Political Psychology

Department of Political Science
College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Central Florida

pos4206b - Political Psychology
David Houghton

Course Home

Instructor Contact

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Introduction

Welcome to POS4206 *Political Psychology*, Spring 2012. This version of the course is fully online; there are no face-to-face meetings, although I will hold office hours for most of the course during which you are welcome to visit me if you are within commuting distance of campus. On this website you will find the course schedule, which will tell you what to read - and in some cases what to watch or listen to - in each Module (click on 'Schedule'). Modules generally post at 5pm on a Friday, with the exception of Module 1 (which will post on the first day of class, and is already available). Each week a new Module will be posted which will ask you to complete various readings and do assignments, in most cases within seven days.

Course Description

'Political psychology' can be defined most simply as the study of the interaction between politics and psychology, particularly the impact of psychology on politics. Beyond this simple definition, however, a glance at some past issues of the academic journal dedicated to this topic – entitled, appropriately enough, *Political Psychology* – reveals that there are many different sub-fields,

specialisms and approaches within it. Consequently, there are many different ways of teaching a course in political psychology. One distinction is that one camp is interested in mass behavior (how people vote, the impact of public opinion on government policies, and so on), while the other focuses on elite behavior (how elite perceptions shape government policies, the impact of personality on leadership, foreign policy decision-making and so on). Another important division in the field is that between approaches (influenced by social psychology) which emphasize the impact of *situations* on behavior, and those (influenced by cognitive psychology and the older tradition of abnormal psychology) which stress the importance of *individual* characteristics in shaping the way we behave. This latter distinction will serve as the critical organizing device in the course.

Sometimes a course like this one is taught almost exclusively as a study of U.S. voting behavior. Here, however, we'll range far and wide over the application of psychological approaches to a variety of political issues (though there will be a particular emphasis on applications to international relations). Starting by elaborating on what the study of political psychology involves, we will begin by looking at some of the psychological theories which have influenced the way we study political science. Particular emphasis will be placed to begin with on the impact of situational theories, most notably the work of B.F. Skinner, Stanley Milgram, Philip Zimbardo and Irving Janis. We will also look at more individually-based theories which examine the impact of personality on decision-making, schema theory, the role of affect or emotion, the impact of what cognitive psychologists call analogical reasoning and recent advances in what might be termed 'political neuroscience'. Along the way we'll illustrate the political value of these theories by examining (among other things) the extraordinary obedience that individual citizens often accord even to genocidal governments, voting behavior, the psychology of terrorism, the 1986 Challenger shuttle disaster, the psychology of genocide, the 1965 decision to Americanize the war in Vietnam, the recent Abu Ghraib prison scandal, and many other political examples.

Required Text

The main course text is my own book *Political Psychology: Situations, Individuals and Cases* (New York: Routledge, 2009), which was written specifically for this course. The bookstore on campus now has copies of this available. It is also available through online sellers like www.amazon.com in paperback or in the Kindle edition. All instructor profits from the sale of this book to course members go to charity (it does not matter *where* you purchase it, since I calculate the profits based on student number enrollments after the class has ended).

A Word of Warning About Online Courses

If you haven't taken an online class before, you should know that they can be gruelling: since there are no face to face meetings, there is more reading than you might do in an ordinary class and more video material to watch. This will require a great deal of intensive reading on your part. Do not take this course unless you are strongly motivated to do the readings and other assignments on time.

Rules of Assessment

The final grade will be composed of three elements:

- Midterm Examination on everything covered so far, taken online *at any time* between Friday 24 February 5pm and Friday 2 March 5pm. Consists of 50 multiple choice questions and worth 40%.
- Cumulative final examination, taken online *at any time* between Friday 20 April 5pm and Friday 27 April 5pm. Consists of 100 multiple choice questions and worth 50%.
- Discussion postings will collectively account for 10%. You will usually have a week to do each posting, and discussion topics will close when the week ends (see individual Modules for details). Note: although I will allow every member of the class to do *one* late posting during the semester, after that I will deduct 1% from your 10% Discussions score for every posting which appears late. It is therefore very much in your interest to ensure that you do the readings and discussion postings on time.

