Course Description

This course provides an overview of the growing literature on political psychology. We will focus on psychological theories that help us to understand how people think and feel about politics. The primary goal of this course is to acquaint you with various ways in which psychological theory contributes to our understanding of politics and vice versa.

Course Structure

Each class involves lecture and discussion. The lectures provide a firm context for students to ground their understanding of each module’s readings. Thus, the lectures complement, rather than duplicate the readings. Do not make the mistaken assumption that lectures substitute for each week’s readings. The objective behind combining lectures with discussion of the material is to strengthen students’ grip on the theories and concepts presented throughout the course. Students are therefore expected to engage in informed discussions about the material they have encountered by, among other things: 1) assessing the quality of evidence marshaled in favor of arguments made by the readings/lectures; 2) teasing out the implications of the readings/lectures for contemporary politics; and 3) identifying linkages across the ideas presented in readings/lectures.

It is imperative that students come prepared to each discussion; which is to say, students are expected to read the material prior to attending class. This ensures that any discussion of the material for the week will revolve around informed assessments, rather than “gut reactions” to the readings and lectures. The two are not the same. The former involves evaluating course material based on what the authors and instructor have actually presented; the latter, on speculations or intuitions one has about the readings and lectures. If you complete the assigned readings, you need not worry about meeting this guideline. Each class meeting is a collective effort at mastering the material from class. The collective part of that statement means we all come prepared ready to engage in the discussion; thus, part of your class grade will be based on the quality of your participation in class discussions (for further detail see section below on grades).

Each student is graded according to four criteria. The first is attendance: Students are expected to attend each class. Not attending class is akin to missing an important meeting in the “real world”. It does not reflect very well on you or your time management, so try your best to avoid it. Each student is allowed two (2) absences without any explanation to the professor. Thereafter, I deduct
points from your participation grade for each additional absence (irrespective of circumstances, unless I am contacted by the Dean).

I also grade your participation, as you are expected to actively contribute to class discussions. The key here is not a student’s volume of participation (i.e., how much one says during class), but the quality of a student’s insights (i.e., the depth of what one says during class). It is better to share two or three keen insights about the readings, than several obvious observations about what the class has read. In preparing for participation, students should be less concerned about being “right”, and more with sharing their informed perspectives/views about the readings. Finally, students will occasionally take “pop” quizzes at the instructor’s discretion. These quizzes are meant to provide students with feedback on their class performance in between their short papers (see below).

In addition to the preceding criteria, students’ grades will also reflect their performance on two short papers and a final exam.

**Short Papers**

Each student will write two short papers on topics offered by the professor. I believe that in addition to providing you with intellectual moorings, the political science major should also equip you with useful professional skills. The ability to write analytically, concisely, and persuasively is a tremendous asset in professional politics. Thus, these papers enable students to sharpen their craftsmanship in the written word.

These papers are expected to be 4 to 6 pages in length (double-spaced), and they are graded in terms of how well-organized, logical, incisive, and persuasive the analysis is. This may sound intimidating, but you will be expected to manage similar expectations in professional political settings (e.g., working for a U.S. Member of Congress). Each paper should follow guidelines established by the Vanderbilt political science department. These guidelines can be found at the following link:

http://www.vanderbilt.edu/political-science/includes/PAPERFORMAT2011.pdf

Your topics for these papers are as follows:

**First Paper (due 10/22):** We will be watching the movie, *Wag the Dog* (1997). In that film, we see how effective “spin-doctors” can be in swaying public opinion. Given what you have learned up to now in this course, how can we understand this effectiveness? In other words, explain to me the psychology of mass media effects in contemporary American politics. Please draw on the readings, lectures, and movie to provide your answer.

**Second Paper (due 12/1):** We will be watching the film, *Hotel Rwanda*. In this movie, we see Hutus committing genocide against the Tutsis. In light of what you have learned so far in this course, what explains this atrocity? That is, explain to me the political psychology behind this intergroup conflict, paying attention in particular to why, when, and who mostly likely participates in these grotesque efforts. Please draw on the readings, lectures, and movie to provide your answers (hint: focus most of your attention on the material from the latter half of the course).
Final Exam (Thursday, 12/17 at 3pm)

The final examination will consist of a take-home essay exam. I will develop a thorough list of questions pertaining to the course material. You are expected to answer **two** questions in total. Students will have until 7pm to turn in this final exam. The first essay endeavors to test your breadth of knowledge regarding political psychology. That is, can you bring together various strands of literature from the different weeks in a nuanced way? The second essay aims to assess the depth of knowledge regarding a specific module in the course. That is, can you thoroughly explain a specific body of literature that we covered during the semester?

**Study Participation – Mandatory Extra Credit**

To inject some flexibility into the grading process, each student receives two (2) extra credit points for participating in a Political Science Study here on campus (details are forthcoming). You may use these points, in total sum, to boost your lowest grade on an assignment—including your final exam (but not your participation grade).

The additional benefit of this extra credit is that, by earning it through your participation in an actual study, you will learn about one crucial tool that political scientists use to collect data.

If you do not tell me what assignment you want your extra credit points applied to, I will default to applying them to your lowest grade in the class.

**Grading**

Paper 1: 25%
Paper 2: 25%
Final Exam: 35%
Participation and Discussion: 15%

**Required Course Books**

There are no required books for this course. Your readings consist of scholarly articles, which I will provide to you via Blackboard.

**Week 1: (8/27), Introduction to Course**

**Week 2: (9/1 – 9/3), Methods of Studying Political Psychology**


Week 3: (9/8 – 9/10), Political Cognition


Week 4: (9/15 – 9/17), Tools of Persuasion


Week 5: (9/22 – 9/24), Attribution


Week 6: (9/29 – 10/1), Emotions


Week 7: (10/6 – 10/8): Political Knowledge


Start watching *Wag the Dog* during last portion of class

Week 8: (10/13), Watch Movie for Paper 1

Finish watching *Wag the Dog*
ENJOY FALL BREAK!

Week 9: (10/20 – 10/22) Authority and Obedience

Paper 1 due Thursday (10/22) at the beginning of class


**Week 10: (10/27 – 10/29), Implicit Cognition**


**Week 11: (11/3 – 11/5), Motivated Reasoning**


**Week 12: (11/10 – 11/12), Social Identity Theory, System Justification Theory, and Social Dominance Theory**


**Week 13: (11/17 – 11/19), Watch Movie for Paper 2**

Watch *Hotel Rwanda*
**Week 14: (11/24 and 12/1), Language, Culture, and Politics**

Paper 2 due Thursday (12/1) at the beginning of class.


**Week 15: (12/3 and 12/8) Personality, Values, and Ideology in Politics**


**Week 16: (12/10) Review for Final Exam**