Government 94kj: The Psychology of International Politics

Spring 2021
Mondays 6-8 PM ET
Harvard University

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Office Hours: TBD

Preliminary syllabus - contents may change (January 22, 2021)

Information session during shopping week

I’ll be holding an information session about the class during shopping week on Friday, January 15 at 12 PM ET. You can find the Zoom link for this sessions on the course website. I recommend attending this information session so that I can answer any questions you may have about the class before the lottery enrollment process begins (described below).

Course description

This course explores the intersection of political psychology and international relations (IR). The Gov department offers lots of classes in IR, but most of them don't have very much political psychology in them; the Gov department also offers a number of classes relating to political psychology, but most of them don't have very much IR in them. This class is an effort to bridge that divide.

Some of the questions we'll look at over the course of the semester include:

- Why is the United States so good at fighting wars, but so bad at planning for what happens after the war ends?
- How do leaders’ previous experiences before coming to power shape how they behave once they’re in office?
- How do states decide when to take their adversaries’ threats seriously?
- Why are some territorial disputes so hard to resolve?
- Are right-wing governments more likely to go to war than left-wing ones?
- Is it worth going to war to maintain a reputation for resolve?
- How do apologies work in international politics?
- Can you tell someone’s foreign policy preferences by looking at their face?

After an introductory class focusing mostly on logistics and a general overview of the class, we begin the semester by exploring the relationship between psychology and rationality, which we use as a launching pad from which to investigate the landscape of political psychology in international relations.

We’ll spend the next two classes on what loosely might be thought of as “cold”, cognitive models of information processing: heuristics and biases, prospect theory, learning and updating from the past, and communicating through the use of signals. In contrast, the following two weeks focus on what might
Table 1: Tentative Class Schedule

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generally be thought of as “hot”, motivated models of decision-making: stereotypes and perceptions, as well as emotions, taboos, and indivisible issues, all of which emphasize the ways in which political judgments are affect-laden.

The next two weeks focus on different dispositional theories and individual differences; personality, operational codes, values, and ideology. Historically, much of the work on personality and operational codes in IR has focused on the leader-level, while much of the work on values and ideology has focused on the mass public, but as the distinction between the study of elite and mass political behavior has begun to blur, these two weeks might be better thought of as exploring the ways that different types of actors systematically differ from one another more generally.

The next three weeks all explore intergroup behavior in international relations: nationalism and social identity (how do individuals identify with and act as a part of groups?), reputation and status, and historical memory, apologies, and collective victimhood. If weeks 7-8 are dispositional, the penultimate week turns to the power of the situation, looking at the effects of violence, threat and political repression. Finally, we conclude with biological and evolutionary approaches to the study of international relations, which portray many of the above mechanisms in a new light.

**Should I take this class?**

This class is an undergraduate version of a PhD seminar I teach on political psychology in IR. It differs from its predecessor both in that its reading list is much shorter, and that it tends to be more strictly focused on applications of psychological theories to questions of international security and foreign policy, although a handful of the readings here come from outside of IR/political science as well (just not as much as in the graduate-level version of the class).

There are no formal prerequisites, but because much of the reading list is designed to give you a sense of new work in the field, students who have prior exposure to IR will likely be better able to hit the ground running. (If you've taken Gov 1790, my American foreign policy class, you'll note that the readings here are a bit more intensive, consistent with this being a Gov 94 and Gov 1790 being an intro-style lecture class). If you've taken Gov 1790 before, it should have more than enough background to prepare you for this class — but if you haven't, that should be fine too! You don't need to have a prior background in psychology.
Gov 94 lottery process

Because this class is a Gov 94 seminar, its enrollment is capped at 16 students, and enrollment is by lottery process. In their spring registration memos, Government concentrators will receive a list of undergraduate seminars, as well as instructions for entering the lottery. Students must list at least three choices on their lottery form and submit it to the Department by 6 PM ET on Tuesday, January 19. The Department will release the lottery results on the evening of Wednesday, January 20.

Once the Department has students’ enrollment information, it will schedule the seminar, which it has scheduled for Mondays at 6-8 PM ET.

Technology

We’ll be using three different platforms for the course, each for a different purpose.

Canvas

- The course website (https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/85011), which contains the syllabus and course readings.
- There are no required texts to purchase for this class; all readings are available electronically on the course website as PDFs.

Zoom

- The video chat software we’re using for class meetings.
- The links to each Zoom session will be made accessible through Canvas.

Slack

- Used for all class communication and asynchronous participation/discussion about course material.
- The Gov 2749 Slack workspace has two channels:
  - #announcements. All class announcements will appear here. (e.g. if there’s a technical glitch with one of our Zoom meetings, I’ll send an update about it in this channel).
  - #general. This channel is for general discussion about the course material. Participation in this channel counts towards your participation grade in the class (see below for details).
- The link to the Slack workspace is accessible through Canvas.

If you have technical difficulties with any of these platforms, more detailed information is available via HUIT.

Course requirements and grading

20% Class participation (synchronous)
20% Slack participation (asynchronous)
25% In-class presentations/facilitation
35% Final paper due: May 3, 2021

This is a seminar-style class that revolves around class discussion; students should come to class having done the readings and ready to talk about them. This in-class participation will be worth 20% of the course grade.
Because this is a synchronous seminar, attendance each week is expected (it's hard to participate in class if you aren't there!)

