of fact.

1. Team "pro", consisting of 3-4 students, researches and presents a structured argument in favor of a resolution.
2. Team "anti", consisting of 3-4 students, researches and presents a structured argument against the resolution.
3. Team "evaluator" consisting of 3-4 students, strictly enforces time-keeping, and otherwise enforces the rules; and summarizes and evaluates the arguments.
4. The "Jury": The remaining students pay attention, take notes, and render the verdict.

Activities

Teams 1 and 2 research, develop, and formally present of their arguments. Research and writing are not timed and take place in and out of class. Positions are presented in an oral presentation that may be supplemented with slides, handouts, etc... Teams will also ask and answer spontaneous questions of each other and will have the opportunity to rebut the other team's arguments against them after question time. The evaluator team both acts as a referee of the debate and synthesizes and evaluates both teams' arguments and makes a 'closing argument' to the jury.

Round 1: Prepared Presentations and Question Time

Team 1's formal presentation: 8 minutes

Team 2 poses questions to Team 1: 2 minutes

Team 1 prepares and presents their response to Team 2: 10 minutes

Team 2's formal presentation: 8 minutes

Team 1 poses questions to Team 2: 1-2 minutes

Team 2 prepares and presents their response to Team 1: 10 minutes

Round 2: Counterarguments

Team 2 presents counterarguments to Team 1's presentation: 10 min.

Team 1 presents counterarguments to Team 2's presentation: 10 min.

Round 3: Referees' Evaluation & Jury's Decision

Referee meeting: 5 minutes

Referees' summary of the debate and verdict with explanation: 10 minutes

The Jury Votes and Declares the Winner

DETAILS

Arguments and Counterarguments (Rounds 1 & 2): The main difference between arguments and counterarguments is that arguments are prepared in advance (in these terms they may be interpreted as a type of 'home assignment'). Counterarguments represent response to arguments of opposing party; they are being formulated in the course of the debate as an answer to opponents' standpoints and their arguments put forward during debates.

Question & answer session (round 1): Teams may ask and answer questions either back-to-back or ask all questions first and then let the other team answer. Both teams are expected to ferret out the strong and weak points of the opposing team, leaving time to ask additional thought-provoking questions (asking team) or giving smart answers (answering team). In general, there is a strategic interest in having some time remaining when the other team's time is up to add more compelling reasons for the position to convince the referees and audience.

Expectations and grades: There is an expectation of in- and out-of-class preparation for this assignment for the debate and referee teams. Grades of the debate teams and referees will be based on the quality of the arguments put forward. The jury will be provided with observation sheets which will be graded. The same number of points will be available to students regardless of their role. Group sizes and the number of debates over the semester will be engineered so that all students are able to participate in every capacity. Formal student peer evaluations will be taken under advisement in grading.

If 10th-day enrollment permits, every student will participate twice on a debate team, once on an evaluator team, and twice as a jury member.

The points available in each role are

Participation as member of:	
Team “pro”	175 pts.
Team “con”	175 pts.
Evaluator Team	125 pts.
Jury	25 pts.