

**INSTRUCTORS: Bedriye Kolemen and Laura Moyer**

## **THE PSYCHOLOGY OF POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING**

### **COURSE OBJECTIVE:**

How do you make your decisions? Do you understand and consider all the factors before you make a decision? What do you base your decisions on when you do not have enough information, or when there is too much information? Do you think you are a fair person? Do you trust your judgment? Would you call yourself rational? Do you think you can be easily manipulated? Is it possible that you are hardwired to make systematic errors in your judgment and decisions? You probably are, like the rest of your classmates and the rest of humanity. In a complex world, we all rely on shortcuts to process information and make decisions. These heuristics allow us to navigate through life, but they also lead us to make consistent and systematic errors. These errors, which are known as cognitive biases, are very difficult to overcome even when we are aware of them. Similarly, we are open to social influences in our decision-making. Cognitive biases and social influences affect our decisions on the most important issues as well as trivial ones. Often, experts are just as prone to falling prey to them; neither bureaucrats nor politicians are immune to making these mistakes. Consequently, these errors play a substantial role in political decision-making.

The main objectives of this course are as follows:

1. To help the students develop the skills to distinguish facts from opinions and erroneous logic.
2. To introduce the students to the messy realm of cognitive biases in political decision-making and demonstrate how these biases affect politics and public opinion.
3. To help them develop the skills to recognize and overcome these decision-making heuristics and cognitive biases.

### **WEEKLY CLASS PLAN:**

Since our knowledge of decision-making heuristics and cognitive biases is derived largely from psychological experiments, we will make extensive use of in-class experiments and simulations throughout the semester to better understand our own cognitive biases. We will cover a different topic in political science in conjunction with a different set of cognitive biases each week. We will follow the below format every week:

#### **Day 1:**

The class will be divided into four teams. These teams will receive separate assignments every week. Every group will be asked to compile a list of facts on a specific aspect of the assigned topic before the first class. Once in class, each group will present their facts. A debate will follow this presentation. The class will be divided into two groups and each group will be asked to defend one side of the issue. During this debate, expression of subjective opinions will be strictly forbidden. Students can recite only facts to make their case. When a student expresses an opinion, others will raise a warning card and keep the debate opinion-free.

#### **Day 2:**

Students will be assigned opinion pieces on the same topic for the second hour of the week. These readings will contain certain cognitive biases. First, we will have a small experiment/simulation in class to demonstrate how these biases operate. Second, we will explain the experiment and the type of cognitive biases in question and provide examples. Third, students will be asked to combine your newly acquired knowledge of these biases with the facts we gathered on the topic and identify the cognitive biases in the readings. A discussion of the readings will follow.

### **Day 3:**

Students will turn in a political speech or article that contains the cognitive biases of the week at the beginning of this class. After several randomly selected students briefly present the pieces they found, we will pick and discuss one of them with the class. Our discussion will focus on whether this cognitive error is used as a tool to manipulate the readers or the writer is making a genuine cognitive error herself.

This course relies heavily on assignments, student participation and teamwork for learning. You will be asked to prepare an assignment for each class as the weekly plan explains. However, reading assignments are minimal. In fact, you will be asked NOT to read on cognitive biases prior to class. This is absolutely crucial for the success of our simulations and experiments in class.

### **TERM PAPER:**

Please pick one cognitive bias and describe in detail how it has influenced one or more historical political decisions.

### **GRADING**

Weekly assignments: 40%  
Term Paper : 50%  
Participation : 10%

### **TOPICS:**

#### **WEEK 1**

**Prospect Theory/Electoral Campaigns**

#### **WEEK 2**

**Anchoring and Adjustment/Foreign Aid**

#### **WEEK 3**

**The Perception of Randomness/ Conspiracy Theories**

#### **WEEK 4**

**Correlation, Causation, and Control/ Immigration**

**WEEK 5**

**Attribution Errors and Self-Fulfilling Prophecies/Racism**

**WEEK 6**

**Group Think /Cold War**

**WEEK 7**

**Conformity and Minority Influence/Social Movements**

**WEEK 8**

**Probability and Risk/Terrorism**

**WEEK 9**

**Representativeness/Public Opinion**

**WEEK 10**

**Availability/ Media**

**WEEK 11**

**Overconfidence/ Separation of Powers**

**WEEK 12**

**Cognitive Dissonance/Ideology**

**WEEK 13**

**Memory and Hindsight Biases/Voting**

**WEEK 14**

**Context Dependence/General Topic**