

ECONOMICS 131: PUBLIC ECONOMICS

Spring Term 2025

Professor Emmanuel Saez

Email: esaez@berkeley.edu

Office hours: Monday 10am-12pm in Evans Hall 623

Lectures – Mondays and Wednesdays 5:10pm-6:30pm in Lewis 100

All lecture notes, assignments, and solutions posted at

<http://eml.berkeley.edu/~saez/course131/course131.html>

Course recordings posted on b-course at

<https://bcourses.berkeley.edu/courses/1542724>

Graduate Student Instructors (GSIs):

Section times and place: <https://classes.berkeley.edu/content/2025-spring-econ-131-001-lec-001>

James Hickman

Email: james_hickman@berkeley.edu

Office hours: alternating Friday 3-5pm (1/31, 2/14, 2/28, 3/14, 4/4, 4/18, 5/2) or Friday 1-3pm (2/7, 2/21, 3/7, 3/21, 4/11, 4/25, 5/9) in Evans 636

Sections 104, 105, 106

Steve Ramos

Email: steve.ramos@berkeley.edu

Office hours: Tuesdays 11:30am-1:30pm in Evans 630

Sections 101, 102, 103

Course Description

This course focuses on the role of the government in the economy. The aim is to provide an understanding of the reasons for government intervention in the economy, analyzing the benefits of possible government policies, and the response of economic agents to the government's actions. The course covers tax policy and inequality, social insurance programs, public goods, environmental protection, and the interaction between different levels of government. Special emphasis is on current policy issues such as inequality and poverty, tax reform, or health care policy.

Prerequisites: Economics 100a or 101a. Students should be comfortable with multivariate calculus.

Readings

Jonathan Gruber, Public Finance and Public Policy, 6th edition, Macmillan, 2019 is the **optional** textbook (the lectures follow loosely the Gruber book). Earlier editions of the textbook are totally fine.

The other readings discussed in the lecture notes can be found in the reference list for each lecture with web links to the pdf files

Lectures

Lecture slides will be posted on the course website. These slides are not comprehensive and not self-explanatory. Note also that lectures do not always cover 100% of the material from the slides. Therefore attending the lectures is critical for learning and for success in the class.

Half of the credit for problem sets, mid-term, and final will be based on conceptual understanding of ideas taught in lectures. Half of the credit will be based on solving mathematical problems related to those covered in lectures and in sections.

No phones, earphones for in-person lectures except for answering iClicker questions. You may use a tablet, provided it is flat on the desk and only open to Econ 131 materials.

Laptops are only allowed in front row (2nd row OK is 1st row is full).

Grading:

1) Exams: Midterm 25%, Wednesday, March 12, 5:10pm-6:30pm (80 minutes) class time.

Final 37%, Friday, May 16, 3-5pm (120 minutes)

Final will be cumulative and based on the full material covered in class, including material tested in the mid-term.

Midterm and final are closed books and closed notes (no access to any electronic device). No alternative times, you need to be able to make those times to take the class.

2) Attendance: 8% of the grade based on attendance and participating in iClicker questions.

.5 pts awarded for each lecture attended with participation up to 8 points max. Students can miss up to 9 lectures out of 25 with no penalty. No excuse for missed classes unless it's a long-term situation that lasts 3 weeks or longer. Attendance and in-class questions through [iClicker cloud](#).

3) Problem sets: 3 problem sets 30% due on Wednesdays at 11:59pm March 5, April 2, April 30.

Problem sets will be posted 2 weeks before the due date.

Group work is permitted for problem sets, but each student must write up and turn in his/her own solutions. All problem sets will be due on specific Wednesdays, and all problem sets must be submitted online through Gradescope by the designated time (no exceptions for late problem sets as solutions will be posted at the due time).

Students need to assign pages on gradescope (to facilitate grading).

To facilitate grading, problem sets, midterm, and final exam assignments will have space in between questions where you can fill in your answers. No need to bring bluebooks for the midterm or final exam.

Grades generally follow a curve: 30% A, 50% B, 15% C, 5% D or F.

Academic Honesty Policy:

In fairness to students who put in an honest effort, cheaters will be punished. Any evidence of cheating will result in a score of zero (0) on that assignment. Cheating on a midterm, or the final exam results in an "F" for the course. Cheating includes copying off another person's exam or assignment, allowing someone to copy off of your exam or assignment, having someone take an exam or assignment for you, changing an exam answer after an exam is graded. Incidences of cheating are reported to Center for Student Conduct, which administers additional punishment.

Re-grading:

Midterm re-grade requests must concern an issue that is worth at least 3 points. For problem sets, re-grade requests must be accompanied by a one-page explanation for why you think you deserve a re-grade. Re-grade requests must be received within one week of the assignment/exam being returned to you. Note that any re-grade request will result in the entire assignment or test being re-graded, with the possibility of an upward or downward adjustment to your assigned grade.

COURSE OUTLINE

The twenty-five 1.5-hour long lectures loosely follow the Gruber textbook. We first cover chapters 1-4 of Gruber. Second, we cover the topics in chapters 17-25 but in a substantially different format than the Gruber textbook. Finally, we cover chapters 5-16 of the Gruber textbook.

- 1) Introduction to public economics and review of tools– 3 Lectures
Gruber, Chapter 1, 2, 4
- 2) Taxation and Redistribution I: Background and tax incidence – 4 Lectures
Gruber, Chapters 17, 18, 19 [lectures do not follow Gruber textbook closely]
- 3) Taxation and Redistribution II: Labor Income Taxes and Transfers – 4 Lectures
Gruber, Chapters 20, 21 [lectures do not follow Gruber textbook closely]
- 4) Taxation and Redistribution III: Capital Income Taxation – 3 Lectures
Gruber, Chapters 22 & 23 & 24 & 25 [lectures do not follow Gruber textbook closely]
- 5) Role of the government I: Externalities – 1 Lecture
Gruber, Chapters 5-6
- 6) Role of the government II: Public Goods – 4 Lectures.
 - A) Basic theory (Gruber Chapter 7)
 - B) Political Economy (Gruber Chapter 9)
 - C) Local public goods (Gruber Chapter 10)
 - E) Public Provision of Private Goods: Education (Gruber, Chapter 11)
- 7) Role of the government III: Social Insurance – 6 Lectures
 - A) Overview (Gruber, Chapter 12)
 - B) Health Insurance (Gruber, Chapters 15 & 16)
 - C) Social Security and Retirement (Gruber, Chapter 13)
 - D) Unemployment Insurance and Disability Insurance (Gruber, Chapter 14)