Elections, Ethnicity, & Extremism: Teaching Political Psychology in the 21st Century
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Political psychology involves the study of the relationship between political and psychological processes. The field of political psychology is quite broad and interdisciplinary as areas of research range from the traditionally conceived realm of politics within the governmental arena to political life within organizations and bureaucracies. In general, political psychology research encompasses such disparate topics as organizational structures, social identity, voting, media priming, propaganda, political attitudes, prejudice and racism, globalization, terrorism, war, and the personality of political leaders.

With the Academic Bill of Rights being promoted in various states and Students for Academic Freedom maintaining an online archive of complaints against professors, it might make sense to avoid any hint of politics in the classroom. However, it is important to teach the psychological science of political behavior precisely because of these endeavors and the ongoing political nature of life.

Our students are and will continue to be confronted with politics in a variety of contexts. Through the study of this information, our students may be better able to assess political situations and make political decisions within their daily lives. Ultimately, knowledge of the psychological processes involved in political realms may make them more effective agents for change in their personal lives as well as the broader global community.

This poster will address the means by which political psychology can not only be taught as a stand-alone course but also integrated across the psychological science curriculum

Course Description - Political Psychology

When one hears the term, political psychology, one might envision the study of elections, campaigns, and voting behavior. While not inaccurate, this perception excludes a broad range of topics that fall within the purview of political psychology. For example, the following questions all address political psychology topics.

- ❑ Why would someone knowingly join a hate group such as the KKK?
- ❑ What role does personality play in leadership?
- ❑ Could the space shuttle disasters have been averted?
- ❑ Why did Hutus begin feverishly murdering their Tutsi neighbors in Rwanda?
- ❑ What possessed a scandal-ridden President to make the choice to have an illicit affair knowing full well that he was living under constant press scrutiny?
- ❑ What is the impact of prejudice on people's lives and do we all harbor a measure of racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.?
- ❑ Why did the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 happen?
- ❑ Is there a difference between nationalism and patriotism?
- ❑ Do campaign ads really have an impact on how you vote?

This course will examine these questions and more. In other words, we will examine the interaction of political and psychological processes and their impact on behavior in both our local and global communities.

<h1 style="text-align: center;">Course and Lecture Topics</h1>

The topics below can be used as the basis for a course outline in political psychology or integrated into existing courses ranging from Introduction to Psychology to Personality Theory. Each is presented as a broad topic with sample subtopics for discussion.

Introduction to Political Psychology
- How are psychology and political science different as disciplines?
- Is politics confined to the government political arena?

The Study of Political Leaders
- The influence of term limits on political decision making
- Personality and politics
- Gender, power, and politics
- Traits of successful and unsuccessful leaders
- Charismatic leaders
- Social class position and leadership
- Psychological effects of power
- Leader profiling

Cognition, Social Identity, Emotions, and Attitudes in Political Psychology
- The influences of emotions and cognitions on political knowledge and judgments
- Attitude formation
- Heuristics
- The psychological aspects of authoritarianism, obedience to authority, and conformity
- Political socialization
- The development of ideologies both destructive and constructive

Voting, Role of the Media, and Tolerance
- The power of persuasion
- Enemy images
- Propaganda
- The psychology of opinion formation, maintenance and change
- Political schemas

The Political Psychology of Race and Ethnicity
- The roles of racial prejudice and stereotyping in politics
- APA's Multicultural Guidelines

The Political Psychology of Groups
- Solidarity within groups and competition between groups
- The psychological theory of 'groupthink,' and how it contributes to understanding group decision-making in international crisis situations

The Political Psychology of Nationalism
- Distinctions between patriotism and nationalism
- Impact of nationalism on decision-making and diplomacy
- Nationalism and ethnicity

The Political Psychology of Political Extremists
- Psychology of hate groups
- Psychology behind terrorism

Political Psychology of International Security and Conflict
- ❑ Peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding
- ❑ Power, victory, or peace?
- ❑ The psychological underpinnings of mass violence and genocide

Sample Projects

Projects for a course in political psychology can have a high degree of immediacy for the student as they can be framed within the context of current events.

Film analysis: Students can analyze recent films through the lens of political psychology. For example, the current film *Munich* can be analyzed within the context of the psychosocial roots of terrorism and knowledge of the counter terrorism methods of deterrence, backlash, and reform. The documentary of the same event, *One Day in September*, can be used to analyze the symbiotic relationship between the media and terrorists.

