

Government 252
The Psychology of Politics

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Office Hours:
M&W, 3:00-5:00 PM
Fall 2008

Course Description

This course addresses three questions: (1) Why do some Americans choose to pursue careers in politics? (2) How do political elites make choices? (3) What effect do these choices have on public policy and civic engagement? Political psychologists seek answers to these questions by exploring the motives, beliefs, personality characteristics of and social influences on political leaders. The course will demonstrate that the reasons political actors give for their behavior are rarely accurate. Much political behavior is driven by unconscious motives, irrational beliefs, personality traits, and information-processing biases that can lead political actors to endorse policies that are contrary to their interests and choose courses of action that are counterproductive, immoral, or destructive.

The first half of the course will address why political actors make such "foolish" choices by exploring how they acquire their personality traits and belief systems, process information, and respond to the demands of their social and political environments. The course's second half will explore both the techniques for and the consequences of political leaders' attempts to "market" these choices to an at times skeptical, at times indifferent, public.

Course Requirements

(1) There will be **two in-class examinations**: a midterm examination on **Wednesday, October 22** and a final examination to take place on a date set by the capricious dispensers of doom in the Registrar's Office. Your performance on the **midterm will determine 30% of your final grade**, while your performance on the **final will determine 35% of your final grade**.

(2) You will be required to write a **12-15 page psychobiography** of a president of your choice utilizing the analytical framework provided by Stanley Renshon in *In His Father's Shadow*. Your psychobiography will be due on **Monday, November 17** and will determine **35% of your final grade**.

Attendance

You must arrive to class on time to succeed in this course. I will allow you **three (3) excused absences** (tardies will be counted as absences) before I start deducting from your final grade, with no appeals allowed either to Tim Gunn or to The Alaska Oil and Gas Conservation Commission. **If you know beforehand that you will need to miss class** (e.g., Joe Biden needs you to coordinate damage control for a possible “Hair Club for Men” law suit, Sarah Palin wants you to make her over so that she is “less Tina Fey” and “more Tina Louise,” Cal Ripken wants you to teach him “The Pulski Pump,” etc.), **then let me know as early in the semester as possible.** If you are felled by an illness that would cause even the CDC to claim that you are “too gross for treatment,” then **you must lodge your request with me for an excused absence prior to class on the day you are absent. Any absence after you have exhausted your three excused absences or any unexcused absences will result in a 2% reduction of your final grade (e.g., a 90 or A- will become an 88 or B+).**

You should also keep in mind that according to the *Academic Information Guide* "any students who miss more than a third of the (class) sessions may expect to be barred from (the final examination). In such cases, the course grade will be recorded as F."

Laptops

My favorite movie is *Braveheart* (well, it is my “favorite movie” if I am awake at 1:00 am and the alternatives are *You, Me, and Dupree* and *Maid in Manhattan: The Director’s Cut*). This is because I adore all things medieval, including mutton and Inquisitions of all stripes. It is this fetish, buttressed by experience, that has caused me to establish a policy of **no laptops in class** (I know what students see when they look through those tubes on the internets). Those who have a **documented learning disability that specifies that they require a laptop to take notes in class** are exempted from this policy.

Books

The following books can be purchased at The Skidmore Shop for less than the price of an Anderson Cooper Eddie Bauer Signature CNN Hurricane Gustav Rain Slicker (waterproof hair epoxy not included):

Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar, *Going Negative*
Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman, *The Press Effect*
Stanley Renshon, *In His Father’s Shadow*
Lauren Slater, *Opening Skinner’s Box*
Drew Westen, *The Political Brain*

Weekly Topics and Reading Assignments

An asterisk (*) denotes a reading to be distributed in class

Week 1: (September 3-5): Political Leadership in America

Readings: *Garry Wills, *Certain Trumpets*, pp. 11-34

Week 2 (September 8-12): The Optimist's Leader

Readings: *Steven Kelman, "'Public Choice' and Public Spirit," *The Public Interest*

Week 3 (September 15-19): From Whence the Democrats Came

Readings: *Alan Brinkley, "The Concept of New Deal Liberalism," from *The End of Reform*

*Joshua Zeitz, "Democratic Debacle," *American Heritage* (June/July 2004), pp. 59-69

*Robert Dreyfuss, "How the DLC Does It," *The American Prospect* (April 23, 2001)

Week 4 (September 22-26): From Whence the Republicans Came

Readings: Sam Tanenhaus, "The End of the Journey," *The New Republic* (July 2, 2007)

W. James Antle, "Conservative Crack-Up," *The American Conservative* (November 17, 2003)

Week 5 (September 29-October 3): Is It Just Emotion That's Taking Me Over?

Readings: Westen, Chapters 1-5

Week 6 (October 6-10): Personality and Political Choice

Readings: Renshon, Chapters 2-7

Week 7 (October 13-17): Does Personality Matter?

Readings: Slater, Chapters 2, 3, and 5

Week 8 (October 20-22): Bad Decisions by Good People

Readings: *Irving Janis, "A Perfect Failure" from *Groupthink*
Slater, Chapter 4

**MIDTERM EXAMINATION
WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 22**

Week 9 (October 27-31): The New Language of Leadership

Readings: *Matt Bai "The Framing Wars," *The New York Times Magazine* ((July 17, 2005)

*Nicholas Lemann, "The Word Lab," *The New Yorker* (October 16, 2000)

Week 10 (November 3-7): Political Marketing

Readings: Ansolabehere and Iyengar, Chapters 1-3

Week 11 (November 10-14): Advertising Effects and Non-Effects

Readings: Ansolabehere and Iyengar, Chapters 4-7

Week 12 (November 17-21): The Media Frame

Readings: Jamieson and Waldman, Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2

**PSYCHOBIOGRAPHY DUE
MONDAY, NOVEMBER 17**

Week 13 (November 24): Catch-Up

Readings: No Reading

THANKSGIVING BREAK

Week 14 (December 1-5): Media Effects and Non-Effects

Readings: Jamieson and Waldman, Chapters 3-5

Week 15 (December 8-10): Review for the Final Examination

Readings: No Reading

**FINAL EXAMINATION
TBA**