

Health Care Politics and Policy

POLS 1825E

Wednesday, 3:00-5:30pm

[January 19, 2023 version]

Sayles Hall 300

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Office hours: Thursday 3:00-4:00 pm and by appointment

This seminar will explore the interplay between politics and policy in the American healthcare system. Why has the U.S. struggled to achieve universal health insurance? Does the United States spend too much on healthcare—or too little? What explains the behavior of key stakeholders in the healthcare system, including patients, providers, and payers? How can we strengthen public health institutions in an era of polarization and declining public trust in experts? Topics include: health equity and racial disparities; the strengths and weaknesses of the US response to the COVID-19 pandemic; the political battle over the Affordable Care Act; healthcare spending, cost control and the quality of care; the opioid epidemic; the past, present and future of Medicare and Medicaid; and international health systems and the differences between those systems and the U.S. approach.

Course Description

By many measures, the U.S. healthcare system performs poorly in comparison with the health systems of other advanced nations. The U.S. spends about 18 percent of GDP annually on healthcare, nearly double the amount spent in some other wealthy democracies. There is little reason to believe that, in return for the higher costs, the United States provides consistently better quality of care. While the U.S. medical system is among the most technologically advanced in the world, its overall health system performance is mediocre. The death rate from COVID-19 has been higher in the U.S. than in other wealthy nations. Moreover, the pandemic had laid bare existing economic and racial inequalities in access to medical services, workplace safety, and financial security.

From a public policy perspective, U.S. healthcare poses a set of problems and opportunities. What are the main issues on the health reform agenda, and how can we make our system more efficient, effective, and equitable? From a political science perspective, U.S. healthcare poses a key question: Why are costs so much higher, and access so much less equal, for little evident benefit, in the United States? How do interests, institutions, and ideas shape the healthcare debate, and what political forces would need to be harnessed to promote the public good? Finally, what does the study of health policymaking teach us about how American government frames problems and implements solutions in an era of hyperpolarization?

Learning Objectives

Students will learn to:

- understand the history of health reform in the United States
- explain how the legacies of past reform efforts have shaped the current healthcare system
- evaluate the Affordable Care Act and its development and implementation
- identify the sources of high healthcare spending and options for cost control
- understand the sources of waste and inefficiency in the healthcare system
- identify the strengths and weaknesses of the U.S. pandemic response and the broader challenges of the public health system
- compare how other nations organize and finance their healthcare systems to the US
- model
- use the concepts developed in the course to analyze contemporary health reform issues

Assignments and Grading

Assignments include: a final exam (30%), two reaction papers (15% each), a seminar paper (30%), and class participation (10%).

The final exam is open book but must be taken during the exam block assigned for this course **(May 11 at 9:00 am)**.

Reaction papers (maximum of 3 pages, double spaced) should address a critical theoretical or empirical question raised in a given week's assigned readings. Papers are due 5:00 pm on the Tuesday before the class meeting in which the relevant readings will be discussed. No outside research is expected for reaction papers.

For the major paper assignment, students may either write a traditional academic term paper or a policy analysis report that provides an evenhanded evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of at least two plausible options for mitigating a significant health policy problem. The papers should be approximately 25 pages in length (double spaced). **Papers are due on May 17 at 5:00 pm.** All topics must be submitted to the instructor **no later than March 3 at 5:00pm.**

Possible issues for policy analysis projects include, but are not limited, to:

- Pandemic response
- Health disparities
- Health insurance reform
- Healthcare costs
- Women's health
- Mental health
- Substance abuse
- Long-term care

- FDA reform
- Rural health
- Hospital consolidation
- Incarceration and health
- Healthcare workforce
- Medicare
- Medicaid
- Administrative burdens and health
- Healthcare in Rhode Island
- Malpractice reform
- Pharmaceuticals
- Evidence-based medicine
- Payment reform
- Veteran's health
- Rural health services
- *Other topics chosen in consultation with the instructor*

Possible issues for seminar papers include the above, as well as:

- Public opinion and healthcare
- Congress and healthcare
- Federalism
- The president and health reform
- Healthcare and policy feedbacks
- US healthcare in cross-national perspective
- *Other topics chosen in consultation with the instructor*

Course readings

All articles are available on Canvas or on the web

Required texts

- Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal*, (Metropolitan Books, 2014)
- Eric Patashnik, Alan Gerber, and Conor Dowling, *Unhealthy Politics: The Battle over Evidence-Based Medicine* (Princeton University Press, 2020).
- TR Reid, *The Healing of America* (Penguin: 2010).
- Paul Star, *Remedy and Reaction: The Peculiar Struggle Over Health Care Reform* (Yale 2013)

