Government 1742: Psychology of International Relations

Spring 2025
Mon & Wed 10:30 - 11:45 AM
Classroom: Sever Hall 206
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Preliminary syllabus – contents may change (January 18, 2025)

Course description

This course explores the intersection of political psychology and international relations (IR). The Gov department offers lots of classes in IR, but most of them don't have very much political psychology in them; the Gov department also offers a number of classes relating to political psychology, but most of them don't have very much IR in them. This class is an effort to bridge that divide.

> Some of the questions we'll look at over the course of the semester include:
>
> - Why is the United States so good at fighting wars, but so bad at planning for what happens after the war ends?
>
> - How do leaders' previous experiences before coming to power shape how they behave once they're in office?
>
> - How do states decide when to take their adversaries' threats seriously?
>
> - Why are some territorial disputes so hard to resolve?
>
> - Are right-wing governments more likely to go to war than left-wing ones?
>
> - Is it worth going to war to maintain a reputation for resolve?
>
> - How do apologies work in international politics?
>
> - Can you tell someone's foreign policy preferences by looking at their face?

After an introductory class focusing mostly on logistics and a general overview of the class, we begin the semester by exploring the relationship between psychology and rationality, which we use as a launching pad from which to investigate the landscape of political psychology in international relations.

The first unit focuses on what loosely might be thought of as "cold", cognitive models of information processing: heuristics and biases, prospect theory, learning and updating from the past, and communicating through the use of signals. In contrast, the second unit focuses on what might generally be thought of as "hot", motivated models of decision-making: stereotypes and perceptions, as well as emotions, taboos, and indivisible issues, all of which emphasize the ways in which political judgments are affect-laden.

The third unit focuses on different dispositional theories and individual differences; personality, operational codes, values, and ideology. Historically, much of the work on personality and operational codes in IR has focused on the leader-level, while much of the work on values and ideology has focused on the mass public, but as the distinction between the study of elite and mass political behavior has begun to blur, these two weeks might be better thought of as exploring the ways that different types of actors systematically differ from one another more generally.

The fourth unit explores intergroup behavior in international relations: nationalism and social identity (how do individuals identify with and act as a part of groups?), reputation and status, reciprocity and revenge, historical memory, apologies, and collective victimhood, and the effects of violence, threat and political repression. Finally, we conclude with biological and evolutionary approaches to the study of international relations, which portray many of the above mechanisms in a new light.

Course lottery

This class is run like an honors class intended to combine the best parts of a lecture course (interesting course material!) with a seminar (a self-selecting group of students eager to engage with the course material in a much more interactive format). Enrollment is capped at 36 students, and is conducted via a lottery process (which, if demand for the class exceeds the number of seats, will prioritize students who have taken Gov 1790 before). There's a short survey in Qualtrics to fill out (click here for the link), which must be submitted by Tuesday, November 12 at 6 PM. We'll then conduct the lottery and release the results by Wednesday, November 13. Lotteried students will have until 12 PM on Thursday, November 14 to enroll, at which point we'll move onto students waitlisted in the lottery. Note that it's unlikely that we'll be able to accommodate enrollment requests from students who miss the lottery deadline. The class is also unable to accommodate auditors.

Should I take this class?

This class is an undergraduate lecture class version of a PhD seminar I teach on political psychology in IR. It differs from its predecessor both in that its reading list is much shorter, and that it tends to be more strictly focused on applications of psychological theories to questions of international security and foreign policy, although a handful of the readings here come from outside of IR/political science as well (just not as much as in the graduate-level version of the class).

There are no formal prerequisites, but because much of the reading list is designed to give you a sense of new work in the field, students who have prior exposure to IR will likely be better able to hit the ground running, and the enrollment lottery (described above) will prioritize students who have taken Gov 1790. If you've taken Gov 1790, you'll note that some of the readings here are a bit more advanced, but also that the assignment structure is very different (no midterms!) You don't need to have a prior background in psychology.

Technology

We'll be using two different platforms for the course, each for a different purpose.

Canvas

- The course website (https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/143202), which contains the syllabus and course readings.

- There are *no required texts to purchase* for this class; all readings are available electronically on the course website as PDFs.

Slack

- Used for all class communication and asynchronous participation/discussion about course material.

