

Political Psychology in International Conflict

Sample Course Syllabus – Undergraduate Level

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Course Description

This seminar course examines the intersection of political psychology and international relations/conflict studies. The first unit introduces what can be broadly described as “cold,” cognitive approaches to information processing, including heuristics and biases, prospect theory, learning from past experiences, and strategic communication through signaling. In contrast, the second unit turns to “hot,” motivated models of decision-making, focusing on how stereotypes, perceptions, emotions, taboos, and indivisible issues shape political judgments in affect-driven ways. The third unit explores dispositional theories and individual differences, such as personality, operational codes, values, and ideology. While research in international relations has traditionally emphasized leaders when studying personality and operational codes, and the mass public when examining values and ideology, the boundary between elite and mass behavior has increasingly blurred. Accordingly, this unit considers how different types of actors vary systematically across these dimensions. The fourth unit addresses intergroup dynamics in international relations, including nationalism and social identity, reputation and status, reciprocity and revenge, historical memory, apologies, collective victimhood, and the impact of violence, threat, and political repression. The course concludes with biological and evolutionary perspectives, which offer new insights into many of the mechanisms discussed throughout the course.

The main objective of this seminar course is to teach you the fundamentals of applied research design and data analysis. The skills that you will learn are indispensable in academic and professional settings. We'll cover the essential intermediate and upper-intermediate quantitative and qualitative techniques used in current research in political psychology applied to international relations and conflict studies. The goal of all lectures and practice exercises is to help you write a research note/research paper in the form of a well-developed

proposal without strict requirements for collecting original empirical data.

The course material and practical assignments cover the following topics: (1) familiarize yourself with the current state of research in political psychology applied to the subfields of international relations and conflict studies; (2) how to design a sound study; (3) where to locate and how to collect relevant data; (4) how to select appropriate techniques for data analysis; and (5) how to interpret and effectively present your research findings in a short research paper.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the semester, the students are expected to:

- Select a Research Topic and Search the Literature to Find Unanswered Questions;
- Create a Hypothesis or Hypotheses and a Prediction or Predictions;
- Define & Measure Variables;
- Identify and Select Participants;
- Select an Observational, Experimental Approach, or Mixed;
- Create and Elaborate on the Research Design;
- Design the Analysis of the Data;
- Create an IRB Application and Pre-Register the Study;

- Present the Proposed Research Project.

Course Structure

The course will be delivered in a face-to-face format. The graded assignments will be a mix of in-class examinations and take-home tasks. We shall meet twice a week for lectures, discussions, practice exercises, and workshops for your research project.

Course Requirements and Policies

Textbook & Readings: There is no required textbook for this course. All materials are freely available either through library, open-source peer-reviewed journals, and datasets. All other required readings will be listed in the syllabus or the weekly sessions and will be placed on the course's Moodle webpage. Key readings students are to cover on a weekly basis include Huddy, Leonie, David O. Sears, Jack S. Levy, and Jennifer Jerit, *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology* (Oxford University Press, 2023). Each of the chapters in the handbook is available as a PDF via library services. A note of caution: while the reading load is not heavy, the material at times gets quite challenging, requiring repeated perusing and detailed note-taking.

Attendance: Since the material in this course is cumulative, regular attendance is vital to your success. Attendance is therefore mandatory. You can have one unexcused absence; each subsequent absence will be penalized by a three-point deduction from the final grade. A doctor's note or a documented emergency are the only valid excuses for missing class.

Drop for Non-Attendance: By the third class/laboratory period or the fifth business day of the semester (whichever comes first), students who have not attended class or contacted the instructor regarding his/her absence may be dropped from the undergraduate class roll.

Academic Honesty: The work that you submit must be your own. Plagiarism and cheating will not be tolerated in any form and will result in an automatic "F" for that assignment. To avoid complications, (1) use in-text citations to credit the source of the ideas and information that you have borrowed; (2) provide a detailed description of each reference in the bibliography; and (3) do not share solutions to your homework.

Make-up Tests and Late Work: Make-up exams are allowed only in the case of illness, accompanied by a formal medical excuse, or a documented family emergency. Late work is accepted with 5 points taken off for every day submitted late. Assignments submitted three days or more past the original due date will NOT be accepted.

Requirements for Credit Only (S/U) Grading: In order to receive a grade of S, students are required to take all exams and quizzes, complete all assignments, and earn a grade of C- or better.

Statement on Students with Disabilities: In accordance with the university policies, reasonable accommodation will be provided to students with disabilities. Any student with such a need is encouraged to make an appointment with me to obtain the necessary assistance.