Campaign ad analysis: Students can analyze recent ads examining their methods of persuasion. Students can analyze the ads for target audience, method of persuasion (e.g., central vs. peripheral, use of fear, group identification, etc.). Additionally, students can redesign these ads for use with different audiences.

Analysis of political speeches or debates: Students can analyze a local or national speeches/debates for content, intended audience, method of persuasion, etc. An interesting analysis involves student's perceptions regarding the effectiveness of a speech/debate and then a comparison of that perception with post-speech/debate polls. Have half of the students watch the speech or debate with the sound on and half with the sound off and then have them rate the effectiveness and quality of the speech or if a debate, have them decide on a winner. Often times, the student's ratings based on watching the speech or debate with the sound off will better match the final polls ratings of speech/debate effectiveness, quality, winner, etc. Students can then analyze the reason for this outcome.

Current events analysis: Students can analyze a current event whether a hate crime or instance of global violence using the various political psychology constructs discussed in class.

Politics = Trouble?

Teaching a course in political psychology should not be a forum for uncritical political discussion and venting. Rather, it is and should be foremost a course on the psychological study of political behavior. However, as such, political discussions and analyses do arise and can be fraught with landmines for both students and teachers. To avoid challenges of political bias and potentially explosive classroom situations, one should keep in mind the following recommendations.

1. Stay grounded as much as possible in the research and scholarship on the various topics. Political psychology is in large measure an offshoot of social psychology and thus, all the research related to social influence, social relations, and social cognitive factors are applicable to the analysis of political behavior. Additionally, all the research related to ethnic and minority relations, international relations, peace psychology, and political science, can be brought to bear in the course. It is important to maintain the rigor of the course for yourself and your students and to focus on the development of critical thinking skills. Thus, an acceptable class argument or evidence would not be what something heard on *Savage Nation* or Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*. Rather, these shows can be analyzed and critically evaluated based on what students are learning in a political psychology class.

2. Mix up examples from history. For example when discussing groupthink one doesn't need to use the decision to go to war in Iraq as the only or primary example. Use the traditional examples and if students will bring up the Iraq war, you can have them evaluate the situation using the criteria already learned and provided. You can have them reach their own conclusions as to whether newspaper articles (e.g. from the *NYTimes*) got it right when they called the decision to go to war with Iraq an example of groupthink or whether they think this is a misapplication of the concept. For almost every topic, one can also just take a couple decades back step. Thus, if one is concerned about analyzing a current war situation, one can instead analyze prior wartime scenarios. For example, in discussing the effectiveness of threats and sanctions, one need not talk about current "hot topics" but can look at writings by political psychologists analyzing the problems associated with threats and sanctions in general and in particular study the analyses that exist examining their use during the Vietnam war.

3. Be an equal opportunity analyzer. Don't always focus examples on what Republicans or Democrats have done right, done wrong, or how they have manipulated the media, etc. For example, when analyzing the persuasion techniques used in political ads, use examples from various political groups. Don't just trash one group then laud your favorite.

4. Be respectful and encourage students to be respectful of others' opinions as well. Know your own biases and work to keep them out of the classroom. Foster an environment where students can state their opinions but one where they know that the need back up their positions beyond simply, "this is just what I think or know in my heart to be true." Again, work to have them ground their positions within the context of the political psychology literature. Be respectful of students and be very careful and considerate in selecting one's own words - just good, general life policy!

Finally, I'm convinced that no matter what one teaches, you may be accused of bias. For example, I had a complaint on a course evaluation in my Holocaust class stating that I was biased against the Nazis and that it was unfair that I painted them in such a negative light. Or, now days, the Student's for Academic Freedom folks register complaints against professors who argue for evolution and don't include intelligent design in their teaching. So many topics within psychology hold special meaning to individuals and their lives (e.g. child abuse, 12-step programs, homosexuality, the use of psychotropic medications). Students often walk into class with misinformation based on the self-help literature, something they learned from their therapist, or the media. I don't think we can avoid teaching topics simply because they are controversial. Of course, it pays to know the institution where one teaches and the cultural standards.

Recommended Resources

Organizations:

International Society of Political Psychology - http://ispp.org

Society for the Study of Peace, Conflict, and Violence: Peace Psychology - http://www.peacepsych.org

Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) - http://www.spssi.org

APA Office of Ethnic Minority Affairs - http://www.apa.org/pi/oema/

Journals:

Political Psychology - http://ispp.org/journal.html

Peace & Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology -
https://www.erlbaum.com/shop/tek9.asp?pg=products&specific=1078-1919

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