The Biology of Politics
Fall 2016
Monday & Wednesdays, 11:00am - 12:15pm

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Course Description

Why do we participate in politics? Who tends to participate? Why do individuals have the political attitudes they do? These questions are central to the study of politics. Political scientists have traditionally focused on factors such as demography, socioeconomic status, mobilization, electoral institutions, parental socialization, and social norms to answer these questions. However, scholars have recently begun to explore the possibility that biological differences may, at least in part, help to explain individual differences in political attitudes and behavior. This course explores the relationship between biology and political behavior with an emphasis on how the two may be linked.

The goal of this course is to provide students with an introduction to the theoretical arguments employed by scholars studying the biological basis of political behaviors and attitudes as well as the findings that have been reported by this growing literature. Along with theories from political science, we will touch on concepts from genetics, neuroscience, psychophysiology, psychology, and evolutionary theory. The course will also expose students to the methodological techniques employed by researchers doing empirical work in these fields. Finally, we will critically evaluate this research agenda and discuss how it may contribute to the future study of politics.

Prerequisites

There are no prerequisites for the course (successful completion of an introductory statistics course would be helpful). The course will be taught from the perspective that students are not familiar with the biological concepts being covered so no advanced knowledge of biology or genetics is required.

Readings

The required text for the course is Predisposed: Liberals, Conservatives, and the Biology of Political Differences by John Hibbing, Kevin Smith, and John Alford. The book is in the
bookstore.

Additional weekly reading assignments (listed below) will be posted on Classes (or available for download from sources NYU has access to). Each week I will also send (via Classes Announcements) links to short news articles and/or blog posts that are related to the topics we will be covering in class. These readings are also required and will be part of class discussion.

**Office Hours**

I will hold office hours Mondays from 9:00am - 11:00am in room 325 at 19th West 4th Street. If you need to schedule a time to meet outside of the schedule office hours, please email me (cdawes@nyu.edu).

**Grades**

Your grade will be based on a midterm, 3 short “discussion” papers, a research paper, class participation, and a non-cumulative final exam. Relevant (tentative) dates are listed in the Course Schedule below.

*Discussion papers:* We will engage in three student-led discussions over the course of the semester about topics designed to provoke thought about challenging and sometimes controversial issues. For each of those discussions, you will be asked to write short papers 1-2 pages in length (double spaced). The short papers will be due at the end of class on the discussion days. I will provide instructions and readings for the class discussions separately.

*Research Paper* The goal of the research paper is to complete a literature review and describe a research design for a topic related to the course that may be of interest to you. The research paper will make up 20% of your grade. While you are not required to conduct any data analysis, I encourage you to do so (it is fun!). If you choose to do so, you can shift 5% of your final grade from your final exam grade to your paper grade. Research topics must be approved by me at least two weeks before the paper is due.

*Class participation:* You will be graded based on your participation in discussion of the assigned readings.

Late assignments will reduced by 5% per day. Make-up exams will not be available for students who fail to provide advanced notice, nor for students without an acceptable explanation and, if necessary, documentation.

Grades will be computed as follows:
- Midterm 25%
- Short papers 15% (5% each)
- Class participation 10%
- Research paper 20%
- Final Exam 30%
Course Schedule

Please be aware that this list of readings, days of readings, and topics may change slightly. I will announce changes in class giving you sufficient advanced warning. Each topic will begin with an introduction designed to make sure students are familiar with key theoretical and methodological concepts. Following these lectures students will be exposed to research using these concepts and tools to explain political behavior.

Introduction

Wednesday (9/7)

No assigned reading

Monday (9/12)

Politics across Generations: Family Transmission Reexamined
Why Do People Vote?

Why Biology?

Wednesday (9/14)

Predisposed Chapter 1
The Anatomy of Politics (also listen to the podcast)

The Twin Design

Monday (9/19)

Predisposed Chapter 7 (about twins)
Twin Study Primer (Psychology Today)
Twin Studies: What Can They Tell Us About Nature and Nurture?

