using principles and theories from both psychology and political science to understand and predict people’s political opinions, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Political thought and behavior play an important role in determining leaders and how leaders will think and behave. Political psychology attempts to apply scientific principles to better understand these processes. Although this entry presents only the smallest of glimpses into a very limited sample of what political psychology has to offer, it is hoped that the reader will gain an insight into the topics that political psychologists explore and the tools with which they conduct their research.

Areas of Research

As suggested by the definition, political psychology is a vast area of study, encompassing research and theory from a wide variety of other academic disciplines. As such, space limitations make it impossible to discuss all or even most of the areas of study. However, much of the field can be distilled into several important subareas.

Individuals

One area of interest to political psychologists is the prediction and understanding of the political thoughts and behaviors of typical citizens. Much research, for example, has investigated what factors contribute to the choices that people make they vote. Some of the most basic research has investigated the relation between demographics and vote choice, focusing on how, for example, age, race, gender, and household income predict vote choice. Other research has focused on how membership in groups such as political parties, trade unions, and religious organizations can be used to predict vote choice. Still other studies have investigated how a person’s stances on political issues such as abortion, taxes, and welfare can predict the candidates for whom he or she will vote.

But voting is only one example of political behavior. Consider the fact that some citizens immerse themselves in the political world, learning a great deal about candidates for political races, donating time and money to their preferred candidates, and never missing an election. Others, however, seem not to care, remaining ignorant of the political world in which they live, unaware of the candidates running for election
and rarely if ever taking part in the political process. The study of why people do or do not participate in the political process is another individual-level phenomenon that has garnered much research. For example, some research has investigated how a person’s demographics predict political participation, learning that, for example, older people, people of higher income, and people of higher education are more likely to participate. Other research has shown that psychological phenomena such as emotions, feelings of threat, or a perception of a personal stake in an issue can lead a person to participate.

Still other research has explored how political campaigns can influence individuals’ political thoughts and behaviors. Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar, for example, have studied the effects of attack advertisements on individuals. They argue that such negative messages can make individuals become more extreme in their political ideologies and, at the same time, make them less likely to vote. Other research has investigated how campaigns are influenced by, for example, media coverage of candidates and issues relevant to the campaign, the amount of money spent on the campaigns, and the state of the economy during the campaign.

**Leaders**

Whereas some political-psychological research focuses on the typical citizen, other research instead attempts to understand the political leader. Margaret Hermann has argued that to gain insight into what makes a good leader requires understanding several important aspects of the leader and his or her surroundings. The first of these aspects is the context around the leader. For example, one type of leader might be best for a country during years of peace, whereas another type of leader might be best for the same country during wartime. The second aspect is to understand the characteristics and behavioral traits of the leader. For example, Alexander George proposed that some U.S. presidents have shown a formalistic style of leadership in which decisions are made in a highly organized structure, other presidents have shown a competitive style in which power is distributed though conflict and bargaining, and still other presidents have shown a collegial style in which teamwork and interaction are valued. The third of Hermann’s aspects is to understand the leaders’ constituencies and the relations between the leader and the constituents. Simply stated, certain groups of people may be best led by certain leaders. Thus, by understanding the context, the leader, and the constituents, one may be able to predict the success or failure of a given leader.

**Intragroup Processes**

Many political psychologists focus on groups and, in particular, how groups come to make decisions. Although it seems logical that groups of people would come to make more accurate decisions than they might otherwise make individually, this is often not the case. For example, Irving Janis found evidence that, in certain circumstances, groups can be driven more to come to a consensus that keeps members of the group satisfied than to come to an accurate decision that may offend or anger members of the group. Janis termed this phenomenon *groupthink*, suggesting that many of history’s worst decisions can be explained in part by its processes, such as the decision to carry out the Bay of Pigs invasion. In a similar vein, David Myers and Helmut Lamm found evidence that members of groups tend to hold more extreme opinions and make more extreme choices when thinking about and discussing options than when formulating such opinions and choices alone. This phenomenon, called *group polarization*, has also garnered much attention by political psychologists.

**International Relations**

Another area of political psychology deals with understanding nations and countries. One area of study on international relations examines what makes international conflict possible. For example, Jim Sidanis and his colleagues have argued that part of the reason that nations go to war is because of social dominance: that those societies who have disproportionately high resources and power want to maintain this social inequality and will go to great lengths—including waging war—to do so. Others, like Urie Bronfenbrenner, have suggested that enemy nations have negatively distorted images of each other and that these false images can lead to mutual aggression and mistrust. Still other research has investigated other aspects of international relations, such as prejudice, treaties, conflict resolution, alliances, and terrorism.
Methodologies

Because political psychologists attempt to understand myriad political processes at many different levels of analysis, they use a wide range of research techniques to do so.

Surveys

Often, research devoted to understanding individual-level phenomena is conducted using surveys, a technique in which participants provide their opinions, thoughts, and beliefs about various issues, people, and objects. Some surveys are conducted in a respondent’s home in a face-to-face format. Others are conducted by telephone, using random-digit-dialing techniques to ensure proper sampling. Other techniques include mail surveys and surveys conducted online. Political psychologists have made especially extensive use of data from the National Election Study surveys, which have been conducted every 2 years since 1948. Participants in these surveys provide a wealth of data about themselves, including their demographics, their political ideologies, and their thoughts and feelings about various candidates, political issues, political parties, public officials, and more.

The Experimental Method

To determine causal relations between variables, political psychologists conduct research using the experimental method. Randomly assigning respondents to conditions and manipulating variables allows such hypotheses of causality to be tested. Although surveys are often conducted using the experimental method, political psychologists often conduct elaborate experimental research that collects data in a way that surveys cannot.

Case Studies

Rather than examining data collected from groups of people like surveys and experiments do, case studies examine one single data point in its naturalistic setting. Thus, instead of learning what a relatively large sample of people think or feel about a particular issue, a case study might examine how decisions made by a person or a group of people during a particular crisis either alleviated or worsened the situation.

Content Analysis

When conducting content analyses, political psychologists examine archived writings and speeches to understand a political phenomenon. Such content analyses can be useful in, for example, distilling a former president’s personality from his state of the union addresses, or understanding the main differences between two political parties on an issue by examining transcripts from relevant debates.

George Y. Bizer

See also Group Polarization; Groupthink; Leadership; Social Dominance Orientation

Further Readings