Use of AI Tools: In this course, students are encouraged to explore and utilize generative

AI tools, such as chatbots, text generators, paraphrasers, etc., as part of their learning and coursework. These tools can be valuable for brainstorming, drafting, and enhancing your understanding of the material. However, it is important to critically assess and cite any AI-generated content used in your assignments and projects. Students are expected to demonstrate their own understanding and critical

thinking in their final submissions. Proper attribution and transparency about your usage of an AI tool are expected.

Assignments and Grading

1. EXAMS (40%): The hands-on component of this course includes in-class timed exams. Throughout the semester, you will be working on three in-class exams based on problem sets so that you can gain first-hand experience with research design, modeling, and data analysis. Additional details on the format and content of these tests will be provided in class.
2. RESEARCH PROJECT/PAPER (40%): The major objective of this course is to teach you to apply the tools of social science research. Accordingly, you are expected to design a research project that explores a specific non-trivial puzzle in political psychology by means of quantitative or qualitative hypothesis testing. The paper should be approximately 12–20 pages long and between 4000–5000 words, including notes, tables, and references. The count does not include the appendix word count. Further instructions will be provided in class and online. The paper (30% of your grade) is due at 11:59 pm on the final lecture day for the course. Submit your paper on Moodle as a Microsoft Word attachment. Late submissions will be penalized by half of a letter grade per day. Start researching your topics immediately! Reviewing the literature and developing a project is a time-consuming process. A developed midterm draft (research paper draft), constituting 10% of your grade, is due on October 23rd. The bulk of your preliminary research must be completed by that date. The first draft, grounded in the scholarly literature, ought to (1) clearly elaborate a non-trivial research question; (2) explain project significance; (3) introduce relevant concepts and suggest operational definitions for the key variables; (4) propose a series of research hypotheses that you intend to test; (5) thoroughly describe and justify the proposed research design; (6) describe a dataset/s or other sources of data that can be realistically accessed or how the data will be generated/collected; and (7) provide a detailed bibliography/references. A helpful approach is to mimic and add to other academic papers dealing with a very similar topic of interest you have selected. A demonstration of this process of cumulative knowledge production will be provided through the course exercises, as it is a core element of empirical research in academic and industry settings.
3. RESEARCH PROJECT PRESENTATION (10%): During the final week of classes, you will be asked to deliver an Overleaf-based presentation of your project. Further details will be provided in class. <https://www.overleaf.com>
4. DISCUSSANT/PEER REVIEW (5%): This semester, you are also responsible for writing a thoughtful and constructive critique (2 pages) of another student's paper (5% of the grade). Further details will be provided in class. The written critique is due on the day when the reviewed paper is presented in class. You will have to orally present your review. The discussants will receive the peer paper they have to review 4 days before the in-class presentation.
5. PARTICIPATION (5%): In-class participation is an essential component of learning. It will constitute 5% of the grade.

Assignment and Grading Summary

- Exams: 40%
- Research presentation: 10%
- Research Paper Draft: 10%
- Research Paper Final Draft: 30%

- Peer Review: 5%
- Participation: 5%

Grading Scale

A: 94–100% C+: 77–79% A-: 90–93% C: 73–76% B+: 87–89% C-: 70–72% B: 83–86% D+: 67–69% B-: 80–82% D: 63–66% D-: 60–62% F: 0–59%

