Syllabus Spring 2012

Personality & Emotion in Political Attitude Formation & Behavior

Département Science Politique et Relations Internationales
Université de Genève

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Meeting Time: Thursday 10.15-12 am
Meeting Room: Uni-Mail M 1140
Instructor: Catherine E. De Vries
Office: Uni-Mail, 4th floor, room 4266
Telephone: 022-3798380
Email: catherine.devries@unige.ch
Office Hours: Tuesday 9.30-11 am, or by appointment
Course Website: http://dokeos.unige.ch

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Clearly the student of politics must know somehow the facts about the soul, as the man who is to heal the eye or the body as a whole must know about the eyes or the body.
– Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics 1102a

In recent years, we are witnessing a growing interest among students of public opinion and political behavior in the psychological underpinnings of citizens’ attitudes and decision-making processes. While for many years rationalist models stressing utility maximization have been dominant within the study of political behavior, more psychological approaches challenge some of the core assumptions of rational choice theory and attempt to come to grips with the fact that voters often lack the capacity (or will) to make (fully) informed choices which are in line with their key preferences. These latter models highlight that voters often do not consider (or are aware of) the full palate of alternatives or range of decision criteria when making up their minds about politics or when choosing who to vote for. This course ties onto these recent psychological contributions to the field of political behavior, and singles out two approaches which have recently gained much prominence: one based on emotions, the other on personality characteristics.

The scientific study of emotions and personality, which has dominated social psychology for many years now, provides new and exciting insights into how voters acquire political opinions and preferences, how stable and certain these attitudes are, and how people update and evaluate them over time. In addition, emotions and personality characteristics may also provide novel insights into how voters translate these political preferences into behavior, and may therefore complement or perhaps even contrast existing explanations that stress rationality. This course aims to familiarize students with several core themes within this ongoing study of emotions and personality in political behavior. It is important to highlight that this course sets out to explore and critically reflect upon the possible contribution of emotions and personality based approaches for understanding political attitude formation and behavior rather than to present an in-depth inquiry into the neuro-psychological basis of both topics. Consequently, we will mostly review literature stemming from the field of political psychology.

The course covers a range of important topics within the study of emotions and personality. The first part of the course is dedicated to the study of emotions, while the latter half deals with personality characteristics. In the case of emotions, we will first review key theoretical contributions addressing the scientific leverage of research into emotions for political science generally, and the field of political behavior specifically. Next, we turn our attention to debates regarding the role of emotion in information processing, and cover topics such as “affective intelligence” or “hot cognition”. In the second part of the course we review current work on the impact of personality characteristics in political attitude formation and behavior. First, we will shortly review work distinguishing different personality types, and how these might be important for understanding preferences and behavior in politics. Subsequently, we will review the recent book by
Mondak (2010) showing how personality exactly shapes political behavior.

As might be expected for questions as broad and complex as these, while there is much we currently know, many debates are still open. The objective of this course is to weigh the available evidence – both descriptive and inferential – to arrive at the fullest possible understanding of how emotions and personality shape political behavior. Although many examples will come from the United States, we will also aim to apply the different approaches to specific developments in Western Europe.

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

This course is a Master level reading and discussion seminar. All students are expected to have done the required reading before each seminar, and come to class with a willingness to critically reflect on the readings. Since some of the readings may be fairly challenging at times, having multiple people contribute through class discussion and questions about difficult topics will help everyone’s understanding of the material. Participating in class also demonstrates that you have done the reading. For these reasons, a grade for classroom participation will be given. Considering that we have 10 classes that will last two hours, everyone should have ample opportunity to participate. One absence during the semester upon prior notification via email is granted.

In this course there will be no final exam. Instead, grading is based on classroom participation (20 %), a presentation (30 %), and two response papers (50 %). The presentation should provide a short and concise summary (maximum of 15 minutes) of the week’s readings, and should serve as a basis for in-class discussion. The two response papers are meant to survey and compare the readings of the week. These written assignments should highlight the central themes and points of disagreement in the literature, and pose any potentially important but unanswered questions. Students will sign up on the first day of class for the weeks in which they will prepare a presentation, or write a response paper. The response papers should be handed in via email on the Monday afternoon (3 pm at the latest) after the class in which the readings were discussed. The response papers should be between 3,000 and 4,000 words in length, and should follow the usual formatting, and citation requirements of research papers. More information on the format of the presentation and response papers will be provided during the first week of the course.

Students are expected to follow the honor code of the Université de Genève at all times, particularly with respect to issues of honesty and attribution. Instances of suspected academic misconduct will be handled strictly in line with University policy (see Art. 63 of the Loi sur l’Université).

**REQUIRED TEXTS**

In a field like political behavior in which the topics addressed are broad in nature, and thus defy easy summary, major contributions are, and will likely be made, in books. That is not to say that shorter academic journal articles are not important, we will read many of them, but we will also focus on one book as well as several book chapters throughout this course. We will be reading significant portions of the following book:


This book can be ordered via Amazon.com. In addition, we will read a variety of texts that are available online (see course website). Articles and/or book chapter that are not available online are made available through the course website.
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<tr>
<th>Session 1:</th>
<th>Introduction: Emotions &amp; Personality in Politics</th>
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<tr>
<td>February 23</td>
<td><strong>Some Less Scientific Stuff To Start With</strong></td>
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<td>Personality: <a href="http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/handy-psychology-answers/201101/the-psychology-politics">http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/handy-psychology-answers/201101/the-psychology-politics</a></td>
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<td><strong>Optional Reading</strong></td>
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<th>Session 2:</th>
<th>Conceptualizing Emotions in Political Behavior</th>
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<tr>
<td>March 1</td>
<td><strong>Required Reading</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Optional Reading</strong></td>
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<th>Session 3:</th>
<th>The Role of Positive Emotions</th>
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<tr>
<td>March 8</td>
<td><strong>Required Reading</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Optional Reading</strong></td>
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**Session 4:**
**March 15**

**The Role of Negative Emotion**

*Required Reading*


*Optional Reading*


**Session 5:**
**March 22**

No Class

**Session 6:**
**March 29**

**Emotions & Political Sophistication**

*Required Reading*


*Optional Reading*


**Session 7:**
**April 5**

**Personality in Political Behavior**

*Required Reading*


*Optional Reading*

None.

**Session 8:**
**April 12**

No Class

**Session 9:**
**April 19**

No Class
Session 10:  
April 26  
The Big Five Approach

Required Reading

Optional Reading

Session 11:  
May 3  
Personality & Political Attitudes

Required Reading

Optional Reading


Session 12:  
May 11  
No Class

Session 13:  
May 17  
No Class

Session 14:  
May 24  
Personality & Political Behavior

Required Reading

Optional Reading