Politics 304: Topics in Political Psychology
Fall 2014
Wednesday, 2:30 – 4:20 in King 306
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Office Hours: Thursday and Friday, 3:00 – 4:30 in Rice 203
Office Hour Signup: http://tinyurl.com/ParkinOffice

COURSE DESCRIPTION
“Political psychology, as an interdisciplinary pursuit, applies psychological concepts and methods to test theories about elite and mass political behavior” (Lavine 2002). Political psychologists have gone “inside the mind” of citizens and political elites in an attempt to explain a host of political phenomena from how people interpret political information and make decisions to the role that emotions, identities, and group dynamics play in forming opinions and evaluating political options.

In this course, we will use leading work in political psychology to investigate critical issues in American politics. After introducing political psychology’s history, methods and major themes, we will look at the psychological aspects of ideology, campaign politics, intergroup relations, and community.

COURSE OBJECTIVES
As a senior seminar, this class has three main objectives.

• First, it serves as an exploration of political psychology, which is intended to broaden your understanding of politics, and American politics in particular. In other words, it encourages you to think about politics in a slightly different way – to think about the psychological processes that shape political thoughts and actions.

• Second, this class provides an opportunity to hone your analytical and discussion skills. You will read challenging material and be asked to work through the author’s approach to determine its uses and implications. You will also be asked to demonstrate your mastery of the material in both verbal and written forms. You must engage, consider, and grapple with the readings as well as develop insights about them.

• Third, this seminar allows you to take on a major research project. Drawing on both class material and outside research, you will write a paper that synthesizes your thinking on a major political topic.

REQUIREMENTS
You are expected to come to class each week having carefully read and considered the required readings. The optional readings are simply there if you are interested. (Please see me if you cannot locate any of the optional readings.) I fully expect that you will have something insightful—if not brilliant—to say in class about each required reading.
The following books are required for the course. They are available for purchase online and at the college bookstore. Some of them have also been put on reserve in the library, although I would not rely on the library copy.


**Assignments and Grading**

Final grades will be based on class participation, written discussion questions and answers, a final paper prospectus, a prospectus review, and a final research paper. The relative weight and due date of each component is as follows:

- **Class Participation**: 15% (due weekly)
- **Discussion Q&A**: 30% (due each week)
- **Paper Prospectus**: 10% (due before November 16th at 2:00 pm)
- **Prospectus Review**: 5% (due before November 18th at 2:00 pm)
- **Final Paper**: 40% (due before December 19th at 11:00 am)

**Class Participation**

Your participation grade is based on your attendance in class, your attitude, and most importantly, your ability to consider and discuss the course material. In terms of your active participation in class, comment *quality* matters much more than *quantity* – insightful comments that reflect an interest in and understanding of the course material will be rewarded much more than frequent commentary on how this stuff reminds you of a personal anecdote.

Good discussion is critical to the success of any seminar. I have provided two attachments at the end of this syllabus to help you become an engaged consumer of the class material and an effective classroom discussant. Please read and follow them closely.


**Discussion Q&A**

Each week that we read a book (except the first week), you are to post a discussion question on Blackboard before Tuesday at 2:00 pm. (Click on “discussion questions” and start a new thread for each weekly question.) Your question should be concise and thoughtful, and it should raise an interesting point or thought about the book that others will want to address. Once all of the questions have been posted, you will answer one of them (it can be your own) with a one-page, single-spaced response. Your response should address the question with reference to the literature on political psychology. This will enable you to demonstrate your mastery of the material.

Response papers are to be submitted to Blackboard before 2:00 pm on Wednesday. You must write all eight responses, although I will only count your top six scores. Each paper will be graded out of five. Those that clearly demonstrate mastery of the material and careful reflection will receive a three or four, while those that show significant insight and/or profound observations will receive a five (these will be very rare).

**Final Paper: Prospectus, Presentation, and Final Draft**

The first step in completing your final project is to identify an interesting topic. You will meet with me to discuss your final paper idea sometime after fall break. I will offer suggestions, guidelines, and expectations, although you will have considerable freedom in choosing a topic that interests you. Once you have settled on a topic, you will decide how to approach it. There are two basic options: a complete research paper or a research design.

In the first option, you would pose a question and answer it using case studies and extant research as your evidence. You might, for example, use existing work to (1) explore how President Obama has dealt with the question of race during his presidency, (2) assess the leadership potential of a 2016 presidential candidate, (3) explain the reaction that Americans have to contentious issues such as immigration, same sex marriage, or health care, or (4) explore the implications of intolerance on college campuses. The key here is to pose an interesting question and answer it using research in political psychology.

