Issues in Political Psychology

Prof. Daphna Canetti

Course Number: 702.2193
Class Time: Wednesday, 12:00-15:00
Class Location: TBA
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Course Description:

What is political psychology? The name is new, with its inception as a separate discipline sometime in the twentieth century, and the formation of an official society only in 1978. Yet scholars discussed the relationship between psychology and political processes as early as ancient Greece. The primary purpose of this upper level course is to provide an overview of political psychological research with an emphasis on the psychological mechanisms underlying political behavior. By focusing on a list of topics that represent merely a portion of those covered in PP, this course is planned to give you a taste of what political psychology is. When one hears the term political psychology, one might envision the study of elections and campaigns. While not inaccurate, this perception excludes a broad range of topics that fall within the purview of political psychology. For example, the following questions address political psychology topics: What is the impact of prejudice and identity on intergroup relations? How does threat impact individuals' political choices? Or what is the psychological and physiological impact of war and terrorism on individuals' political worldviews? 

Greek fables discuss both the sour grapes phenomenon, in which desires are adjusted in accordance with what we cannot have cannot have, and an alternative phenomenon in which we want what we cannot have. Machiavelli presents a complex and sophisticated manual for how the Prince should use psychology to gain political power. De Tocqueville makes the revolution of rising expectations and the concept of relative deprivation key to the fall of the old regime in France. Finally, the founding fathers built the American system of government on critical assumptions about human nature, setting up checks and balances to counter human tendencies toward domination. The practical political world is similarly filled with assumptions about how relations among people might be said to be inevitably linked with human psychology; appeals to character are a longstanding staple in democratic politics.

This course has a lecture format: we meet once a week to learn, critically reflect, and digest assigned materials. As the political Middle Eastern context is a "lively" conflict that breeds turning points and crucial events on a daily basis, I expect that all of you follow the news and use this knowledge to contribute to our group discussions.

Course Requirements:

1. Weekly writing responses
2. Oral Presentation
3. Mid-Term Exam
Final Grade:

1. Weekly writing responses 10%

Students are expected to come to class prepared. This means they must read the material, as indicated on the accompanying syllabus, and participate in class discussions.

For each text read, students will be required to hand in Transcription Notes. This means you are to choose and write out in their entirety three (3) sentences or paragraphs or verses which you consider especially significant to understanding the work being discussed that week in class.

After each quote, free-write about what is important and/or significant about the passage. Do these select passages act as a key to unlocking the meaning of the text? Do they cause a personal reaction, emotionally, intellectually?

These Transcription Notes will not be corrected (for grammar, spelling, etc.) nor will they be graded. But they must be handed in on the day we read the specific text and they constitute 10% of the final grade. Points will be deducted for Notes handed in late or not at all.

Please e-mail the Transcription Notes to me in the body of the mail -- not as attachments -- before the start of every class.

2. Oral Presentation 20%

The students (either on their own, or in couples) will choose one additional reading, marked with an asterisk (*), from the syllabus, and will present it in class (up to 20 minutes). Students will choose their readings by our second meeting (3.11). Students will email me a summary of their presentation up to three days (by Friday, 12:00 PM) before their class presentation.

3. Mid-Term Exam 30%

The mid-term exam covers material from part I, “Basic Concepts and Theories in Political Psychology”. The mid-term exam will consist of four questions.

4. Term Paper 40%

The term paper is intended to provide you with the opportunity to more fully explore your class discussion topic, as well as examine it from a more empirical perspective. The term paper from the beginning of the course through week 12, and it will consist of twelve research questions.
Week 2: Intergroup Relations (3.11)


Week 3: Threat Perceptions (10.11)


Week 4: Political Participation in Democratic Politics (17.11)


Week 5: Political Leadership & Decision-Making (24.11)


Ariely, Dan. 2008. Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions. Chapters 1 & 9. **Chapter 1 is summarized in this below TEDTalk**

Week 6: Religion and Ideology (1.12)


Week 7: Genetics and Neurobiological Revolution (8.12)

Week 8: Midterm Exam (15.12)

Part II – the Psychology of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Week 9: Intractable Conflict: Basic Concepts and Case Studies (22.12)

Week 10: Exposure to Political Violence and Terrorism (29.12)

Week 11: Emotions and Political Behavior (5.1)

Week 12: Peace Psychology (12.1)

*** Changes may occur, but they will be notified in advance***