Online Resources: The best online resource for learning more about health policy is the Kaiser Family Foundation webpage: <http://kff.org>:

- An overview of Medicare
<https://www.kff.org/medicare/issue-brief/an-overview-of-medicare/>
- An overview of Medicaid
<https://fundersroundtable.org/2020/01/16/a-medicaid-overview-qa-with-kaiser-family-foundation/>

- Affordable Care Act
<https://www.kff.org/tag/affordable-care-act/>
- Recent surveys on health policy
<http://kff.org/polling/>

The Commonwealth Fund also has useful material online. Healthcare journalists on Twitter include: Sarah Kliff (*New York Times*), Margot Sanger-Katz (*New York Times*), Austin Frakt (*New York Times*), Jonathan Cohn (*Huffington Post*), and Elizabeth Rosenthal (*Kaiser*).

Some Relevant Journals

Health Affairs

Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law

The Milbank Quarterly

HSR: Health Services Research

New England Journal of Medicine

JAMA (Journal of the American Medical Association)

Journal of Health Economics

Web Sites

- Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS): <http://www.cms.gov/>
(The agency that runs Medicare – much data, analysis; note “Medicare Chartbook” in particular)
- Medicare Payment Assessment Commission (MedPAC): <http://www.medpac.gov>
(Congressional advisory commission – analyses of full range of Medicare issues)
- Government Accountability Office (GAO): <http://www.gao.gov>
(Congressional policy analytic and accounting agency – includes full text of reports)
- Congressional Budget Office (CBO): <http://www.cbo.gov>
(Includes reports, cost scoring, and congressional testimony about Medicare)
- AcademyHealth: <http://www.academyhealth.org>
(The professional society for health services and health policy research, and program office for many initiatives with access to research and reports of relevance to Medicare)
- Urban Institute: <http://www.urban.org>
(Largest health policy group at a general think tank; full-text reports on line)
- 1% Steps for Health Care Reform (solutions for reducing healthcare costs developed by leading academic health experts) <https://onepercentsteps.com/>
- The Commonwealth Fund: <http://www.cmwf.org>
(Major health policy foundation that also conducts its own research and distributes reports; Also click on its “DC Policy Updates” for weekly summaries of health policy actions in the nation’s capital.)
- Brookings Institution: <http://www.brookings.edu>
(Major mainstream/center-left think tank)
- American Enterprise Institute (AEI): <http://www.aei.org>
(Major center-right think tank)
- Heritage Foundation: <http://www.heritage.org>
(Major conservative think tank, with a Center for Health Policy Studies)

- Cato Institute: <http://www.cato.org>
(Major Libertarian think tank, with Cato Health Policy Studies)

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS AND READINGS
[Subject to Change—Pay Attention to Class Announcements]

January 25
Course Overview

No readings

February 1
Three Lenses for Understanding Healthcare: Economics, Politics, and Policy Analysis

Charles E. Phelps, “Why Health Economics?” from *Health Economics*, on Canvas.

Daniel Carpenter, “Is Health Politics Different?” *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2012, on Canvas.

Mark Schlesinger, “Public Opinion” on Canvas.

Sarah Gollust and Julia Lynch, “Who Deserves Health Care? The Effects of Causal Attributions and Group Cues on Public Attitudes about Responsibility for Health Care Costs,” *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*, 2011, on Canvas.

Katharine Baicker, and Amitabh Chandra, “Evidence-based health policy,” *New England Journal of Medicine*, 2017, on Canvas.

Recommended

Kenneth Arrow, “Uncertainty and the Welfare Economics of Medical Care,” *American Economic Review*. 1963, on Canvas.

February 8
Health Inequalities: Disparities by Race, Education, and Geography

Health Affairs Issue Brief, “Health, Income and Poverty,” October 2018, on Canvas.

Merlin Chowkwanyun, “What Is a “Racial Health Disparity”? Five Analytic Traditions,” *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*, 2022, on Canvas.

Jo Phelan and Bruce Link. “Is Racism a Fundamental Cause of Inequalities in Health?” *Annual Review of Sociology*, 2015, on Canvas.

Emma Pierson et al., “An algorithmic approach to reducing unexplained pain disparities in underserved populations,” *Nature*, 2021, on Canvas.

Anne Case and Angus Deaton, “The Great Divide: Education, Despair, and Death,” *Annual Review of Economics*, 2022, on Canvas.

Benjamin K Couillard and Christopher L. Foote, Kavish Gandhi, Ellen Meara, and Jonathan Skinner. "Rising geographic disparities in US mortality." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 2021, on Canvas.

February 15

The US Healthcare System in Cross-National Perspective, Part 1

TR Reid, *The Healing of America*, read entire book.

Watch PBS series on universal healthcare, focusing on the following two segments:

UK

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/should-u-s-look-to-uks-single-payer-national-health-service-for-next-health-care-moves>

Switzerland

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/how-switzerland-delivered-health-care-for-all-and-kept-its-private-insurance>

February 22

The US Health Care System in Cross-National Perspective, Part 2

Commonwealth Fund, "Reflecting Poorly: Health Care in the US Compared to Other High-Income Countries," 2021, on Canvas.

Austin Frakt and Arron Carroll A. “Why the U.S. Spends So Much More Than Other Nations on Health Care,” *New York Times*, 2018.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/02/upshot/us-health-care-expensive-country-comparison.html>

Sherri Glied, Morgan Black, Wiley Lauerman, Sara Snowden “Considering ‘Single Payer’ Proposals in the US: Lessons from Abroad,” 2019, on Canvas.

Ezekiel Emanuel, et al. "Comparing health outcomes of privileged US citizens with those of average residents of other developed countries." *JAMA Internal Medicine*, 2021, on Canvas.

Elizabeth Rosenthal, “American Way of Birth, The Costliest in the World,” *New York Times*
http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/01/health/american-way-of-birth-costliest-in-the-world.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

Watch PBS series on universal healthcare, focusing on the following two segments:

Australia

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/what-the-u-s-can-learn-from-australias-hybrid-health-care-system>

Canada

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/how-canada-got-universal-health-care-and-what-the-u-s-could-learn>

March 1

The History of Health Reform in the US [paper topics due March 3 at 5:00 pm]

Paul Starr, *Remedy and Reaction*, read entire book.

Jonathan Oberlander. "The Ten Years' War—Politics, Partisanship, and the ACA," *Health Affairs* 2020," on Canvas.

Jonathan Gruber and Benjamin Sommers, "The Affordable Care Act's Effects on Patients, Providers, and the Economy," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 2019, on Canvas.

Recommended

Jamila Michener, "Race, Politics, and the Affordable Care Act," *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*, 2020, on Canvas.

Jacob S. Hacker, "The Historical Logic of National Health Insurance: Structure and Sequence in the Development of British, Canadian, and U.S. Medical Policy" *Studies in American Political Development*, 1998, on Canvas

March 8: Insurance, Costs, and Social Value

Aviva Aron-Dine, Liran Einav, and Amy Finkelstein, "The RAND Health Insurance Experiment, Three Decades Later," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 2013, on Canvas.

Jacob Goldin, Jacob, Ithai Z. Lurie, and Janet McCubbin. "Health insurance and mortality: Experimental evidence from taxpayer outreach." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 2021, on Canvas.

David Cutler, "What is the US Health Spending Problem?" *Health Affairs*, 2018, on Canvas.

Zack Cooper et al. "The Price Ain't Right: Hospital Prices and Health Spending on the Privately Insured," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 2019, on Canvas.

Michael Chernen, Zack Cooper, Eugene Larsen Hallock, and Fiona Scott Morton. "Physician agency, consumerism, and the consumption of lower-limb MRI scans." *Journal of Health Economics*, 2021, on Canvas.

Jonathan Oberlander, “The \$40 Trillion Question: Can Congress Control Health Care Spending?” 2016, on Canvas.

KFF, “Americans’ Challenges with Health Care Costs,”
<https://www.kff.org/health-costs/issue-brief/americans-challenges-with-health-care-costs/>

Recommended

Amitabh Chandra, Amy Finkelstein, Adam Sacarny, and Chad Syverson. "Health care exceptionalism? Performance and allocation in the US health care sector." *American Economic Review*, 2016, on Canvas.

March 15

The Politics of Evidence-Based Medicine

Eric Patashnik, Alan Gerber, and Conor Dowling, *Unhealthy Politics*, read entire book.

Jonathan J. Darrow, Jerry Avorn, and Aaron S. Kesselheim, “FDA Approval and Regulation of Pharmaceuticals,” *JAMA*, 2020, on Canvas.

March 22

The US Pandemic Response: Successes and Failures

Alyssa Bilinski, Kathryn Thompson, and Ezekiel Emanuel, “COVID-19 and Excess All-Cause Mortality in the US and 20 Comparison Countries, June 2021-March 2022,” *JAMA*, 2022, on Canvas.

