PSCI 334: Political Psychology
Course Syllabus – Spring 2014

Instructor: Efrén O. Pérez
Class meetings: Tuesdays, 1:10–3:40pm
Classroom: Commons 349
Instructor’s office: Commons 345
E-mail: efren.o.perez@vanderbilt.edu
Phone: 615-322-6222
Office hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11:30am-12:30pm (or by appointment)

Course Description

Synergy between the study of politics and the study of the mind has been created at a clipping pace in the last few decades. This synergy is what is known as political psychology. The creative energy behind political psychology is rooted in the application of concepts, theories, and methods that deepen our understanding about the origins and consequences of political decision-making. The focus of political psychologists, then, is the individual psyche. But as we will learn throughout the course, the human psyche is itself a product of context: institutions, environments, and numerous webs of relationships that mold the political mind and its influence on political behavior. The course thus strives to impart greater appreciation for the workings of the political mind and its embedding within larger social frameworks.

Exciting as the study of political psychology may be, it is a vast and expanding field. For this reason, the course cannot cover every niche of inquiry within this corpus of knowledge. We will have to discipline ourselves and impose a curricular order that will give us both breadth and depth of knowledge. The course will therefore largely focus on the political psychology of individual judgment and choice. This emphasis will introduce doctoral students to recent and evolving developments in the study of attitudes, cognition, emotions, identities, and values, and their respective influences on political decision-making. Graduate students will also learn and gain a deeper appreciation for the promise—and the perils—associated with the main tools used by political psychologists, including: experiments, surveys, response latency measures, scales, and focus groups. Though these bodies of work will be presented separately, one goal of this course is to encourage students to identify linkages across bodies of work as a way for students to learn one of the pathways to the production and accumulation of social scientific knowledge.

Course Structure

The main objective of this course is to provide doctoral students with a foundation that blends tradition with innovation. That is, the course strives to, first, familiarize students with some core modes of theory and inquiry in political psychology; and second, to expose students to some of the cutting-edge research that is emerging in this field. In this way, the course is meant to provide you with a firm and solid background that can be used to integrate the knowledge you learn in other courses (e.g., public opinion, experiments, voting behavior, racial politics). To be sure, the course is comprehensive. Yet by no means is it exhaustive. Students can expect the material to be organized into the following four modules:

- **Module I. Methods and Techniques** – This first module focuses on some of the key methodological approaches used by political psychologists. We will learn about experiments and their advantages and disadvantages, as well as the design of effective experimental manipulations. We will also cover the important differences between moderating and mediating variables in psychological research. Finally, we will spend time learning about different approaches to measurement, including the use of scales.
• **Module II. Cognition and Affect** – This module begins by examining traditional work on social cognition, a body of work that views the human mind as a computer. We will learn about some of the core assumptions behind this corpus of research, as well as some of its more fruitful extensions, including dual-process models and research on framing and priming. This foundation will serve us well as we examine growing research on affect, automaticity, and implicit cognition. This type of research, we will learn, challenges some of the key assumptions of social cognition by carving out a larger role for phenomena such as emotions, implicit attitudes, and biased information-processing.

• **Module III. Social Identity Theory (SIT)** – Here we focus on a body of theoretical and empirical work that explains how group identities structure individual behavior. The well-elaborated theoretical mechanisms and predictions of this research make it a useful framework for inquiry into group dynamics, as scholars have used SIT to study diverse phenomena such as anti-immigrant opinion, patriotism and nationalism, and the political behavior of majority and minority groups in the U.S. We will learn about the core assumptions and predictions of SIT, as well as some of its applications and extensions in political settings. We will also discuss some of the limits of this body of work.

• **Module IV. Biology, Personality, and Politics** – This final module focuses on the self – a concept that plays a critical part in both longstanding (e.g., authoritarianism) and emerging (e.g., genes and politics) lines of inquiry. We will learn what the self is, how psychologists go about confirming its existence, and how the nature(s) of the self manifest themselves politically. To grapple with these themes, we will learn about the self and its relation to 1) the study of genes and political behavior; 2) authoritarianism, ethnocentrism, and social dominance orientation; and 3) political values and ideology.

**Expectations and Grading**

This is an intensive graduate seminar. As such, the course is meant to begin training students in the craft of producing new knowledge in the area of political psychology. At minimum, this requires your mastery of the material, which in turn, requires that you actively engage and reflect on the readings each week. Your grade in the course, therefore, will be based on the following assignments:

1. **Participation (10%)** – Constructive engagement and critiques of each week’s readings. At minimum, this means you come to class having read and thought about the material for each week.