The second option is a research design. In this option, your paper would pose an interesting question, present a literature review, propose a theory (based on past research) and explain your plan for gathering data and testing hypotheses about causal mechanisms and processes. In short, you would propose a study without actually collecting any of the data. (Of course, if you have solid statistical skills, you are welcome to actually conduct the study although this would require much more time and effort, as well as IRB approval in some cases. You would have to start very early in the semester.) If you select the research design option, you might propose a study/experiment aimed at understanding, for example, the conditions of threat under which people will start to support a retraction of civil liberties. Or, you might design a study aimed at explaining how voters evaluate candidates who do not fit their preconceived stereotypes. In the past, students have gone on to complete the project as a private reading the next semester.

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1 You should keep your response under one, single-spaced, page. Brevity is a valuable skill. You must try to synthesize and economize your writing. Remember that we have all read these books, so minute details are not as important as original ideas. It should be quite obvious after reading your response that you have fully engage with the material.

After our meeting, you will write a five-page (double-spaced) prospectus in which you describe your thinking about the project you hope to complete. The prospectus must be posted on Blackboard by 2:00 pm on Sunday, November 16th. I will then forward your prospectus to a reviewer (see below). Your prospectus should address the following (and any other points you think are important):

- What is your research question? Why is this question important? Why will people want to read about it?
- What does the literature say about this question? What do we already know? How does your question relate to the literature both in political psychology and more generally? Are you trying to fill a gap in the existing literature? Are you trying to extend our knowledge beyond past research?
- What are your preliminary thoughts about the answer to your question? What is your theory? What are your hypotheses?
- How might you research this question and test your theory/hypotheses? Will you think about designing an experiment, using case studies, or some other method? How will you outline your paper?
- What might an answer to this question contribute to our understanding of American politics? What might be the implications?

Students will present their research-in-progress to the class during our last three meetings of the semester (November 19th, December 3rd and 10th). (We will not meet on November 26th, as this is the day before Thanksgiving.) You will have 15 minutes to walk the class through your research, answering questions as you go. These presentations are intended to be “workshops” in which you present information for feedback from your colleagues. They are meant to help you work through issues and get advice that will be useful in completing your paper. As such, you will gain the most by being well-prepared and organized. However, you are not simply making a presentation of your research; you should engage your classmates with questions, and you should expect to be interrupted. (Please see ‘Attachment Three: Conducting a Good Workshop’ for further guidance.)

Finally, you will write a major research paper that is between 15 and 20 pages (double-spaced) and is due via Blackboard on Friday, December 19th at 11:00 am. Because papers are being submitted during the exam period, they cannot be late. In other words, late papers will not be accepted without prior approval from Oberlin College. It’s simple, if you miss the deadline, you will receive zero on the paper and fail the course—plan accordingly!!

Prospectus Review

Peer review is a major part of scholarly life. Near the end of the semester, you will review a classmates’ prospectus. Your review should be about three pages (double-spaced) and should provide feedback on how to improve the final paper. Specifically, you should offer polite and constructive commentary on the following:

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3 This is an absolute deadline. To be safe, you should assume that all of the following will happen 24 hours before your paper is due: (1) you will get in a fight with your roommate; (2) your computer will crash; (3) the fire alarm in your building will go off repeatedly in the middle of the night; (4) you will contract some curious sickness for which Health Services has no cure; and (5) 6 feet of snow will fall within a 2 hour period. In short, you do not have the luxury of leaving your paper until the last minute!
• Question: Is it clear? Does it seem important?
• Literature Review: Is the cited literature relevant? Does the review seem complete? What could be added to the review? Should parts of the review be removed?
• Theory: Is the theory coherent and logical? Is the theory testable and falsifiable?
• Research Design: Does the proposed research design seem appropriate? Will it accurately test the hypotheses? Is it creative/clever? Is it parsimonious? Are other tests or evidence needed?
• Implications: Do the proposed implications make sense? Have all of the implications been considered?
• Other: Do you have any other suggestions that might make the paper better?

Your review should be uploaded to Blackboard by 2:00 pm on Tuesday, November 18th. I will then pass it along to the author. Your review will be graded on its thoroughness, even-handedness, and helpfulness. You will be called upon to discuss your review during your classmate’s final paper workshop.

Final letter grades will be assigned in the following way:

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**TOPICS AND READINGS**

**Class One (September 3rd): What is Political Psychology and How is it Studied?**

Beyond introducing the course and its syllabus, this class will provide a brief overview of political psychology and how it is commonly studied. We will pay particular attention to the development of political psychology while also spending some time discussing the research methods used by political psychologists. Please read Houghton’s book *before* class as it provides an excellent grounding in the literature. Houghton’s book will also serve as a good resource throughout the semester.

