

Politics: Personality and Individual Differences – Fall 2022

Aarhus University

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Contents/Description:

Why is there so much disagreement in politics? Why can't we all just look at the evidence and come to the same, reasonable conclusions? One possibility is that many of our divisions emerge from more fundamental differences in our psychological makeups – in who we are.

In this course we will look at the ways individuals differ and where those differences come from. To what extent are these differences biological in nature, or a result of our upbringing or some combination? Most importantly for us, we will try to understand the political implications of these differences.

Political psychologists have created and studied many measures of individual difference. In this course we will cover a variety of them, from purely psychological measures of personality, to cognitive style, to more political measures which straddle the line between personality and values.

There are many ways one's nature can influence political outcomes. We will look at both direct and indirect models of impact, as well as evidence that individuals are predisposed to have different political reactions to the same phenomena. Although we are beginning to develop more complex understandings of these relationships, this is still an emerging field of study, and therefore we will highlight uncertainties, gaps, and areas for new lines of research.

We will also explore the nuts-and-bolts of this field. Just how good and reliable are these psychological measures we use? How were they developed and can they be improved? These questions will be the subject of many of the seminar activities. This will help you get a better understanding of the research you are consuming, in addition to experience with the practical concerns guiding researchers.

Course goals:

- The student should be able to understand the purpose and focus of the different measures of individual difference discussed in the course.
- The student should be able to understand and explain the purported major political impacts of these measures of individual difference, both direct and indirect.
- The student should be able to evaluate the evidence for those relationships.
- The student should understand how these measures are developed and tested, as well as the practical concerns that researchers face when using them.
- The student should be able to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of these different measures, when applied to political questions.

Books used:

- Mitchell, K. J. (2020). *Innate: How the wiring of our brains shapes who we are*. Princeton University Press.
- Mondak, J. J. (2010). *Personality and the foundations of political behavior*. Cambridge University Press.

Both books are available as free e-books through the library's website. Please contact me if you have trouble finding them.

A quick note on the exercises below:

This all may change! I have my current ideas below about what I think will be good and useful for everyone, for developing an understanding of the course content, learning certain skills, and preparing you all for the final exam. However, we will see what works and what doesn't and the plan may therefore change. I will also ask for your input about what you are enjoying and find useful and your responses may affect my plans.

A quick note on readings:

I will expect you to do all the assigned readings before class. Some weeks I may send out specific reading questions for us to discuss in class. If I do, I'll expect you to have prepared responses to them.

Class 1 – Background – (29 August)

In this class we'll introduce some of the foundational concepts for this course, touching on neuroscience, psychology, and genetic inheritance. We will also consider why these individual differences exist.

Required readings:

- Innate, chapters 1-5 (99 pages)
- Buss, D. M. (2009). How can evolutionary psychology successfully explain personality and individual differences?. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 4(4), 359-366. (8 pages)

Exercise:

This week we won't have an exercise. Instead, we will get to know each other a bit, and what our expectations for the course are. We will also discuss what you all may believe coming into this class.

Class 2 – The Big Five: Part I – (5 September)

We'll start our discussion of the big five in this class. We will consider its origin and usage. What should we make of this trait-based approach? We will also start thinking about some models for how personality could relate to political attitudes.

Required readings:

- Personality and the Foundations..., chapters 1-3 (91 pages)

Exercise:

Let's deconstruct the lexical approach to personality and simulate a factor analysis by hand. Well, something like it.

Class 3 – The Big Five: Part II – (12 September)

In this class, we'll go over some main relationships between the big five and political attitudes and behavior.

Required readings:

- Personality and the Foundations..., chapters 5-6 (60 pages)

Exercise:

Today you'll take some big five tests. We'll discuss the different tests and in the next class I'll go over some results.

Class 4 – Can you predict political beliefs from childhood personality? – (26 September)

How much can we infer from a child's behavior? Can we predict what you will believe about politics just by knowing your personality as a kid? What can genetics tell us? How should we, more generally, think about a direct relationship between personality and political attitudes?

Required readings:

- Block, J., & Block, J. H. (2006). Nursery school personality and political orientation two decades later. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 40(5), 734-749. (16 pages)
- Wegemer, C. M., & Vandell, D. L. (2020). Parenting, temperament, and attachment security as antecedents of political orientation: Longitudinal evidence from early childhood to age 26. *Developmental psychology*, 56(7), 1360. (12 pages)
- Hatemi, P. K., & Verhulst, B. (2015). Political attitudes develop independently of personality traits. *PloS one*, 10(3), e0118106. (24 pages)
- Dawes, C. T., & Weinschenk, A. C. (2020). On the genetic basis of political orientation. *Current opinion in behavioral sciences*, 34, 173-178. (6 pages)

Exercise:

TBD.