- The Gov 1742 Slack workspace has three channels:

  - `#announcements`. All class announcements will appear here. (e.g. if there's a logistical announcement about the class, I'll send an update about it in this channel).
  - `#general`. This channel is for general discussion about the course material.
  - `#readingresponses`. This channel is for the biweekly reading responses, which are part of the asynchronous participation grade.

- The link to the Slack workspace is accessible through Canvas.

If you have technical difficulties with any of these platforms, more detailed information is available via HUIT.

Course requirements and grading

25% Class participation (synchronous and asynchronous)

20% Assignment #1, due February 26, 2025

20% Assignment #2, due April 9, 2025

35% Final Exam: TBD

This is a lecture class, although thanks to its smaller size, it will incorporate more class discussion than a typical lecture; students should come to class having done the readings and ready to talk about them (which they'll receive even more of a chance to do in our weekly discussion section). There are also weekly discussion sections where you'll have additional opportunities to engage with the course material. This in-class participation, when combined with biweekly asynchronous participation (described below) will be worth 25% of the course grade. Note that this means attendance is expected (it's hard to participate in class if you aren't there!)

In addition to in-class participation, we'll also use the course's `#readingresponses` Slack channel for biweekly asynchronous participation. Starting on January 27, a short reading response prompt will be posted for the following week; students will be randomly assigned to complete *six responses* over the course of the semester. (This is different from Gov 1790, where students had to submit a response post each week). This will be a chance for you to ask questions, flag the parts of the material that was of the most interest to you, and help set the agenda for the discussion later that week.

Each student assigned to participate asynchronously in a given week will be expected to provide a short (e.g. 1 paragraph) reading response, as well as reply to another student's discussion post. In this sense, our asynchronous participation will better resemble dialogue than a monologue. In order to facilitate this dialogue, each initial response will be due by 9 PM on the Friday before each class meeting, and each reply will be due by 9 PM on the Sunday before each class meeting. Please treat discussions on Slack the same way that you would treat in-person interactions in class: engaging with one another other respectfully and constructively.

While 12.5% of the course grade comes from synchronous participation in class and 12.5% comes from asynchronous participation over Slack, asynchronous participation through Slack can also be supplementary to synchronous participation in class: students who may not be as comfortable speaking during class can make up for it by being more active in asynchronous participation over Slack, provided they have the preapproval of the instructor.

The class does not have any midterms. 40% of the grade comes from two 5-7 page written assignments (one due on February 26, and the other due on April 9), which will give you a chance to wrestle with the course material while pursuing topics relevant to your own interests.

- The first written assignment (due February 26) will give you a chance to dive deeper into one of the substantive topics discussed in Unit A (prospect theory, heuristics and biases, learning, and signaling) by exploring it in the context of a historical case or major foreign policy decision that interests you.

- In the second assignment (due April 9), you'll pick a world leader, past or present, and use one of the approaches we'll discuss in the beginning of Unit C to assess their personality, leadership style, or operational code from a distance.

More information about each written assignment will be made available a month before each assignment is due.

Finally, there will be a final exam in exam week (worth 35% of the final grade).

Collaboration and academic integrity policy

Discussion and the exchange of ideas are essential to academic work. For assignments in this course, you are encouraged to discuss the material presented in the course with your classmates. However, you should ensure that any written work you submit for evaluation is the result of your own research and writing and reflects your own approach to the topic. You must also adhere to standard citation practices in political science and properly cite any books, articles, websites, etc. that have helped you with your work. We specifically forbid the use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools for any written assignments in the class. Violations of this policy will be considered academic misconduct.

Special accommodations

Harvard has an office dedicated to students seeking accessibility accommodations, the Disability Access Office (DAO). They're happy to help with any accommodation requests you require. Students requesting academic accommodations are requested to present their letter from the DAO the second week of the semester. Failure to make these arrangements by this date may negatively affect our ability to implement the arrangements on time.

