

Government 252
The Psychology of Politics

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Office Hours:
M & W, 12:30-2:30 PM
Fall 2010

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 **three in-class examinations**: a Lucinda Williams "Are You Alright?" examination on **Friday, October 2 (15%)**, a midterm examination on **Friday, October 21 (25%)** and a final examination scheduled by the custodial staff at Mordor for **Thursday, December 16 at 9:00 AM (25%)**.

(2) You will be required to write a **12-15 page psychobiography** of a president of your choice that utilizes the analytical framework provided by Stanley Renshon in *In His Father's Shadow*. Your psychobiography will be due on **Monday, November 22** and will determine **35% of your final grade**.

Attendance

You are allowed to miss four (5) classes. There are no excused absences. I do not grant excused absences for two reasons: (1) I just do not possess the Jedi

mind to be able to discriminate between those illnesses, events, life changes, ankle deformities, etc. that are serious and those that are trivial; and (2) Five absences allows you to miss 1 ½ of the class sessions without incurring any penalty. Even Lindsay Lohan's agent is not this generous (and he was the one who superglued Lindsay's hair extensions). **I will treat tardies as absences.** I know that 10:10 AM is a heinous time to have class, but, as they say in the convent, "we must persevere. Fraulein Maia." I do often say significant things at the outset of class about readings, assignments, life coaching opportunities, etc. It is hence important that you be at least physically present at 10:10 AM. Your mind belongs to you (while I can access your dreams, I respect your privacy... though I do worry about all those unicorns and rainbows that seem to dance around your unconscious), but I do need at least to feel your presence if I am to summon the strength to love myself (As Darryl Philbin once said to Michael Scott, "Mike, it takes great courage to be you. I could not do it.")

I will deduct 2% from your final grade for each absence you accrue over the 5 absence limit (e.g., a student who earns a cumulative score of "90" (A-) on the course assignments who compiles 6 absences will receive an "88" (B+) for the course).

If you reach five absences, I will send you an email alerting you that your next absence will compel me to deduct 2% from your course grade.

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 E."

Laptops

Laptops are not allowed in class. I have seen what Facebook has done to those I love. All of them are now lost to me (well, the truth is that they never liked me much). Students who have a disability that precludes them from taking notes with any instrument other than a laptop must provide me with documentation testifying to their "laptop needs" **by the end of the second week of classes** (i.e., Friday, September 17).

Cell Phones, Blackberries, PDAs, and Other Gadgets for Touching Lives and Spreading Your Love

I recognize that these devices (which always prompt from me the exclamation, "Ohhh, shiny") are as much a part of you as those monthly alimony checks are to maintaining Elin's super sweet Swedish lifestyle. I shall thus not cause you any feelings of separation or anxiety by having Big Coco confiscate

them at the door. But I would be grateful if you turned them off during class. I am quite sensitive to sound. It is the principal reason why I sleep in a hyperbaric chamber. That, and doing so, of course, can make me immortal.

Books

The following books can be purchased at The Skidmore Shop for less than a “Bill O’Reilly P90X Apology Workout Program” (Protein Remorse Shakes Sold Separately):

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*

Important Note Pertaining to The Hodges Harbrace Handbook

All Government majors are now required to **own** a copy of the 17th edition of *The Hodges Harbrace Handbook*. Copies of the HHH can be found on the bottom shelf of the “Government” section at The Skidmore Shop. **If you do not yet own a copy, then you must purchase one for this course.** If you already own a copy, then consider yourself as having passed your conditioning test

Weekly Topics and Reading Assignments

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

Week 1: (September 8-10): Political Leadership in America
Readings: *Garry Wills, *Certain Trumpets*, pp. 11-34

Week 2 (September 13-17): The Optimist’s Leader
Readings: *Steven Kelman, “Why Public Ideas Matter,” Chapter 2 in Robert Reich (ed.), *The Power of Public Ideas*

Week 3 (September 20-24): 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

Week 4 (September 27-October 1): From Whence the Republicans Came

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

*Sean Wilentz, "Jimmy Carter and the Agonies of Anti-Politics," Chapter 3 in Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan*, pp. 73-95

"ARE YOU ALRIGHT?" EXAMINATION FRIDAY, OCTOBER 1`

Week 5 (October 4-9): Is It Just Emotion That's Taking Me Over?

Readings: Westen, Chapters 1-5
Slater, Chapter 5

Week 6 (October 11-15): Personality and Political Choice

Readings: Renshon, Chapters 2-7

Week 7 (October 18-22): Does Personality Matter?

Readings: Slater, Chapters 2 and 3

MIDTERM EXAMINATION FRIDAY, OCTOBER 22

Week 8 (October 25-29): Bad Decisions by Good People

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

Week 9 (November 1-5): 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 8-12): Political Marketing

Readings: Ansolabehere and Iyengar, Chapters 1-3

PSYCHOBIOGRAPHY DUE MONDAY, NOVEMBER 12

Week 11 ((November 15-19): Advertising Effects and Non-Effects

Readings: Ansolabehere and Iyengar, Chapters 4-7

Week 12 (November 22): Catch-Up

Readings: No Reading

THANKSGIVING BREAK

Week 13 (November 29-December 3): Media Frames

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

Week 14 (December 6-10): Media Effects and Non-Effects

Readings: Jamieson and Waldman, Chapters 3-5

FINAL EXAMINATION

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 16, 9:00 AM, Ladd 307