Jacob Hacker, Alex Hertel-Fernandez, Paul Pierson, and Kathleen Thelen, “The American Political Economy Confronts Covid-19,” 2022, on Canvas.

Tanya Lewis, “How the U.S. Pandemic Response Went Wrong—and What Went Right—During a Year of COVID,” *Scientific American*, 2021.

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-the-u-s-pandemic-response-went-wrong-and-what-went-right-during-a-year-of-covid/>

Eric Lipton et al, “The CDC Waited its Entire Existence for this Moment. What Went Wrong?” *New York Times*, 2020,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/03/us/cdc-coronavirus.html>

Jacob Wallace, Paul Goldsmith-Pinkham and Jason L. Schwartz “Excess Death Rates for Republicans and Democrats During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” NBER working paper, 2022, on Canvas.

Matt Grossmann et al, “All States Close but Red Districts Reopen: The Politics of In-Person Schooling during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Annenberg Center Working Paper*, 2021, on Canvas.

Recommended

Lydia DePillis “This Scientist Created a Rapid Test Just Weeks Into the Pandemic. Here’s Why You Still Can’t Get It,” *ProPublica*, 2021.

<https://www.propublica.org/article/this-scientist-created-a-rapid-test-just-weeks-into-the-pandemic-heres-why-you-still-cant-get-it>

Watch: Interview with former FDA Director Scott Gottlieb

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?515253-3/washington-journal-dr-scott-gottlieb-discusses-us-coronavirus-pandemic-response>

March 29

No Class—Spring Break

April 5

Pharmaceuticals: Innovation versus Access?

Frank R, Ginsburg P. “Pharmaceutical Industry Profits and Research and Development,” *Brookings*, 2017

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2017/11/17/pharmaceutical-industry-profits-and-research-and-development/>

The Economist, “Why Drug Prices in America Are So High,” 2016

<https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2016/09/12/why-drug-prices-in-america-are-so-high>

Joseph White and Nicholas Corwin, “Insulin Shocks,” *Journal of Health Politics, Policy, and Law*, 2022, on Canvas.

Amy Kapczynski, “The Political Economy of Market Power in Pharmaceuticals,” *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*, 2023, on Canvas.

Testimony of Prof. Craig Garthwaite before the House Committee on Education and Labor Subcommittee on Health, Employment, Labor, and Pensions, 2019, on Canvas.

Recommended

Austin Frakt, “To Reduce the Cost of Drugs, Look to Europe,” 2015, *New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/20/upshot/to-reduce-the-cost-of-drugs-look-to-europe.html>

April 12

Medicare and Medicaid

Jonathan Oberlander, “Medicare: The Great Transformation,” 2013, on Canvas.

Amitabh Chandra and Craig Garthwaite, “Economic Principles for Medicare Reform,” *The Annals*, 2019, on Canvas.

Colleen Grogan, “Medicaid: Designed to Grow,” 2013, on Canvas.

Sarah Miller, Norman Johnson, Laura R Wherry, “Medicaid and Mortality: New Evidence From Linked Survey and Administrative Data,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 2021, on Canvas.

Phillip Rocco, Ann Keller, and Andrew Kelley, “State Politics and the Uneven Fate of Medicaid Expansion,” *Health Affairs*, 2020, on Canvas.

Recommended

Jacob Hacker, “Between the Waves: Building Power for a Public Option,” *Journal of Health Politics, Policy, and Law*, 2021, on Canvas.

Sara Rosenbaum, “The Future of the Indispensable Insurer: The Biden Administration and Medicaid,” *Journal of Health Politics, Policy, and Law*, 2021, on Canvas.

April 19

The US Public Health System in an Era of Polarization

Amy Fairchild et al, “The Exodus of Public Health,” *American Journal of Public Health*, 2010, on Canvas.

Ed Young, “How Public Health Took Part in Its Own Downfall
The field’s future lies in reclaiming parts of its past that it willingly abandoned,” *The Atlantic*, on Canvas.

Anna Maria Barry-Jester and Hannah Recht and Michelle R. Smith, and Lauren Weber, “Pandemic Backlash Jeopardizes Public Health Powers, Leaders,” *Associated Press*, 2020, on Canvas.

Vinay Prasad, “Public Health’s Truth Problem,” *City Journal*, 2022, on Canvas.

Harold Pollack, “We Need a Public Health Revolution,” *Democracy*, 2020, on Canvas.

April 26

The Possibilities and Limits of Healthcare

Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal*, read entire book.

Alexi Wright et al., “Family Perspectives on Aggressive Cancer Care at End of Life,” on Canvas.