After the first week, the discussion week will be led in collaboration with student facilitators, who will introduce the week's topic, place the course readings in a broader perspective, before opening the floor for broader class discussion. These in-class presentations/facilitation sessions will be worth 25% of the final grade.

In addition to in-class participation, we'll also use the course's Slack channel for asynchronous participation. Starting on February 1, a short (e.g. 1 paragraph) reaction post will be due on the course's #general Slack channel at 12 PM the day of each class meeting. This will be a chance for you to ask questions, flag the parts of the material that was of the most interest to you, and help set the agenda for the seminar later that day. Please treat discussions on Slack the same way that you would treat in-person interactions in class: engaging with one another respectfully and constructively.

While 20% of the course grade comes from synchronous participation in class and 20% comes from asynchronous participation over Slack, asynchronous participation through Slack can also be supplementary to synchronous participation in class: students who may not be as comfortable speaking during class can make up for it by being more active in asynchronous participation over Slack, provided they have the preapproval of the instructor.

The class does not have any exams. The remaining 35% of the grade comes from a final paper: students will write an original research paper applying a psychological theory to a topic related to international politics. More information about the paper will be provided a few weeks into the semester.

Finally, note that undergraduate classes at Harvard College are back on an A-F grading system (not the emergency SAT-UNSAT system temporarily implemented in SP 2020).

**Collaboration and academic integrity policy**

Discussion and the exchange of ideas are essential to academic work. For assignments in this course, you are encouraged to discuss the material presented in the course with your classmates. However, you should ensure that any written work you submit for evaluation is the result of your own research and writing and reflects your own approach to the topic. You must also adhere to standard citation practices in political science and properly cite any books, articles, websites, etc. that have helped you with your work.

**Special accommodations**

Harvard has an office dedicated to students seeking accessibility accommodations, the Accessible Education Office (AEO). They're happy to help with any accommodation requests you require. Students requesting academic accommodations are requested to present their letter from the AEO the second week of the semester. Failure to make these arrangements by this date may negatively affect our ability to implement the arrangements on time.

**Flexibility**

2020 has been... a lot. These aren't the circumstances in which any of us thought we would be in, and there will undoubtedly be unexpected developments that will arise throughout the term. Two of our guiding principles this semester will therefore be flexibility and communication. If you're facing challenges, whether at home or on campus, please let me know, so I can work with you to find potential solutions. Just please keep
Learning effectively on Zoom

The shift to learning online can be challenging for many students. I’ve prepared a guide on how to learn effectively over Zoom (along with a description of the Zoom procedures we’ll be using this semester: how will we be answering questions in class? etc.), which you can access in the Files section on the course website.

About the readings

As the tentative schedule below shows, I’ve assigned four pieces a week, which relate to one another in a variety of ways (usually two of them focus on one topic, and another two focus on another; so for example, for the heuristics and biases class, the first two readings are about prospect theory, the second are about cognitive biases in foreign policy decision-making). The articles and book excerpts are substantively and methodologically diverse, covering a wide range of areas of security and foreign policy, but also utilizing a wide range of approaches: some are qualitative case studies, others use experiments, survey data, and so on. This means that if there’s one reading about an area or using an approach you’re less familiar with, fear not – chances are the others that week will be quite different. Sometimes I assign book excerpts – they might look longer, but are usually less dense than the articles, and are therefore faster reads than their page count would suggest. If you ever feel like you aren’t being assigned enough reading – or just want to know more about a topic – you should feel free to check out the recommended reading lists in the graduate-level version of this class, available here.

Seminars only work when everyone does the reading, which means you’ll want to come to class each week having read all four articles, and ready to discuss. You should also feel free to ask clarifying questions about the reading in the #general channel on Slack – and feel free to help answer your classmates’ questions in the channel as well, which can contribute to your asynchronous participation grade.

Tentative Class Schedule

1. Introduction

The first class will consist of a general overview of the course and a discussion of course logistics. For background material:


2. Psychology and rationality

What does it mean to be rational? Are rationality and psychology opposites?
3. Heuristics and biases

How do actors make decisions in conditions of risk or uncertainty?


4. Learning and signaling

How do leaders learn from history and their prior experiences? How do leaders use signals to communicate with one another?


5. Stereotypes and perceptions

How do stereotypes shape leaders’ behavior? How do misperceptions lead to war?

6. Emotions and indivisible issues

How do emotions shape decision-making? Why are some territorial disputes so hard to resolve?


7. Personality and operational codes

How do leaders’ personalities and predispositions matter in international politics?


8. Values and ideology

How do moral judgments structure foreign policy preferences? How do political ideologies lead actors to fight?


9. Nationalism and social identity

Does being a part of a group make us want to fight? How does international politics change our identities?


10. Reputation and status

How does reputation matter in international politics? When do actors fight for status?


11. Historical memory and apologies

How do our collective memories of the past affect our ability to work with one another in the present? Can apologies overcome prior transgressions?


12. Legacies of violence
What effect does exposure to conflict and the threat of violence have on our psychology?


13. Evolution and biology
What can evolutionary and neurobiological approaches tell us about international politics?