Tentative Course Schedule

Week	Substantive Topic and Weekly Readings
Week 1	Introduction to the Current State of Political Psychology Reading: Kertzer, Joshua D., and Dustin Tingley. 2018. “Political Psychology in International Relations: Beyond the Paradigms.” <i>Annual Review of Political Science</i> 21(1): 319–339.
Week 2	Rational Choice and Cognitive Constraints: Psychology and Rationality Readings: Fearon, James D. 1995. “Rationalist Explanations for War.” <i>International Organization</i> 49(3): 379–414. Lake, David A. 2009. “TRIPs across the Atlantic: Theory and Epistemology in IPE.” <i>Review of International Political Economy</i> 16(1): 47–57. Elster, Jon. 2007. <i>Explaining Social Behavior: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences</i> . New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, pp. 191–231. Rathbun, Brian C., Joshua D. Kertzer, and Mark Paradis. 2017. “Homo Diplomaticus: Mixed-Method Evidence of Variation in Strategic Rationality.” <i>International Organization</i> 71(S1): S33–S60.
Week 3	Rational Choice and Cognitive Constraints: Prospect Theory Readings: Levy, Jack S. 1992. “An Introduction to Prospect Theory.” <i>Political Psychology</i> 13(2): 171–186. McDermott, Rose. 1998. <i>Risk-Taking in International Politics: Prospect Theory in American Foreign Policy</i> . University of Michigan Press, pp. 45–75. Alternative if the book chapter is unavailable: McDermott, Rose. 2004. “Prospect Theory in Political Science: Gains and Losses from the First Decade.” <i>Political Psychology</i> 25(2): 289–312. Extra Reading (for Empirical Demonstration): Boettcher III, William A., and Michael D. Cobb. 2006. “Echoes of Vietnam? Casualty Framing and Public Perceptions of Success and Failure in Iraq.” <i>Journal of Conflict Resolution</i> 50(6): 831–854.
Week 4	Rational Choice and Cognitive Constraints: Heuristics and Biases Readings: Kertzer, Joshua D., Marcus Holmes, Brad L. LeVeck, and Carly Wayne. 2022. “Hawkish Biases and Group Decision Making.” <i>International Organization</i> 76(3): 513–548. Rapport, Aaron. 2013. “The Long and Short of It: Cognitive Constraints on Leaders’ Assessments of ‘Postwar’ Iraq.” <i>International Security</i> 37(3): 133–171.
Week 5	Rational Choice and Cognitive Constraints: Learning and Signaling Readings: Khong, Yuen Foong. 1992. <i>Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu and the Vietnam Decision of 1965</i> . Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 51–52, 97–147. Fuhrmann, Matthew. 2020. “When Do Leaders Free-Ride? Business Experience and Contributions to Collective Defense.” <i>American Journal of Political Science</i> 64(2): 416–431. Schelling, Thomas C. 1966. <i>Arms and Influence</i> . New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, Chapter 2. Hall, Todd, and Keren Yarhi-Milo. 2012. “The Personal Touch: Leaders’ Impressions, Costly Signaling, and Assessments of Sincerity in International Affairs.” <i>International Studies Quarterly</i> 56(3): 560–573.

Week	Substantive Topic and Weekly Readings
Week 6	<p>Hot Cognition and Motivation: Perceptions</p> <p>Readings: McManus, Roseanne W. 2021. “Crazy Like a Fox? Are Leaders with Reputations for Madness More Successful at International Coercion?” <i>British Journal of Political Science</i> 51(1): 275–293. Duelfer, Charles A., and Stephen Benedict Dyson. 2011. “Chronic Misperception and International Conflict: The U.S.-Iraq Experience.” <i>International Security</i> 36(1): 73–100.</p>
Week 7	<p>Hot Cognition and Motivation: Stereotypes</p> <p>Readings: Schwartz, Joshua A., and Christopher W. Blair. 2020. “Do Women Make More Credible Threats? Gender Stereotypes, Audience Costs, and Crisis Bargaining.” <i>International Organization</i> 74(4): 872–895. Post, Abigail S., and Paromita Sen. 2020. “Why Can’t a Woman Be More Like a Man? Female Leaders in Crisis Bargaining.” <i>International Interactions</i> 46(1): 1–27.</p>
Week 8	<p>Hot Cognition and Motivation: Emotions</p> <p>Readings: Lerner, Jennifer S., Ye Li, Piercarlo Valdesolo, and Karim S. Kassam. 2015. “Emotion and Decision Making.” <i>Annual Review of Psychology</i> 66: 799–823. McDoom, Omar Shahabudin. 2012. “The Psychology of Threat in Intergroup Conflict: Emotions, Rationality, and Opportunity in the Rwandan Genocide.” <i>International Security</i> 37(2): 119–155.</p> <p>Assignment: In-Class Exam 2 (Thursday).</p>
Week 9	<p>Hot Cognition and Motivation: Indivisible Issues</p> <p>Readings: Fiske, Alan Page, and Philip E. Tetlock. 1997. “Taboo Trade-offs: Reactions to Transactions That Transgress the Spheres of Justice.” <i>Political Psychology</i> 18(2): 255–297. Goddard, Stacie E. 2006. “Uncommon Ground: Indivisible Territory and the Politics of Legitimacy.” <i>International Organization</i> 60(1): 35–68.</p>
Week 10	<p>Elite and Mass-Level Dispositions: Personality and Operational Codes</p> <p>Guest Speaker: Bradford Morrison (Leadership Trait Analysis).</p> <p>Readings: Caprara, Gian Vittorio, and Michele Vecchione. 2013. “Personality Approaches to Political Behavior.” In <i>The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology</i>, ed. Leonie Huddy, David O. Sears, and Jack S. Levy. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. Harden, John P. 2021. “All the World’s a Stage: US Presidential Narcissism and International Conflict.” <i>International Studies Quarterly</i> 65(3): 825–837. Renshon, Jonathan. 2009. “When Public Statements Reveal Private Beliefs: Assessing Operational Codes at a Distance.” <i>Political Psychology</i> 30(4): 649–661. Walker, Stephen G., Mark Schafer, and Gary Smith. 2020. “The Operational Codes of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton.” In <i>Oxford Handbook of Behavioral Political Science</i>, ed. Alex Mintz and Lesley Terris. Oxford University Press.</p>
Week 11	<p>Elite and Mass-Level Dispositions: Values and Ideology</p> <p>Readings: Kertzer, Joshua D., Kathleen E. Powers, Brian C. Rathbun, and Ravi Iyer. 2014. “Moral Support: How Moral Values Shape Foreign Policy Attitudes.” <i>Journal of Politics</i> 76(3): 825–840. Ballard-Rosa, Cameron, Mashail Malik, Stephanie Rickard, and Kenneth Scheve. 2021. “The Economic Origins of Authoritarian Values: Evidence from Local Trade Shocks in the United Kingdom.” <i>Comparative Political Studies</i> 54(13): 2321–2353. Jost, John T. 2017. “Ideological Asymmetries and the Essence of Political Psychology.” <i>Political Psychology</i> 38(2): 167–208. Bertoli, Andrew, Allan Dafoe, and Robert F. Trager. 2019. “Is There a War Party? Party Change, the Left–Right Divide, and International Conflict.” <i>Journal of Conflict Resolution</i> 63(4): 950–975.</p>
Week 12	<p>Social Identity and Intergroup Relations: Nationalism and Social Identity</p> <p>Readings: Gries, Peter Hays. 2005. “Social Psychology and the Identity-Conflict Debate: Is the ‘China Threat’ Inevitable?” <i>European Journal of International Relations</i> 11(2): 235–265. Nugent, Elizabeth. 2020. “The Psychology of Repression and Polarization.” <i>World Politics</i> 72(2): 291–334. Bertoli, Andrew D. 2017. “Nationalism and Conflict: Lessons from International Sports.” <i>International Studies Quarterly</i> 61(4): 835–849. Powers, Kathleen E. 2022. <i>Nationalisms in International Politics</i>. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 1–31.</p>