Required Reading: (read before our first class)


Optional Reading:

Class Two (September 10th): How We Think About Politics
We will begin our study of political psychology with an approachable analysis of how we think about politics. Jonathan Haidt’s The Righteous Mind looks at how our sense of morality shapes our political thoughts and opinions. By describing the moral foundation of politics, Haidt sets the groundwork for many of the books we will read throughout the semester.

Required Reading:

Optional Reading:

Class Three (September 17th): Political Cognition
This week’s reading—The Ambivalent Partisan—extends our inquiry of political decision-making with a focus on partisanship and the cognitive process. As the authors note, “this book is focused on the relationship between partisan attachment, the nature of citizens’ multiple and conflicting political judgment goals, and the normative quality of their perceptions, preferences and choices” (xii). We will explore how and why Americans make their political decisions, and discuss the implications this might have for campaigns and politics more generally.

Required Reading:

Optional Reading:

Class Four (September 24th): Unconscious Political Thought and Affect
This week takes us into the realm of unconscious political thought and affect. We will explore how the mind works to process political information in the milliseconds before conscious awareness, and the role that affect plays in the equation. The authors of The Rationalizing Voter suggest, “political behavior is the result of innumerable unnoticed forces, with conscious deliberation little more than a rationalization of the outputs of automatic feelings and inclinations.” We will take up this claim and discuss its implications.

Required Reading:

Optional Reading:

Class Five (October 1st): The Political Psychology of Representation
Most of the extant work in political psychology focuses on campaigns and/or public opinion. This week, we explore a new area of concern: The Political Psychology of Representation. Representing Red and Blue explores the psychological process by which citizens express their preferences to elected officials, and how they react to the actions their leaders take. Although there are certainly parallels between this and the older research tradition, the new focus on representation takes the investigation into some interesting areas.

Required Reading:

Class Six (October 8th): Authoritarianism
This week, we move from electoral politics to the broader study of American political behavior with an analysis of authoritarianism. Scholars have long been interested in why some people are more prone to intolerance and devotion to authority than others, and Karen Stenner’s The Authoritarian Dynamic is the latest work in this tradition. It offers a more flexible perspective on authoritarianism by combining predispositions with environmental factors, which has some interesting implications for American politics.

Required Readings:

Optional Readings:

Class Seven (October 15th): Discrimination and Dominance
Political psychologists have always been interested in political identities and how they structure society and relations between groups. Indeed, the tensions between groups in American society – based on race, gender, sexuality, class, etc. – represent some of this country’s most enduring challenges. This week we will examine race and gender relations with a focus on what they mean
for political opinions and social policies in the United States. We will do this by exploring Sidanius and Pratto’s sophisticated Social Dominance theory.

**Required Reading:**

**Optional Reading:**

**Fall Break**

**Class Eight (October 29th): Communities, Groups and Obligations**
This week’s book—*Boundaries of Obligation in American Politics*—extends our investigation of social identity. We will look at how our sense of community and group membership is constructed and how it influences our feelings of obligation toward others. In particular, we will explore how this sense of membership influences our thoughts about who should benefit from redistributive policies.

**Required Reading:**

**Optional Reading:**

**Class Nine (November 5th): The Psychological Sense of National Identity**
Our final book asks us to consider *Who Counts as an American?* It explores the psychological process by which we create our sense of national identity, and the implications this has for various aspects of American political life. Why do some people have a stronger sense of national identity than others? How does national identity help and/or hurt the American people? Our discussion will touch on these and other fascinating questions about what it means to feel connected to our nation.

**Required Reading:**

Class Ten (November 12th): Final Paper Prospectus
We will not be meeting as a class this week. Instead, you will be working on and submitting your final paper prospectus. Once we have discussed your paper idea (you should see me sometime after fall break), you will write a five-page (double spaced) prospectus (see instructions above). Your prospectus must be posted on Blackboard by 2:00 pm on Sunday, November 16th. I will then forward it to your reviewer. Once you have received your partner’s prospectus, please post your review of it on Blackboard by 2:00 pm on Tuesday, November 18th.

Classes Eleven to Fourteen (November 19th, December 3rd and 10th): Research Presentations
Students will present their work in progress during these classes. See instructions above and Attachment Three below for more details. (We will not meet on November 26th as that is the day before Thanksgiving.)