Key dates for the semester	
Wednesday, October 23	Crimson cart opens
Wednesday, November 6	Course registration opens
Tuesday, November 12 at 6 PM ET	Gov 1742 lottery form due (via Qualtrics)
Wednesday, November 13	Lottery results announced
Thursday, November 14 at 12 PM ET	Registration deadline for lotteried students to enroll in the class
Monday, January 27	First class meeting

About the readings

As the tentative schedule below shows, I've assigned two pieces per class (so, four pieces a week), which relate to one another in a variety of ways. The articles and book excerpts are substantively and methodologically diverse, covering a wide range of areas of security and foreign policy, but also utilizing a wide range of approaches: some are qualitative case studies, others use experiments, survey data, and so on. This means that if there's one reading about an area or using an approach you're less familiar with, fear not – chances are the others that week will be quite different. Sometimes I assign book excerpts – they might look longer, but are usually less dense than the articles, and are therefore faster reads than their page count would suggest. If you ever feel like you aren't being assigned enough reading – or just want to know more about a topic – you should feel free to check out the recommended reading lists in the graduate-level version of this class, available here.

You'll want to come to class each week having read all the articles, and ready to discuss. You should also feel free to ask clarifying questions about the reading in the #general channel on Slack – and feel free to help answer your classmates' questions in the channel as well, which can contribute to your asynchronous participation grade.

Tentative Class Schedule

Monday, January 27: Introduction to the class

The first class will consist of a general overview of the course and a discussion of course logistics, along with a summary of the different methodological approaches we'll be encountering in the course readings. For background material:

> Kertzer, Joshua D., and Dustin Tingley. 2018. "Political Psychology in International Relations: Beyond the Paradigms." *Annual Review of Political Science* 21: 319-339.

A. Rational choice and cognitive constraints

Wednesday, January 29 and Monday, February 3: Psychology and rationality

What does it mean to be rational? Are rationality and psychology opposites?

> Fearon, James. 1995. "Rationalist Explanations for War." *International Organization* 49 (3): 379-414.

> Lake, David A. 2009. "TRIPs across the Atlantic: Theory and epistemology in IPE." *Review of International Political Economy* 16 (1): 47-57.

> Elster, Jon. 2007. *Explaining Social Behavior: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*. 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." *International Organization* 71 (S1): S33-S60.

Wednesday, February 5: Prospect theory

How do actors make decisions in conditions of risk or uncertainty?

Levy, Jack S. 1992. "An Introduction to Prospect Theory." *Political Psychology* 13 (2): 171-186.

McDermott, Rose. 1998. *Risk-Taking in International Politics: Prospect Theory in American Foreign Policy*. University of Michigan Press, pp. 45-75.

Monday, February 10: Heuristics and biases

How do cognitive biases affect decision-making in foreign policy?

Kertzer, Joshua D., Marcus Holmes, Brad L. LeVeck, and Carly Wayne. 2022. "Hawkish Biases and Group Decision Making." *International Organization* 76 (3): 513-548.

Rapport, Aaron. 2013. "The Long and Short of It: Cognitive Constraints on Leaders' Assessments of "Postwar" Iraq." *International Security* 37 (3): 133-171.

Wednesday, February 12: Learning

How do leaders learn from history and their prior experiences?

Khong, Yuen Foong. 1992. *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu and the Vietnam Decision of 1965*. 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." *American Journal of Political Science* 64 (2): 416–431.

Wednesday, February 19: Signaling

How do leaders use signals to communicate with one another?

Schelling, Thomas C. 1966. *Arms and Influence*. 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." *International Studies Quarterly* 56 (3): 560-573.

B. Hot cognition and motivation

Monday, February 24: Perceptions

How do misperceptions lead to war?

McManus, Roseanne W. 2021. "Crazy Like a Fox? Are Leaders with Reputations for Madness More Successful at International Coercion?" *British Journal of Political Science* 51 (1): 275-293.

Duelfer, Charles A., and Stephen Benedict Dyson. 2011. "Chronic Misperception and International Conflict: The U.S.-Iraq Experience." *International Security* 36 (1): 73-100.

Wednesday, February 26: Stereotypes

How do stereotypes shape leaders' behavior?

Schwartz, Joshua A, and Christopher W Blair. 2020. "Do Women Make More Credible Threats? Gender Stereotypes, Audience Costs, and Crisis Bargaining." *International Organization* 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." *International Interactions* 46 (1): 1-27.

Monday, March 3 and Wednesday, March 5: Emotions

How do emotions shape decision-making?

Lerner, Jennifer S., Ye Li, Piercarlo Valdesolo, and Karim S. Kassam. 2015. "Emotion and Decision Making." *Annual Review of Psychology* 66: 799-823.

McDoom, Omar Shahabudin. 2012. "The Psychology of Threat in Intergroup Conflict: Emotions, Rationality, and Opportunity in the Rwandan Genocide." *International Security* 37 (2): 119-155.