Wednesday (9/21)

Are Political Orientations Genetically Transmitted?
Genetic Variation in Political Participation

Monday (9/26)

Twin Studies of Political Behavior: Untenable Assumptions?
Sources of Human Psychological Differences: The Minnesota Study of Twins Reared Apart
Pre-Birth Factors, Post-Birth Factors, and Voting

Identifying Genes

Wednesday (9/28)

Predisposed Chapter 7 (about genes)
What is a ‘Gene’ and Why Does it Matter for Political Science
Monday (10/3)
In Defense of Genopolitics
The Fourth Law of Behavior Genetics
The Genetic Architecture of Economic and Political Preferences

Wednesday (10/5)
GWAS of 126,559 Individuals Identifies Genetic Variants
Genome-wide Association Study Identifies 74 Loci Associated with Educational Attainment
The Genetics of Success

Monday (10/10)
Fall recess (no class)

Gene-Environment Correlation and Interaction

Wednesday (10/13)
Gene-Environment Interplay for the Study of Political Behaviors
Friendships Moderate an Association

Monday (10/17)
Guest lecture: Dalton Conley (Princeton University)

Class Discussion #1

Wednesday (10/19)
See Classes folder for readings

Personality

Monday (10/24)
_Predisposed_ Chapter 4
The Secret Lives of Liberals and Conservatives
The Big Five Personality Traits in the Political Arena

Wednesday (10/26)
Left or Right? Sources of Political Orientation
The Role of Cognitive Style in the Link Between Genes and Political Ideology
The Relationship between Genes, Psychological Traits, and Political Participation

Research Design and Midterm Review

Monday (10/31)
No assigned reading
**Midterm Exam (Wednesday 11/2)**

**Attention**

Monday (11/7)

*Predisposed* Chapters 5
Applying the Flanker Task to Political Psychology

**Psychophysiology**

Wednesday (11/9)

The Mind-Body Connection
Political Attitudes Vary with Physiological Traits
Physiological Arousal and Political Beliefs
News, Politics, and Negativity

**Class Discussion #2**

Monday (11/14)

See Classes Folder for readings

**Neurocognitive Correlates**

Wednesday (11/16)

*Predisposed* Chapters 6
Neurocognitive Correlates of Liberalism and Conservatism
Political Orientations Are Correlated with Brain Structure in Young Adults

**Research Topic Due (Wednesday 11/16)**

Monday (11/21)

Guest lecture: Hannah Nam (Stony Brook University)

Wednesday (11/23)

Thanksgiving recess (no class)

**Hormones**

Monday (11/28)

Hormones and Politics
Dominance, Politics, and Physiology
When Endocrinology and Democracy Collide
Partisan Identification as a Predictor of Cortisol Response to Election News
Evolution
Wednesday (11/30)

*Predisposed* Chapter 8
The Ancestral Logic of Politics
Social Welfare as Small-Scale Help

**Research Paper Due (Wednesday 11/30)**

Evaluating Candidates
Monday (12/5)

Inferences of Competence from Faces Predict Election Outcomes
Looking the Part
Winning Faces Vary by Ideology
Voice Pitch Influences Voting Behavior

Mating
Wednesday (12/7)

The Politics of Mate Choice
The Politics of Beauty: The Effects of Partisan Bias on Physical Attractiveness
Assortative Mating on Ideology Could Operate Through Olfactory Cues

Disgust Sensitivity
Monday (12/12)

Conservatives are More Easily Disgusted than Liberals
Disgust: A Predictor of Social Conservatism and Prejudicial Attitudes Toward Homosexuals
Disgust Sensitivity and Public Demand for Protection

Class Discussion #3
Tuesday (12/13)

See Classes folder for readings

Future Directions & Wrap Up
Wednesday (12/14)

*Predisposed* Chapter 8

**Final Exam (Monday 12/19 10-11:50am)**