Final Papers are Due Friday, December 19th at 11:00 am
Attachment One: How to Actively Engage with the Readings

In this class, it is important that you really engage with the reading to ensure that you have gained a good sense of the author’s argument and evidence. Simply reading the book is not enough; you have to really process the information. To do this, you might answer the following questions about each book:

- What is the author(s) central question(s)? Why is the question(s) important?
- What is the author’s theory? What predictions does s/he make about the answer to the question? What does s/he expect to find and why?
- What is the author’s method for investigating his/her question and testing his/her hypotheses? How does the author go about testing his/her theory?
- What does the author find? What are the results of his/her analysis? What evidence does s/he offer to support or refute the proposed theory?
- What are the implications of the findings? What do the findings tell us? Why might these findings be important?
- What are some of the limitations of the research? How might these limitations be overcome?
- What questions are raised by the study? What comes to mind when you step back and think about the research?

If you can answer each of these questions, in detail, you have probably engaged sufficiently with the material. When it comes to evaluating each book, you should keep the following simple rules in mind:

Rule # 1: Don’t Whine! It is unfair to criticize a piece of scholarship until you completely understand it. Even then, your criticism ought to be followed by constructive suggestions for how the problems might be addressed.

Rule # 2: Understand the Limitations of Research! Conducting research is a daunting and challenging endeavor. Researchers often do the best they can with what they have. Until you have conquered the challenges of primary research yourself, you may want to take it easy on those who have taken the leap.

Rule # 3: Don’t Believe Everything You Read! The research you will read in this class (and most of what you will read in college) has been vetted by reviewers and editors to ensure its high quality. However, mistakes and misinterpretations can still get into a final manuscript. It is your job to read everything with a healthy level of skepticism – don’t be a jerk, but then again don’t believe everything you read just because it is been written in a peer-reviewed book or article.
Attachment Two: The Do’s and Don’ts of Classroom Discussion

Your participation grade in this class is largely based on your ability to effectively engage in discussion of the class material. Here are some hints on how you might become an effective discussant.

Do Not…

• Do NOT dominate the conversation
• Do NOT drone on or make vague statements
• Do NOT let anyone else (including the professor) dominate the conversation or drone on (actively, but politely, interject)
• Do NOT whine after class about the discussion (it is, after all, your discussion – take some ownership)
• Do NOT disrespect others as they speak

Do…

• DO be prepared for the discussion
  o You should actively read the assigned material and practice verbalizing the thesis and evidence offered by the author. You should also reflect on the readings so that you will have something to say about them in class.
• DO turn monologues into dialogues by asking others for their views
• DO state your point (succinctly and specifically) and ask others for their opinion
• DO interject when someone is droning on by asking questions about what they are saying
• DO strive to make the discussion better by actively trying to improve it
• DO relate your understanding of the class material to the wider world and other phenomena
• DO speculate about the significance of the text and the possible research questions it suggests
Attachment Three: Conducting a Good Workshop

Your objective is to engage your classmates in a discussion of your research. This ought to be interesting to them so that they might offer suggestions that you can use when writing your final draft. Here are some pointers on conducting a good workshop.

1. The biggest sin is to be boring. You should come to your presentation with a controlled level of excitement. You should be well prepared and, please, do not read anything aloud.

2. The second biggest sin is to be ---. This is no time to make it up or to engage in a rant in which you vent your personal feelings in the absence of logic and evidence.

3. You must engage the members of the seminar in your research process. To do so, make sure they understand the question (What is it you are trying to figure out?) and, from time to time, come back to it, reminding them what you are trying to do.

4. To engage them in the research process, realize that you are trying to tell them how you are looking for an answer to your research question. You want to show how your thinking on this topic has evolved and the steps you have taken along the way.

It is understood that your presentation is of research-in-progress. Those who present on the last day will obviously be further along than those who present on the first day. Regardless of when you present, your presentation should address as many of these questions as possible.

- What is your question? How did you come to this question? Why do you want to know the answer to this question? Why is this question important?
- What is the state of the literature? What have other researchers already found out? What do the seminar’s required readings and other works say about your topic? What contribution are you making to the literature in this area?
- What is your theory? What do you hypothesize the answer to be? Is there a proposition – a statement of a relationship you expect to observe? Why do you think that?
- If you are right, so what? What would that teach us? And if you are wrong, what will we learn?
- How did/will you find out? What research activities did you/are you going to engage in? Where did/are you going to look?
- What will you take as evidence? How will you know if your hypotheses have been verified? For example, if you propose that male voters rely on emotions less than female voters, what “facts” (empirical indicators) are you going to use to signal that this is true?
- What do your findings mean? What inferences can you make from the evidence?
- What is the “take-home” point of your project?
- What does your project suggest about psychology and politics more broadly?