  Makeup examinations and extensions to weekly assignments will be offered *only in the very rarest of circumstances*. In order to be eligible to take a makeup exam or get an extension, you must give a *convincing written explanation*, backed up with proper medical or other documentation, as to why you were unable to meet the expectations required of other class members. Only where the instructor is fully satisfied that the student could not be expected to complete the original assignment/examination given his or her personal circumstances will any exceptions whatsoever be granted. Note also that any makeup examination *will not necessarily be of the same format as the original exam*.

  Finally, please note that ***no extra credit*** will be offered in this course; by continuing with the course, you are agreeing to abide by its rules of assessment and agreeing to accept the marks/grades assigned to your work. All grades are final. The grading scheme will be as follows:

  A 90 or above
  A- 88-89
  B+ 86-87
  B 82-85
  B- 80-81
  C+ 78-79
  C 73-77
  C- 70-72
  D+ 67-69
  D 63-66
  D- 60-62
  F Below 60

Schedule of Readings
Online Version, Spring 2012

This course schedule will tell you what to read - and in some cases what to listen to or watch - in each Module. I may change a few things as we go along, so check back here regularly. Web links to the audio segments and videos used in the course are also included here.

Post Date	Module	Topic	Activity
Part I: Introduction			
Monday 9 January	1	Introduction to Class	Overview of objectives and methods of assessment, plus a bird's eye view of what we'll be covering during the semester.
Friday 13 January	2	Situationism and Dispositionism	Read David Houghton, *Political Psychology: Situations, Individuals and Cases* (New York: Routledge, 2009), Chapter 1.
Friday 20 January	3	A Brief History of the Discipline	Houghton, Chapter 2.
Part II: Situationism			
Friday 27 January	4	Behaviorism and Freedom	Houghton, Chapter 3. You can watch a video about John Watson here and one about B.F. Skinner here. There is a reappraisal of Skinner here
Friday 3 February	5	The Psychology of Obedience	Houghton, Chapter 4; view the film, 'Obedience' (available via course homepage).
Friday 10 February	6	Creating a "Bad Barrel"	Houghton, Chapter 5. You may find the website for Philip Zimbardo's new book 'The Lucifer Effect' useful, which can be found here. You can also watch a Jon Stewart interview with Zimbardo by clicking here. You can listen to an NPR interview with Zimbardo by following this link. Part I of a BBC special on Stanford can be viewed here, and Part II is here.You can watch part of a useful video called 'The Human Behavior Experiments' here.
Friday 17 February	7	Group Decision-Making	Houghton, Chapter 6. You can watch an introduction to the film *Groupthink* by

			clicking here.
Friday 24 February	8	Midterm Examination	Midterm Examination, taken online at any point between Friday 24 February 5pm and Friday 2 March 5pm. The exam will be all topics covered so far, and consists of 50 multiple choice questions.
Friday 2 March	9	Spring Break	No new assignments this week.
Part III: Dispositionism			
Friday 9 March	10	Psychobiography	Houghton, Chapter 7.
Friday 16 March	11	Cognition	Houghton, Chapter 9.
Friday 3 March	12	Affect and Emotion	Houghton, Chapter 10.
Friday 30 March	13	Neuroscience	Houghton, Chapter 11. You can see a video interview with political neuroscientist Drew Westen here.
Part IV: Bringing The Two Together			
Friday 6 April	14	Voting Behavior	Houghton, Chapter 12.
Friday 13 April	15	Terrorism/Conclusions	Houghton, Chapters 15 and 17.
Friday 20 April	16	Final Examination	Cumulative examination taken online, 100 multiple choice questions. This can be taken at any time between Friday 20 April at 5pm and Friday 27 April at 5pm.