Class 5 – Nazis! – (3 October)

In the wake of the Second World War, researchers had two opposing, but not mutually exclusive agendas. Some researchers wanted to understand how regular people could do horrible things. Other researchers wanted to understand who would be drawn to the ideologies behind these horrible things. This is a good way for us to consider situationism.

Required readings

- Martin, J. L. (2001). The authoritarian personality, 50 years later: What questions are there for political psychology?. *Political Psychology*, 22(1), 1-26. (26 pages)
- Kandler, C., Bell, E., & Riemann, R. (2016). The structure and sources of right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation. *European Journal of Personality*, 30(4), 406-420. (15 pages)
- Feldman, S. (2003). Enforcing social conformity: A theory of authoritarianism. *Political psychology*, 24(1), 41-74. (34 pages)
- Haslam, S. A., & Reicher, S. (2007). Beyond the banality of evil: Three dynamics of an interactionist social psychology of tyranny. *Personality and social psychology bulletin*, 33(5), 615-622. (8 pages)

Exercise:

Today we'll take some different tests of authoritarianism and discuss what we think of them. In the next class we'll go over some of the results.

Class 6 – In-group/Out-group and Immigration (populism?) – (5 October)

How might the big five and authoritarianism relate to populism, prejudice, and immigration attitudes?

Required readings:

- Bakker, B. N., Schumacher, G., & Rooduijn, M. (2021). The populist appeal: Personality and antiestablishment communication. *The Journal of Politics*, 83(2), 589-601. (13 pages)
- Sibley, C. G., & Duckitt, J. (2008). Personality and prejudice: A meta-analysis and theoretical review. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 12(3), 248-279. (32 pages)
- Peresman, A., Carroll, R., & Bäck, H. (2021). Authoritarianism and immigration attitudes in the UK. *Political Studies*, 00323217211032438. (18 pages)

Exercise:

In groups, let's come up with research questions about the relationships between the big five and authoritarianism.

Class 7 – Opposing models of threat sensitivity – (10 October)

Today we'll consider two opposing models from the authoritarianism literature for what happens to individuals when they feel threatened. How could this be resolved? Or is one of these models just plain wrong?

Required readings:

- Feldman, S., & Stenner, K. (1997). Perceived threat and authoritarianism. *Political Psychology*, 18(4), 741-770. (30 pages)
- Hetherington, M., & Suhay, E. (2011). Authoritarianism, threat, and Americans' support for the war on terror. *American Journal of Political Science*, 55(3), 546-560. (15 pages)
- Velez, Y. R., & Lavine, H. (2017). Racial diversity and the dynamics of authoritarianism. *The Journal of Politics*, 79(2), 519-533. (15 pages)

Exercise:

In groups, you'll go through one of the articles from the suggested readings for next session. Start working on a presentation on it (which you'll continue working on outside of class) to be presented in the next session.

Class 8 – Are conservatives a bunch of wimps? Some criticism – (24 October)

Following up on the last session, are conservatives so conservative because they're a bunch of whiny cowards? Afraid of or disgusted by every little thing? Let's see what the evidence says.

Required readings:

- Johnston, C. D., & Madson, G. J. (2022). Negativity bias, personality and political ideology. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 6(5), 666-676. (11 pages)
- Bakker, B. N., Schumacher, G., Gothreau, C., & Arceneaux, K. (2020). Conservatives and liberals have similar physiological responses to threats. *Nature human behaviour*, 4(6), 613-621. (9 pages)
- Ruisch, B., Boggs, S. T., Moore, C., Samayoa, J. G., Ladanyi, J., Steinert, S., & Fazio, R. (2021). Investigating the Conservatism-Disgust Paradox in Reactions to the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Critical Reexamination of the Interrelations between Political Ideology, Disgust Sensitivity, and Pandemic Response. (41 pages)
 - Can be found at: <https://psyarxiv.com/yn23v/>

Suggested readings:

- Aarøe, L., Petersen, M. B., & Arceneaux, K. (2020). The behavioral immune system shapes partisan preferences in modern democracies: Disgust sensitivity predicts voting for socially conservative parties. *Political Psychology*, 41(6), 1073-1091. (19 pages)
- Oxley, D. R., Smith, K. B., Alford, J. R., Hibbing, M. V., Miller, J. L., Scalora, M., ... & Hibbing, J. R. (2008). Political attitudes vary with physiological traits. *science*, 321(5896), 1667-1670. (4 pages)
- Hibbing, J. R., Smith, K. B., & Alford, J. R. (2014). Differences in negativity bias underlie variations in political ideology. *Behavioral and brain sciences*, 37, 297-307. (11 pages)

Exercise:

Present the articles from the suggested readings – which you started working on in last class.

Class 9 – Are extremists mentally ill? – (31 October)

What explains extremists? Maybe they're mentally ill. Today we'll look at some research in this area and discuss the topic more generally. We'll also discuss mental illness from a genetic point of view.

