Overview and course requirements

In this course for advanced undergraduates and graduate students, we will delve into the psychology behind political opinion and behavior. In the field of political science, the psychological mechanisms guiding political views were initially explored mainly through studies in public opinion, which is to say, survey research. Partly in response to the limitations of survey research, and partly as an off-shoot of work independently occurring in psychology departments, experimental and laboratory techniques were added to the toolkit, and although the questions being explored were similar to those in public opinion, the subfield became known as political psychology. We will be treating these two fields in a unified fashion, given their overlapping interest in the psychological mechanisms behind political behavior and opinions.

We begin with a brief introduction to the two fields, assuming that students are more familiar with public opinion than with political psychology. We then tackle three major topic areas, exploring papers that employ both survey and experimental designs. The first section covers the organizing structures behind political beliefs: ideology; identity and social groups; personality – and in particular, the so-called “authoritarian” personality; and finally ambivalence, or how individuals deal with conflicting views. The second section moves beyond belief structures, to look more closely at psychological processes of political judgment and evaluation: how individuals deal with deficient information; how they use shortcuts of memory and calculation; how they are influenced by their unconscious associations and beliefs; and how emotions, in particular, influence judgment and behavior. The last section moves in turn beyond the single individual, to look at the practical problems of persuasion: how the news media affects consumers; and how the media and elites affect individuals’ judgments by framing the importance of competing issues. In the last class, we will spend half our time discussing the big picture – how far we have come, and where the field might go next – which naturally segues into specific proposals for where to go next, the student papers.

Requirements  Each student will be required to write weekly 1-page response papers, present to the class at least three of the papers we will be reading, and develop a final project. The final grade will be determined by 20% class participation and discussion, 20% response papers and presentations, and 60% the final project.

- **Response papers** These should be short, but not summaries. Rather, they should focus on one or two related papers, emphasize their strengths, and present critiques and avenues for improvement or further research, as well as questions raised that might be interesting to discuss in class. Students may skip up to two weeks of their choosing.

- **Presentations** A sign-up sheet will be posted online a couple days after the first class, and students are expected to fill out their schedule in the first couple weeks of class. Presentations should be very brief (5-10 minutes) and should include a short overview of your chosen paper and, as with the response papers, an evaluation of its strengths, weaknesses, and the substantive questions it raises.

- **Final paper** Because much of what we will read involves either experiments or survey design, students will not be required to provide a full paper with data and results. Instead, they are asked to provide,
essentially, the first two-thirds of a paper: a research hypothesis, overview of the relevant literature (perhaps more extensive than would fit in a final published paper), and a careful design of an experiment, survey, or other data-generating process that will hopefully answer your questions. Furthermore, along the way, students will be required to submit a short paper proposal (Week 11) and the last class will be dedicated to discussions of paper proposals and research design.

Week 1. Introduction

Groundwork

After looking briefly at some of the seminal works in public opinion, we will focus mainly on Zaller’s book. Though not the be-all and end-all of the field, it is an important effort to synthesize the entire process, from public influence, to psychology, to survey response. His model will turn up in different guises throughout the rest of the course. The week on political psychology will serve more as an introduction to students who might be less familiar with experimental and laboratory research and design. It will also look more broadly at the question of psychology, and how that differs, or doesn’t, from the dominant rationalist paradigm.

Week 2. Public Opinion


Further reading:


Week 3. Political Psychology


Structures of Belief

In public opinion research, as in popular opinion, the dominant organizational principle was originally the ideology, so we begin with that. As we will see, the fundamental question will be whether ideology is a separate causal factor, or merely a name for empirically evident clusters of beliefs. Another source of belief organization, this time outside the individual, is the social group, where group identities may structure and organize beliefs – or again, it may just be that we hang out with like-minded people. Turning in a more traditionally psychological direction, perhaps instead there are personality types that structure beliefs. Authoritarianism has become a popular framework for understanding a certain cluster of belief types, but perhaps even more than the previous two topics, it is also beset by accusations that the notion is ad hoc and not causal. Finally, we will look at what happens when beliefs are not consistent or structured, and how individuals deal with conflicting opinions.

Week 4. Ideology


Further reading:


Week 5. Identity and Social Groups


Further reading:


**Week 6. Personality and Authoritarianism**


Further reading:


Week 7. Ambivalence


Further reading:


Cognitive Processes and Limitations

The previous two weeks have led us inexorably towards more detailed psychological mechanisms for understanding how beliefs are formed and how they change. In this section, we look more closely at the processes of decision making: not so much the structure of beliefs, but their creation and subsequent effects on behavior. Here, of course, the experimental method will be crucial. We begin with how individuals think given limited or flawed information, how they deal with flawed memories, or rationalize ad-hoc decisions they have made. We then look more closely at heuristics, the short-cuts of evaluation and analysis people employ to make decisions in a complex world when perfect Bayesian rationality may be impossible. We then turn from such (semi) conscious procedures to unconscious ones, and look at a small portion of the huge new literature suggesting that we are all, unconsciously, riven by prejudice and instinctive judgments. Does the fact these prejudices can be suppressed mean that they are not a problem? Finally, we look at the tricky nature of emotion: is it another short-cut for analysis; or again, just a name for a cluster of opinions; or does it have its own causes and effects independent of the other mechanisms we have explored?

Week 8. Cognitive and Informational Limitations


Further reading:


**Week 9. Heuristics**


Further reading:


**Week 10. Automatic and Unconscious Response**


*Further reading:*


**Week 11. Emotion**


**Further reading:**


**Persuasion**

In the concluding weeks of the course, we turn from analysis to synthesis, examining the real-world interplay of the various factors we have previously explored. We begin with the fraught question of the effect of the news media on consumers: how large is it, and is bias a problem given the vulnerabilities we have already thoroughly documented? Delving deeper into a specific mechanism here leads to the burgeoning field of “framing,” where external sources affect not people’s beliefs per se, but the relative importance ranking of the issues before them. The effects of framing appear quite large, and are a challenge for traditional rationalist approaches, since it is unclear how rational bayesian beliefs should respond to arguments about relative importance.

**Week 12. The Media**


**Further reading:**


Week 13. Framing


Further reading:


Week 14. Wrap-up and paper proposals.

We finish with a look backwards and forwards. What have these psychological approaches added to our understanding of political opinion and behavior? How, if at all, do they challenge traditional rational-behavior models? What sorts of new models can we devise that more directly include all the vagaries of human belief and thought that we have explored? And how might we apply the discoveries to our specific fields of interest? I look forward to seeing your own proposals for where to go next.