Monday, March 10: Indivisible issues

Why are some territorial disputes so hard to resolve?

Fiske, Alan Page, and Philip E. Tetlock. 1997. "Taboo Trade-offs: Reactions to Transactions That Transgress the Spheres of Justice." *Political Psychology* 18 (2): 255–297.

Goddard, Stacie E. 2006. "Uncommon Ground: Indivisible Territory and the Politics of Legitimacy." *International Organization* 60 (1): 35-68.

C. Elite and Mass-Level Dispositions

Monday, March 24 and Wednesday, March 26: Personality and operational codes

How do leaders' personalities and predispositions matter in international politics?

Caprara, Gian Vittorio, and Michele Vecchione. 2013. "Personality Approaches to Political Behavior." In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, 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." *International Studies Quarterly* 65 (3): 825-837.

Renshon, Jonathan. 2009. "When Public Statements Reveal Private Beliefs: Assessing Operational Codes at a Distance." *Political Psychology* 30 (4): 649-661.

Walker, Stephen G., Mark Schafer, and Gary Smith. 2020. "The Operational Codes of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton." In *Oxford Handbook of Behavioral Political Science*, ed. Alex Mintz and Lesley Terris. Oxford University Press.

Monday, March 31 and Wednesday, April 2: Values and ideology

How do moral judgments structure foreign policy preferences? How do political ideologies lead actors to fight?

> Kertzer, Joshua D., Kathleen E. Powers, Brian C. Rathbun, and Ravi Iyer. 2014. "Moral Support: How Moral Values Shape Foreign Policy Attitudes." *Journal of Politics* 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." *Comparative Political Studies* 54 (13): 2321-2353.

> Jost, John T. 2017. "Ideological Asymmetries and the Essence of Political Psychology." *Political Psychology* 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." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63 (4): 950–975.

D. Social identity and intergroup relations

Monday, April 7 and Wednesday, April 9. Nationalism and social identity

Does being a part of a group make us want to fight? When does nationalism lead to war?

> Gries, Peter Hays. 2005. "Social Psychology and the Identity-Conflict Debate: Is the "China Threat" Inevitable?" *European Journal of International Relations* 11 (2): 235-265.

> Nugent, Elizabeth. 2020. "The Psychology of Repression and Polarization." *World Politics* 72 (2): 291-334.

> Bertoli, Andrew D. 2017. "Nationalism and conflict: Lessons from international sports." *International Studies Quarterly* 61 (4): 835–849.

> Powers, Kathleen E. 2022. *Nationalisms in International Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp 1-31.

Monday, April 14 and Wednesday, April 16: Reputation and status

How does reputation matter in international politics? When do actors fight for status?

> 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." *World Politics* 73 (1).

> Renshon, Jonathan. 2016. "Status Deficits and War." *International Organization* 70 (3): 513-550.

> Barnhart, Joslyn. 2016. "Status Competition and Territorial Aggression: Evidence from the Scramble for Africa." *Security Studies* 25 (3): 385-419.

Monday, April 21: Reciprocity and revenge

Are wars fought for revenge? Does vengeance matter in democratic foreign policies too?

Souleimanov, Emil Aslan, and Huseyn Aliyev. 2015. "Blood Revenge and Violent Mobilization: Evidence from the Chechen Wars." *International Security* 40 (2): 158–180.

Stein, Rachel. 2015. "War and Revenge: Explaining Conflict Initiation by Democracies." *American Political Science Review* 109 (3): 556-573.

Wednesday, April 23. Historical memory and apologies

How do our collective memories of the past affect our ability to work with one another in the present? Can apologies overcome prior transgressions?

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." *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 16 (4): 351–374.

Imhoff, Roland, Micha'l 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." *Political Psychology* 38 (6): 907–924.

Monday, April 28. Legacies of violence

What effect does exposure to conflict and the threat of violence have on our psychology?

Getmansky, Anna, and Thomas Zeitzoff. 2014. "Terrorism and Voting: The Effect of Rocket Threat on Voting in Israeli Elections." *American Political Science Review* 108 (3): 588-604.

Lupu, Noam, and Leonid Peisakhin. 2017. "The Legacy of Political Violence across Generations." *American Journal of Political Science* 61 (4): 836-851.

Wednesday, April 30. Conclusion