Required readings:

- Innate, chapter 10 (32 pages)
- Gill, P., & Corner, E. (2017). There and back again: The study of mental disorder and terrorist involvement. *American Psychologist*, 72(3), 231. (11 pages)
- Weenink, A. W. (2015). Behavioral problems and disorders among radicals in police files. *Perspectives on terrorism*, 9(2), 17-33. (17 pages)
- Melle, I. (2013). The Breivik case and what psychiatrists can learn from it. *World Psychiatry*, 12(1), 16-21. (6 pages)

Exercise:

In groups, you'll go through some potential diagnoses in the current DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders). What do you think of them?

Class 10 – Media usage – (7 November)

Let's explore some of the (limited) research into the relationships between personality and media usage. How does the media fit into our model of personality's effect on politics? We'll also discuss whether we think the current media environment increases the impact of personality.

Required readings:

- Personality and the Foundations..., chapter 4 (30 pages)
- Arceneaux, K., Gravelle, T. B., Osmundsen, M., Petersen, M. B., Reifler, J., & Scotto, T. J. (2021). Some people just want to watch the world burn: the prevalence, psychology and politics of the 'Need for Chaos'. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, 376(1822), 20200147. (9 pages)
- Peresman, Adam. (2022). Individually Informed: Personality, news consumption, and affective polarization. Working Paper. (42 pages)
 - Available on my website: adamperesman.com
- Xu, X., & Peterson, J. B. (2017). Differences in media preference mediate the link between personality and political orientation. *Political Psychology*, 38(1), 55-72. (18 pages)

Exercise:

TBD.

Class 11 – Intelligence – (14 November)

There has not been much research into the role intelligence plays in political attitudes or behavior. We'll discuss why we think that may be. We'll also discuss some research which has been done. What questions remain?

Required readings:

- Innate, chapter 8 (28 pages)
- Ludeke, S. G., & Rasmussen, S. H. (2018). Different political systems suppress or facilitate the impact of intelligence on how you vote: A comparison of the US and Denmark. *Intelligence*, 70, 1-6. (6 pages)
- Oskarsson, S., Cesarini, D., Dawes, C. T., Fowler, J. H., Johannesson, M., Magnusson, P. K., & Teorell, J. (2015). Linking genes and political orientations: Testing the cognitive ability as mediator hypothesis. *Political Psychology*, 36(6), 649-665. (17 pages)

Exercise:

In groups, you'll look for research which links intelligence with the proxies we'll be discussing in the next session. Each group will focus on one proxy.

Class 12 – Proxies for intelligence (maybe) – (21 November)

Although there hasn't been much research into intelligence, there's been a lot of research into phenomena which could conceivably relate to intelligence. In today's class we'll discuss some of these approaches.

Required readings:

- Ksiazkiewicz, A., Ludeke, S., & Krueger, R. (2016). The role of cognitive style in the link between genes and political ideology. *Political Psychology*, 37(6), 761-776. (16 pages)
- Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. G. (2019). Lazy, not biased: Susceptibility to partisan fake news is better explained by lack of reasoning than by motivated reasoning. *Cognition*, 188, 39-50. (12 pages)
- Tappin, B. M., Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. G. (2020). Rethinking the link between cognitive sophistication and politically motivated reasoning. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*. (20 pages)

Exercise:

Present your group findings from last week about the relationships between these proxies and intelligence.

Class 13 – Gender differences – (28 November) **DRAFTS OF SYNOPSES DUE TODAY**

Is there such a thing as a male brain or a female brain? What differences in personality may exist? How might this be relevant for politics? Could other things help explain any differences between men and women and their views on politics?

Required readings:

- Innate, chapter 9 (33 pages)
- Mac Giolla, E., & Kajonius, P. J. (2019). Sex differences in personality are larger in gender equal countries: Replicating and extending a surprising finding. *International Journal of Psychology*, 54(6), 705-711. (7 pages)
- <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/12/opinion/gender-gap-politics.html>
 - (5 pages)

Exercise:

In groups, use the GSS explorer to look for gender differences in political preferences. What do you find (or not find)?

Class 14 – Overselling or underselling? – (5 December)

For the final class I want us to consider the extent to which we might be overselling or underselling the role these individual differences play. How might we critique this research approach? What are some ways forward?

Required readings:

- Bakker, B. N., Lelkes, Y., & Malka, A. (2021). Reconsidering the Link Between Self-Reported Personality Traits and Political Preferences. *American Political Science Review*, 115(4), 1482-1498. (17 pages)
- Bakker, B. N., & Lelkes, Y. (2018). Selling ourselves short? How abbreviated measures of personality change the way we think about personality and politics. *The Journal of Politics*, 80(4), 1311-1325. (15 pages)
- Inglehart, R. F., & Norris, P. (2016). Trump, Brexit, and the rise of populism: Economic have-nots and cultural backlash. (53 pages)

Exercise:

Group feedback on your draft synopses.

Total required pages: 977 pages