Week	Substantive Topic and Weekly Readings
Week 13	<p>Social Identity and Intergroup Relations: Reputation and Status</p> <p>Readings: Mercer, Jonathan. 1996. Reputation and International Politics. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, Introduction and Chapter 2. Jervis, Robert, Keren Yarhi-Milo, and Don Casler. 2021. "Redefining the Debate over Reputation and Credibility in International Security: Promises and Limits of New Scholarship." <i>World Politics</i> 73(1). Renshon, Jonathan. 2016. "Status Deficits and War." <i>International Organization</i> 70(3): 513–550. Barnhart, Joslyn. 2016. "Status Competition and Territorial Aggression: Evidence from the Scramble for Africa." <i>Security Studies</i> 25(3): 385–419.</p>
Week 14	<p>Social Identity and Intergroup Relations: Reciprocity and Revenge; Historical Memory and Apologies</p> <p>Readings: Souleimanov, Emil Aslan, and Huseyn Aliyev. 2015. "Blood Revenge and Violent Mobilization: Evidence from the Chechen Wars." <i>International Security</i> 40(2): 158–180. Stein, Rachel. 2015. "War and Revenge: Explaining Conflict Initiation by Democracies." <i>American Political Science Review</i> 109(3): 556–573. Noor, Masi, Nurit Shnabel, Samer Halabi, and Arie Nadler. 2012. "When Suffering Begets Suffering: The Psychology of Competitive Victimhood between Adversarial Groups in Violent Conflicts." <i>Personality and Social Psychology Review</i> 16(4): 351–374. Imhoff, Roland, Michal Bilewicz, Katja Hanke, Dennis T. Kahn, Naomi Henkel-Guembel, Slieman Halabi, Tal-Shani Sherman, and Gilad Hirschberger. 2017. "Explaining the Inexplicable: Differences in Attributions for the Holocaust in Germany, Israel, and Poland." <i>Political Psychology</i> 38(6): 907–924.</p>
Week 15	<p>Social Identity and Intergroup Relations: Legacies of Violence</p> <p>Readings: Getmansky, Anna, and Thomas Zeitzoff. 2014. "Terrorism and Voting: The Effect of Rocket Threat on Voting in Israeli Elections." <i>American Political Science Review</i> 108(3): 588–604. Lupu, Noam, and Leonid Peisakhin. 2017. "The Legacy of Political Violence across Generations." <i>American Journal of Political Science</i> 61(4): 836–851.</p>
Week 16	<p>In-Class Final Paper Presentations and Final/Project Draft Submissions</p>

This syllabus is a sample and may be revised to reflect institutional requirements and the academic calendar.