

## POSC 203

## Political Psychology

Fall Term 1998

TTh 10:30-12:15

Sayl 253

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Office Hours TTh 1-2, 4:30-5:15  
F 10-12

In this course, we will examine the intersections of politics, on the one hand, and personality and social psychology on the other hand. We will explore the usefulness of psychological theories for conducting political analysis. We will investigate the role of the individual, of group processes, of political and social cognition, and of the political context in political decision-making by both leaders and the general public. We will address some of the following questions. As you do the assigned reading, keep these questions in mind.

**\*Personality and Political Leadership:** Do the personalities of political leaders affect the type and quality of their decision-making? Are certain kinds of leaders more dangerous than other types of leaders? If so, what is the nature of this danger, and under what circumstances does this danger emerge? Does the electoral process systematically select certain types of people for leadership positions? If so, has this selection process changed over time, and does it now select systematically for a different type of person than earlier in our history? If so, with what consequences?

**\*Group Processes and Elite Decision-making:** What group processes enhance good political decision-making? What group processes can interfere with good decision-making, and how can leaders adapt decision-making processes to minimize these effects? What is the role of a leader's personality in shaping and guiding group decision-making? Would it be better for individual presidents to make solitary decisions, or does a group process, on the whole, result in 'better' decisions?

**\*Political Cognition and Elite Decision-Making:** What role do individual differences in social and political perception play in elite decision-making? How do decision-makers employ historical analogies and broader metaphors when they decide the fate of nations? How do political events and experiences during one's formative years affect the analogies and metaphors one uses to understand the political arena? What are the political consequences of principles of information processing and cognition?

**\*Leadership Applications:** How does one take a specific example of decision-making and apply concepts from individual and group psychology to that particular set of decisions? We will focus on several important historical examples, particularly Vietnam, the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, Watergate, and the Iranian Hostage Crisis.

**\*Denial and Public Life:** Is our society characterized by punitive attitudes? If so, what are the sources of these attitudes? Are they rooted--at least in part--in harsh child-rearing attitudes, as some scholars have claimed? Do punitive practices within the family lead to authoritarian political attitudes and thus to unwise public policies in the United States? Do these practices create a syndrome, or personality structure, which is highly authoritarian in orientation? If so, does this

syndrome in turn fuel a politics of denial that prevents us from constructing wise policies to confront our persistent public problems?

**\*Authoritarianism and Public Life:** What is the role of authoritarianism and obedience in our politics? Is authoritarianism a personality predisposition? Is it a situation-induced set of attitudes and behaviors? How do authoritarians differ politically from non-authoritarians? Under conditions of perceived threat, do the latter behave differently than the former? Is authoritarianism increasing or decreasing in our public life?

**\*Malignant Political Aggression:** Are ordinary people quite capable of carrying out acts of terrible political aggression? Are certain types of people particularly predisposed to perpetrate atrocities? What is malignant political aggression, and what are the factors that precipitate it?

**\*Self Interest and Altruism in Political Life:** Is our country currently in the midst of a political era that overemphasizes individualism and selfish interests at the expense of a broader commitment to the common good and common interests? Do most citizens' political attitudes and actions reflect a narrow self-interest motivation? On the other hand, what is altruism? What are the causes and consequences of altruism, and what are its implications for politics? What are the factors that predispose individuals toward altruism? Are ordinary citizens capable of political altruism, or are only extraordinary people likely to engage in this type of extraordinary activity?

The required texts include: James David Barber, *The Presidential Character*; Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink*; Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War*; Rose McDermott, *Risk Taking in International Politics*; Ervin Staub, *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide*; Bob Altemeyer, *The Authoritarian Specter*; Kristen Renwick Monroe, *The Heart of Altruism*; and Michael Milburn & Sheree D. Conrad, *The Politics of Denial*.

Grades will be based on a midterm examination, a final examination, two take-home papers/essays, a video journal, and class participation. The examinations will be comprised of shorter and longer essay questions. The shorter essay questions will be of the "did you read it and do you remember it" variety. The longer essay questions will require you to integrate and analyze the concepts and theories studied. They will be of the "how well do you understand it" variety. Reading the assigned material closely will prepare you for the shorter essay questions. Writing the assigned take-home essays/papers and participating in class discussions will prepare you for the longer essay questions.

You are assigned to write on two out of six take-home essay questions. (See information at back of syllabus.) Be prepared to discuss the essay topics on the date they are due, whether or not you have chosen to write on that particular topic.

Class participation and video journals will also affect your final grade. Each time we view a video, you should write a two-page analysis, relating the major points of the video to the assigned readings. Information presented in the videos should be studied, understood, and critiqued just as the assigned readings are. You can and should refer to this information when writing your take-home essays, writing your examinations, and discussing topics in class.

### Reading Outline

Thursday September 10 Introduction to Political Psychology

Thursday September 17 Introduction to Psychological Approaches to Foreign Policy Decision-Making

**Read:** Barber, chs. 1-4, pp. 1-122; Khong, chs. 1-2, pp. 3-46; Janis, ch. 1, pp. 2-13; McDermott, chs. 1-2, pp. 1-44.

Tuesday September 22 JFK's Demise and Resurrection: The Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and Vietnam

**Read:** Janis, chs. 2 and 6, pp. 14-47, 132-158; Barber, ch. 11, pp. 341-385; Khong, ch. 4, pp. 71-96.

Tuesday September 29 LBJ's Demise: Vietnam

**Read:** Khong, chs. 3, 5-7, pp. 47-70, 97-205; Janis, ch. 5, pp. 97-130; review Barber on LBJ.

Thursday, October 1 Nixon's Demise: Watergate

**Read:** Janis, ch. 9, pp. 198-241; Barber, ch. 5, pp. 123-168.

Thursday October 8 Carter's Demise: The Shah and The Iranian Hostage Crisis

**Read:** McDermott, chs. 3-4, pp. 45-105; Barber, ch. 13, pp. 398-455.

Tuesday Oct 13 Political Character, Groupthink, Analogical Reasoning, and Prospect Theory: Conclusions

**Read:** Barber, ch. 15, pp. 484-492; Khong, chs. 8-9, pp. 209-264; Janis, chs. 8, 10-11, pp. 174-197, 242-276; McDermott, ch. 7, pp. 165-186.

Thursday Oct. 15 Midterm Examination

Tuesday October 20 Denial & Politics

**Read:** Milburn & Conrad, chs. 1-3, 5, 7, 9-10, pp. 13-71, 107-120, 145-165, 201-237.

Tuesday October 27: Authoritarianism

**Read** Altemeyer, chs. 1-5, 10-11, pp. 6-145, 235-308.

Thursday October 29 Obedience & My Lai

**Read:** Kelman & Hamilton, *Crimes of Obedience*, chs. 1-2, pp. 1-52; Janice Gibson and Mika Haritos-Fatouros, "The Education of a Torturer," *Psychology Today*, Nov. 1986, pp. 50-58.

Thursday November 5 Politics & Genocide

**Read:** Staub, chs. 1-11, 15, pp. 3-169, 232-245.

Thursday November 12: Altruism & Politics

**Read:** Monroe, chs. 1-5, 7, 10-11, pp. 3-118, 137-160, 197-238.

Tuesday November 17: Ordinary & Extraordinary Citizens and Politics

Final Examination: TBA