2. **Discussion Leadership (20%)** – Each student is responsible for leading class discussion of two topics from the course. This entails reading all of the assigned readings and one further reading. It also involves reflection on these readings in order to prepare discussion questions that force students to critically analyze the encountered readings, draw out the implications of the theories presented, and to create synergy between bodies of work. Individual selection of the topics is on a first-come, first-serve basis. I will be responsible for the first two class meetings, and possibly the two weeks on Social Identity Theory (SIT) (the latter will depend on final class enrollment).

3. **Short Paper (30%)** – Each student is responsible for writing a short, 4-6 page paper on one of the further readings. The paper should summarize and critically analyze the reading. To that end, the paper should explain the key theoretical ideas and methods used in the study, as well as your assessment of the research. Only one student can write on the same further reading. It perhaps makes most sense for a student to write on a further reading that falls under one of the weeks that he/she will lead discussion on.
4. **Final Exam (40%)** – Students will take a mock comprehensive exam on **Thursday, May 1st at 9:00am**. This will be an open-book, open-note, take-home exam. Students will have 24 hours to answer one broad question, and two topic-specific questions on the material from the course. As such, the exam is meant to test your ability to braid together various strands of theory and concepts from the seminar.

**Course Books (required)**

The following books are required reading. I highly recommend that you purchase these online through a trusted vendor. Doing so will enable you to keep your semester costs down, especially if you purchase slightly used versions of these books (which is what I often do).


**Module I: Methods, Techniques, and Frameworks**

**Week 1 (1/7): Political Psychology Frameworks**

There are no assigned readings for today. During today’s class, we will review the syllabus, introduce ourselves, and discuss our expectations for this course. In addition, we will identify key themes and approaches within the study of political psychology. We will conclude by noting where this course fits in the larger field of political psychology.

**Week 2 (1/14): Method and Technique in Political Psychology**


Themes: Experiments; external versus internal validity; mediating versus moderating variables; measurement and scaling.

Further readings


• Kam, Cindy D., Jennifer R. Wilking, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister. 2007. Beyond the “Narrow Data Base”: Another Convenience Sample for Experimental Research. Political Behavior 29: 228-238


Module II. Cognition and Affect

Week 3 (1/21): Introduction to Political Cognition


**Themes:** Memory; information-processing; data-retrieval and judgment; bounded rationality.

**Further readings:**


Week 4 (1/28): Dual Process Models


**Themes:** Heuristic versus systematic information processing; information cues; need for cognition.

**Further readings:**


Week 5 (2/4): Tools of Persuasion


**Themes:** Framing and priming; stereotypes and politics; metaphors and politics.

**Further readings:**


Week 6 (2/11): Attitude Strength, Ambivalence, and Political Knowledge


**Themes:** Implications of attitude strength; origins and consequences of ambivalence; sophistication and its measurement.

**Further readings:**


**Week 7 (2/18): Affect: Emotion and Mood**


**Themes:** Models of emotion; measurement of emotion; emotion and political decision-making.

**Further readings:**


Week 8 (2/25): Automaticity: Implicit Attitudes


**Themes:** Implicit attitudes; Measures of implicit attitude (e.g., AMP, AP, and IAT); response latencies as data.

**Further readings:**


SPRING BREAK!

Week 9 (3/11): Automaticity: Motivated Reasoning

- Lodge, Milton, and Charles S. Taber. The Rationalizing Voter. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 1, 2, 3, 6, 7

Themes: Rationalization in political evaluation; hot cognition; affective transfer and contagion.

Further readings:


Module III. Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Week 10 (3/18): Social Identity Theory – Nuts and Bolts


**Themes:** In-group favoritism; out-group derogation; the content and origins of social identities.

**Further readings:**


**Themes:** Stigma; status hierarchies; nested identities.

**Further readings:**


**Module IV. Biology, Personality, and Politics**

**Week 12 (4/1): Bio-Politics**


**Themes:** Genetic bases of politics; twin study designs; measurement error.

**Further readings:**


**Week 13 (4/8): Personality and Politics: Authoritarianism, Ethnocentrism, and Social Dominance Orientation**


**Themes:** Conceptualization and measurement validity; intergroup settings; categorization; conformity; hierarchy and inequality.

**Further readings:**


**Week 14 (4/15): Political Ideology and Political Values**


Themes: Manifestations of values; origins of values; measurement of values; values and political choice.

Further readings:


