Syllabus: Political Psychology (Gov1372)
Spring 2014

Time: Mon, Wed 4:00-5:30pm
Place: Boylston Hall - 110 (Fong Auditorium)

Office hours: Tuesdays 2-4pm and by appointment
Office location: CGIS S316

Introduction

This course examines what psychology (mostly social and cognitive) can tell us about political phenomena (that is, rather than examining what happened in politics (e.g. who won an election) or how it happened (e.g. who voted for whom), we will look at why it happened by looking at the psychology of individuals. For example, what causes individuals to make decisions and form attitudes? Or, why do individuals identify with certain groups and not others? Answering these types of questions will allow us to explain phenomena such as the role of media in politics, why people identify with parties, and who wins Presidential elections.

In the course of learning about the substance of these topics, we will also consider how the knowledge was acquired: what type of research was conducted? How valid are the conclusions? How could the research be improved? In addition to a midterm and a final, all students will be asked to complete an original piece of political psychology research.

Assignments

There will be four assignments in this class: participation in section meetings (20%), an original piece of political psychology research (30%), a midterm (15%), and a final (35%).

Deadlines

Student project begins: February 19th
Midterm exam: March 12th
Last day to submit project proposals: March 24th
Project presentation: April 23rd
Project individual written report: May 8th.
Final exam: exam period, TBA.
Books available at the COOP and on reserve at Lamont:


Course policies:

- **Office hours** are held 2-4pm on Tuesdays in CGIS S316 and are the best way to have a meeting with me. If you have a conflict with this time, e-mail me to set up a meeting.

- **Section attendance** is mandatory. Section participation counts for a relatively high proportion of your final grade (20%) in order to encourage thorough preparation and lively discussions. Your TF’s have the authority to give you section assignments and they set your final participation grade; make sure to check with them for their section grading rubric.

- **Lecture attendance** is mandatory. I have made a serious effort to keep readings in this class to a manageable minimum. A consequence of this effort is that lectures will sometimes cover material that is not in the readings; conversely, not all the reading material will be covered in lectures. The section discussions, the midterm and the final exam will all presume you are familiar with both the lectures and the readings.

- **Technology policy:** during lectures, you will occasionally be asked to fill in surveys, take part in experiments, and answer multiple choice questions. Therefore, please bring a device to lecture that is capable of receiving e-mails and browsing the internet. Smartphones will work for this purpose. If you do not own such a device, you are excused from this request.

- **Required readings** are listed in the detailed schedule below. Required books are on reserve at the Lamont and available at the COOP. Journal articles and book excerpts will be made available electronically through the course website. You will be expected to do all required readings before the date for which they are listed.
- **Optional readings** are listed in the detailed schedule below, marked as optional. These readings are there to provide more background information or extended applications of theories to interested students. For example, you may find these readings useful for your research project.

- **Collaboration policy:** Collaboration is not allowed on the midterm and the final exam. The research project is a group project and collaboration on this assignment is required; the group as a whole will be responsible for and graded on the research presentation. The individual research reports on these projects, however, need to be written individually and *not in collaboration* with your group members. No two reports should be the same.

- **AEO accommodations:** for academic adjustments or accommodations, please present a letter from the Accessible Education Office to your TF by the second section meeting. We will make any reasonable accommodations to support the learning needs of all students.

- **Plagiarism** is the act of taking undeserved or unwarranted credit for something. Please note that plagiarism ranges from the intentional to the careless; both forms are nonetheless considered plagiarism. Please familiarise yourselves with the proper use of sources ([http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do](http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do)) and with the disciplinary consequences of plagiarizing ([http://handbook.fas.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k95151&pageid=icb.page584280](http://handbook.fas.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k95151&pageid=icb.page584280)).

**What is the research project?**

The research project is a group assignment to carry out an original piece of political psychology research. A detailed project introduction will occur in lecture and section on February 19th and 20th. In section that week, you will form research groups and may begin choosing research topics. You can discuss group formation and topic selection among yourselves prior to this date, but formal groups and topics can only be selected starting in section that week. Note that groups should consist of people from the same section.
Detailed schedule and required readings:

Jan 27th : Introduction

What is political psychology? An introduction to what this class does (and does not) cover.

No assigned readings.

Jan 29. The origins of political psychology.

We look at the origins of modern political psychology. What is the “authoritarian personality” and why was this concept developed? Why are the classic studies in political psychology about authority and submission? The distinction between individual difference explanations and situational explanations is introduced.


I. Individual differences.

Feb 3. Personality and politics.

Is personality related to political orientation? Do conservatives and liberals think about politics differently? How much of our political differences can we ascribe to personality variables?


Optional:

**February 5. Genetics and political neuroscience**

*Are some political behaviors (partially) caused by genes? How do we know whether (and how much) genes matter? Can advanced neuroscience methods, e.g., fMRI scanning, teach us something about politics?*


(Optional):


**II. “Universals” of human psychology**

**Feb 10. Bounded rationality and human cognition**

*Human information processing capacity is limited. As a result, we use conscious and sub-conscious shortcuts, or heuristics, in our reasoning. What are some of these heuristics? What are the consequences for political decision-making?*


**Feb 12 Human cognition continued**

*We continue the discussion of cognitive shortcuts, with a focus on vote choice.*

Optional:


Feb 17. No class: President’s Day

Feb 19 Introduction to student project

We will discuss picking a topic, finding a question, and designing experiments. Section this week will be devoted to forming research groups and getting started on the project.


Feb 24 The importance of information

When we have less than perfect information, we need to use “informational shortcuts”. What is the impact of the availability of information on how partisan our opinions are? How do informed individuals differ from uninformed individuals?


Feb 26 Information continued

We continue the discussion of information effects. How do we know whether someone has enough information to make a politically sound choice? Can this knowledge be reliably measured?

March 3 Emotions and politics

Classical political thought tends to suggest that emotions are an unreliable guide to making political decisions. We will discuss current debates on the role of emotions in politics: are they a distraction, a necessary evil or even indispensable for politics?


March 5. Cooperation

Why and how do human beings co-operate? Why does political ideology, under certain circumstances, cease to predict attitudes toward welfare recipients? We discuss our evolved mechanisms for detecting free-riders in a co-operative situation.


Optional:

March 10. Fairness and system justification

Believing that our environment is predictable and/or fair is a fundamental human need. To satisfy this need, we engage in motivated reasoning: we hold on to beliefs
about our society as fair in the face of evidence to the contrary.


**Midterm: March 12th**

**Spring Break**

**III. The importance of groups**

**March 24. The importance of groups**

*We are social animals. As a consequence, we think of ourselves and others in terms of the groups we belong to. We discuss the ease with which in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination are activated.*


*Optional:*


**March 26. The importance of groups continued**

*How malleable is group membership? When and why do we change our allegiance from one group to another? When are identities sticky, and what are the consequences of being ‘stuck’ with a low-ranking identity in a hierarchical world?*

IV. The importance of situations

March 31 Classical situational studies on obedience and authority.

We return to the classic obedience and authority studies. The situation has a powerful impact on our behavior: we discuss its power and limits.


Optional:

April 2 Media effects.

How powerful is the media? How can we properly study whether and when media influences opinions? The impact of the media on opinions is an intuitively appealing concept whose existence turns out to be surprisingly difficult to prove.


Optional:

April 7 Riots

Under what situations do riots occur? We will pit dispositional and situational explanations of youth riots against one another; our primary example will be the Watts riot.

### V. Bringing it all together

**April 9 Race politics in contemporary United States**

*What happens when the power of groups is combined with the power of the situation? We look at race relations and the role of race as a powerful political symbol in America. The concept of symbolic attitudes is introduced.*


**April 14. Race politics in contemporary United States, continued.**

*Why do Americans “hate welfare”? We combine our knowledge of racial politics, elite use of political messages, and the human reliance on heuristics to understand the close connection between race and welfare politics in the United States.*


*Optional:*


**April 16 Obama’s election**

*How was Obama elected President, given America’s history of racism? Did his race matter? Did his election signify (one step in the road toward) the end of racism?*

April 21 Inequality and redistribution

In a world with so much inequality, why do we not see more demands for redistribution? We will draw on our knowledge of heuristics, system justification and the importance of groups.


April 23. Student project presentations.

April 28. Understanding ideology.

We bring together our knowledge of social identity, the importance of information, and individual dispositions to understand ideology and partisanship. Can we speak of a meaningful ideology in the mass public? If so, how do we reconcile this with the existence of information effects and the power of partisan cues?


Optional:

April 30. Partisan polarization: what’s going on?

American elite politics today is highly polarized. How does the polarization of elite politics relate to the attitudes of the public? We will discuss “values voters”, the influence of polarized media on public opinion, and what it means for public opinion to be polarized.


Optional: