

Chapter 1

Two Conceptual Schemes or Distinctions

What we know (or think we know) about political behavior is changing rapidly, mostly because our understanding of how the brain itself works and how the mind and body affect one another is being transformed. Our popular conception of the supposed "rationality" of human beings—in which our actions are the outcome of conscious thought and deliberation, and where such rational thought trumps (or ought to take precedence over) "wayward" emotions—has been popular at least since the eighteenth century. It has long had an instinctive appeal with philosophers and the person in the street alike. But it is increasingly being challenged by advances in neurobiology and neuroscience, building in a more and more radical way on a critique which began in earnest with the birth of psychology as a field in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

As the cognitive linguist George Lakoff points out, this standard view of human decision-making is very much a product of a historical period we commonly term "the Enlightenment." During the eighteenth century, "reason" triumphed over "tradition." In politics, monarchies were increasingly replaced by republics (and later liberal democracies) in the West, and religion was challenged by science and secularism. Although this period of human history certainly represented a great advance on what had gone before, Lakoff suggests, it had one major downside: it saddled us with a way of thinking about human reasoning and decision-making that we now know to be misleading. We implanted a vision of ourselves as highly reasoned and rational, but modern cognitive science and political psychology fundamentally challenge that. "Most of us think we know our own minds. This is because we engage in conscious thought, and it fills much of our waking life," Lakoff notes.

But what most people are not aware of, and are sometimes shocked to discover, is that most of our thought—an estimated 98 percent—is not conscious. It is below the level of consciousness. It is what our brains are

doing that we cannot see or hear . . . Your brain makes decisions for you that you are not consciously aware of.¹

We may *feel* as if we are rational beings, but advances in neuroscience are challenging our understanding of ourselves and the extent to which we “know our own minds.” In particular, the idea that emotion is not usually a destructive force but actually essential to reasoned decision-making is beginning to take hold in the study of political psychology. As Rose McDermott puts it:

Most of us are taught from early on that logical, rational calculation forms the basis of sound decisions . . . we assume that emotions can only interfere with this process . . . But what if we were wrong about the general impact of emotion on decision making? What if, most of the time, emotion serves a productive function, providing the foundation for swift and accurate decision making? What if emotion assumed equal, or even primary, status in generating choice?²

We will have more to say about this transformation in our understanding of behavior later on, especially when we discuss the topics of emotion and neuroscience in more depth. But for now we should note that this radical critique ultimately calls into question the notion that we are even conscious agents making choices, and challenges the notion that we can somehow divorce feelings and emotions from decision-making. More broadly, this point about how we commonly *assume* that human beings make decisions and how they actually *do* gives rise to the first distinction that we’ll use in this book, between what are commonly called *Homo economicus* and *Homo psychologicus*. It is also rather useful, I shall suggest, to distinguish between two more general approaches to understanding political behavior, *situationism* and *dispositionism*; in other words, is our behavior most often a product of the situations in which we find ourselves, or do our basic predispositions about the world fundamentally shape the ways in which we react to it? We’ll take each conceptual distinction in turn.

Homo Economicus and Homo Psychologicus (or “Econs” and “Humans”)

Traditionally, psychology has provided only one set of approaches to understanding what drives political behavior, for the development of modern political science has been influenced by economics as well. At present, two models of decision-making still dominate our thinking about political behavior,

Table 1.1 A summary of the features of the *Homo economicus* and *Homo psychologicus* models

Homo economicus

- Humans are fully rational actors.
- They possess perfect information.
- Derived from microeconomics.
- Actor maximizes “subjective utility.”
- Actor weighs up the costs and benefits of various actions.
- He/she then selects the option that delivers the greatest benefits relative to cost (optimal choice).
- Actors update their beliefs when new information becomes available.

Homo psychologicus

- “Boundedly rational” actor.
- Actors do not possess perfect information.
- There are limits to human beings’ processing abilities.
- Derives from social and cognitive psychology, and from neuroscience.
- Actor “satisfices” instead of maximizes utility.
- He/she employs various cognitive short cuts in order to manage “information overload” or a shortage of information.
- Actors fail to update their beliefs, even when new information becomes available.
- Group and broader social pressures may lead the actor to behave in non-rational ways, even contrary to his/her beliefs and values.

one derived from economics, the other derived from psychology. Each is summarized in Table 1.1.

One point of contention between the two views is that while the *Homo economicus* model holds that actors update their views when new information becomes available, *Homo psychologicus* maintains that they very often do not. One classic approach within the latter camp that we’ll discuss later in the book is called “cognitive consistency” theory, and it’s especially well illustrated by the Marian Keech story, which shows what typically happens “when prophecy fails.” During the early 1950s, the psychologist Leon Festinger infiltrated what we would nowadays call a religious cult. Its leader, “Marian Keech”—her name was changed in Festinger’s book to protect her identity—was predicting that the world would soon come to a cataclysmic end, and she specifically predicted that this would happen on December 21, 1954. She also prophesied (rather dramatically) that a flying saucer would pick up the “true believers” the day before, thus saving them from the devastation which would befall the “sinners” who remained.

Many members of the group had a lot to lose if Keech’s prediction was wrong; they had sold their houses and given up their jobs and their savings in preparation for the coming of the space ship. But for Festinger, this scenario

represented a godsend. He knew that the prophecy would fail, and he was thus presented with a golden opportunity to observe how people react psychologically when a prediction in which they ardently believe turns out to be untrue. Unlike them, he knew that the flying saucer would never show up. How would they handle the news, though? What would they do? In the event, when the saucer failed to show, Keech (conveniently) had a new “vision from God” shortly before 5am on the 21st, saying that “everyone was saved.” The group members then rationalized away the evidence that they had been wrong all along, and for some the saucer’s non-appearance even *strengthened* their belief in the cult! While it would be easy to dismiss the members of the group as mad or unhinged, Festinger’s view was that this incident actually illustrates a very common and very normal psychological tendency.³ While *Homo economicus* suggests that we just update our beliefs when our theories are disconfirmed, Festinger argued that in reality we usually just find a way to ignore or discount dissonant information. We bring things back into balance, in other words, by coming up with some sort of psychologically comforting rationalization or excuse.

Homo economicus—often referred to simply as “rational choice” or the “rational actor” approach—constitutes a somewhat popular approach to the understanding of political behavior. However, it is not (at least in the author’s view) properly considered an approach to political psychology. Although there has long been talk of combining the psychological and economic approaches somehow to construct a single unified theory, no one has so far succeeded in doing so. Certainly, there have been efforts by rational choice theorists in particular to make their assumptions more realistic, but the great strength of *Homo economicus* is arguably that it provides a way of simplifying human behavior in a way designed to make the latter more or less predictable. Many economists use it as a set of simplifying assumptions in the *full knowledge* that these assumptions are not realistic, but utilize them nevertheless in the expectation that they will generate powerful models and predictions. As soon as the complexity and greater realism of *Homo psychologicus* is conceded, however, it becomes clear that much of human behavior is idiosyncratic and unpredictable. In any case, the remainder of this book focuses on the latter model, and though *Homo economicus* will frequently be referred to in what follows, it will mainly be used as a foil to *Homo psychologicus*. Unlike the former, political psychology as a field is highly empirical: it is concerned with describing and explaining how political agents actually do behave, and not primarily with how they ought to, or with making simplifying assumptions about reality.⁴ As we shall see, however, there is a great deal of disagreement among political psychologists as to what that reality looks like.

It’s worth pointing out here that *Homo economicus* is even being challenged within economics *itself*, by a field of that discipline which its advocates call behavioral economics (and increasingly by advocates for “neuroeconomics” too). The term “behavioral” is significant here; it is a reference to the fact that some economists have become disenchanted with making unrealistic assumptions about how people might (or ought to) behave, wishing to focus instead on how they really do behave and drawing on *Homo psychologicus* in doing so. One pioneer of this subfield, Richard Thaler, often distinguishes between what he calls “Econs” and “Humans.”⁵ “Econs” are logical, consistent, and fully rational; their preferences do not change, and they act in selfish ways to obtain what they know they want. “Humans,” on the other hand, are far less rational, often act in selfless (rather than selfish) ways, and are not at all sure what they want or what they will do. Paradoxically, then, there is at least one branch of Economics nowadays which does not follow the teachings of *Homo economicus*.

“My Brain Made Me Do It”

Until very recently, the critique of *Homo economicus* has been inspired mostly by the perspective of the cognitive psychology of the 1970s and 1980s. In recent years, though, that critique has been much further developed—as we have already noted—by discoveries within neuroscience or the study of the human brain. Neuroscience has uncovered further ways in which individual decision-makers depart from pure rationality. For instance, it has been discovered that much reasoning is undertaken by the *unconscious* brain, long before we are ever aware of “making” a decision. Some experiments have been conducted which suggest that a quarterback’s unconscious brain “knows” that he is going to throw the ball to the left (or right) side of the field *before he does*, or that the brain of a soccer player taking a penalty knows that he will kick the ball to (say) the right side of the goal, before he is consciously aware of having made that decision. It has also been found that we don’t necessarily know what our own preferences are before making a decision, and that those preferences can be altered by purely presentational factors.

These findings actually predate the widespread availability of MRI machines. In the 1980s, Benjamin Libet and his colleagues hooked his subjects up to an EEG machine—a device which measures brain activity—and asked them to simply raise their finger at a time of their own choosing. Using a timer, the subjects were asked to push a button at the exact moment they decided to move. Libet and his colleagues found that there was a slight delay between consciously deciding to move and actually doing it. No surprise there. But they also found something a lot more astonishing: the brain wave patterns of

subjects showed that the brain became active more than a second before the subjects became aware of actually making any decision. This experiment has been replicated countless times using slightly different scenarios, but in each case the results have been essentially the same: the brain appears to “know” what we are going to do, even before we become aware of making the choice. Some replications even put the time lag (before we are consciously aware of our decision) at as much as seven seconds. This has sparked a long-running debate about legal responsibility and free will. Can we really be “guilty” of something, if we never made a conscious decision? This remains unresolved at the time of writing, but what is clear about this experiment is that our unconscious brains are up to something long before we are actually aware of it.⁶

Another indication of the power of unconscious thinking is that when we actually do become aware of something—for instance, when we deliberately think about performing an action, like walking downstairs—it actually becomes harder to do than if we did it on auto pilot. Jonah Lehrer refers to this phenomenon as “choking on thought.” He gives the example of an otherwise outstanding opera singer, Renee Fleming, who became convinced that she was going to make an error in a passage of Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro*.⁷ Despite having successfully sung that portion hundreds of times before, she became unable to perform it because she could no longer “let go” and simply sing the passage without thinking about it. There is, in other words, such a thing as “thinking too much,” and this too may be a reflection of the fact that much of what we do is done unconsciously. We will have more to say about this topic when we discuss the subjects of emotion in Chapter 10 and neuropolitics in Chapter 11.

Situationism and Dispositionism

In early 2004, the world was shocked by the publication of revolting images depicting the torture and humiliation of detainees by American soldiers at the now infamous Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Ironically, the prison had been used for years to house anyone whom Iraq’s former dictator Saddam Hussein considered a potential enemy or threat to his power, and countless Iraqis had undergone agonizing torture and/or summary execution there. And now here were the representatives of the United States, supposedly Iraq’s liberator, engaging in human rights abuses, and capturing it on film. More than anything else, perhaps, the pictures did most to undermine America’s legitimacy in Iraq early on. After numerous investigations, narrowly confined to the lowest level of the chain of command, seven individuals were eventually put on trial for the abuses committed at Abu Ghraib.

In *The Lucifer Effect*, social psychologist Philip Zimbardo argues that the scandal at Abu Ghraib—in which ordinary, psychologically “normal” prison guards tortured and humiliated Iraqi prisoners—was in large part a result not of the characteristics of the individuals themselves, but of the strong situational forces they faced.⁸ As Zimbardo puts it, he was “shocked but not surprised” by the horrors of Abu Ghraib when the scandal erupted in May 2004, as dramatic images of prisoner abuse spread around the world via television and the internet:

The media and the “person in the street” around the globe asked how such evil deeds could be perpetrated by these seven men and women, whom military leaders had labeled as “rogue soldiers” and “a few bad apples.” Instead, I wondered what circumstances in that prison cell block could have tipped the balance and led even good soldiers to do such bad things. To be sure, advancing a situational analysis for such crimes does not excuse them or make them morally acceptable; rather, I needed to find the meaning in this madness. I wanted to understand how it was possible for the characters of these young people to be so transformed in such a short time that they could do these unthinkable deeds.⁹

A famous practitioner in the field of political psychology, Robert Jervis, uses the example of people sitting in a burning building to illustrate situationism in relation to political behavior, and we can readily adapt this for our own purposes.¹⁰ Suppose that a classroom in which you are sitting erupts spontaneously into flame. Or if this is too much of an imaginative stretch, imagine that someone has dropped a lighted cigarette, and the rather cheap, flammable carpeting in the room soon catches fire.¹¹ It becomes obvious that the whole room will burn to the ground, or that we will all die of smoke inhalation if we remain where we are. We all make speedily for the exit.

Do we need to study individuals and their particular characteristics to explain behavior in this instance? It seems not. The character or structure of the situation itself determines our actions. If we don’t run for the exit, we shall meet with a very unpleasant death, most of us long before our time. We hadn’t planned on going out this way, and we’ll be damned if we sit around and let it happen. This approach to understanding human behavior is sometimes paired with the assumption of *rationality*, which assumes that human behavior is regularized and predictable. Because most of us at a minimum correctly perceive that we have an interest in self-preservation, we will accordingly leave the room before the flames engulf us.

At least some scenarios in human life are like the burning building example, in the sense that they leave relatively little leeway for human choice. Even in

this example, though, there is at least some room for variation. For instance, if there are two exits to the room, what psychological characteristics affect the choice of one or the other? More interestingly, some of us may leave in an orderly fashion, while others may literally clamber over their classmates in a mad struggle to get out. Do moral concerns for others disappear in the stampede for the exits, or is this kind of situation one that brings out a basic nobility in some? Some (hopefully the professor, for instance) might adopt a leadership role, trying to organize the departure and maybe looking around for a fire extinguisher. On the other hand, at least one member of the class may be so depressed at his or her prospects of passing the course that he or she actually chooses to remain in the room in order to “end it all.” Less flippantly, some people actually do run *into* burning buildings. Many firemen and policemen lost their lives on September 11, 2001, selflessly attempting to rescue others from the burning World Trade Center. If the situation is everything, why does human behavior vary like this?

These are all quibbles in the sense that they don’t challenge the fundamental assumption that most of us, most of the time, will move speedily to the exit. There is a more telling objection, though. Most scenarios in politics actually cannot be meaningfully described as “burning buildings,” in the sense that they allow far more leeway for choice than the extreme example just given; this is so even in a situation of dire threat to the security of a nation, where everyone agrees that the “building” is in fact on fire. In real-life politics, the choices available are rarely so clear-cut as the issue of whether one exits a room, and the ambiguity of the situation is such that reasonable individuals very often disagree as to the proper course of action. As Jervis suggests, in politics there is often profound disagreement as to whether the room *is even burning at all*.¹²

Zimbardo’s handy distinction between “the apple” and “the barrel” provides a useful way of explaining what we mean by the terms *situationism* and *dispositionism*, a distinction which is going to be critical to the rest of the book. Were the appalling events at Abu Ghraib caused by “bad apples,” or was the barrel itself turning the apples inside it rotten? In that book, situationism is defined as an approach in which the environment or situation that surrounds the individual—in Zimbardo’s terms, “the barrel”—is considered most important in shaping an actor’s behavior; dispositionism, on the other hand, is defined as an approach in which the individual actor—his or her beliefs, values, and personality, or “the apple” in Zimbardo’s parlance—are considered most significant in this respect. We can think of behavior as driven by *internal* causes (dispositions) or *external* causes (situations), or of course by some combination of both. Within the situational camp there are various forms of external causes that are held to shape behavior, from the position our country occupies within

the international system to the immediate social roles we play in our daily lives. Inside the dispositionist approach, a diversity of approaches as to what causes the behaviors of individuals—their neurobiologies, genetic predispositions, knowledge structures, beliefs, personalities, and so on—are present as well. We will use this simple distinction to explain and contrast a variety of psychological theories of relevance to an understanding of politics, and then show how these can be used to explain genocide, voting behavior, racism, nationalism, conflict between states, and a variety of other political behaviors.

The distinction between dispositional and situational factors as forces acting on behavior has long been central to social psychology, and it continues to be utilized by major scholars in that field today.¹³ Social psychologists usually come down on the situationist side of the debate. Most of us, on the other hand, are instinctive dispositionists. We like to think that *who* we are—what we believe about the world and the kind of personality we have—exerts a fundamental impact on our behavior. Our political and legal systems largely just assume that this is so, holding us primarily responsible for our actions.¹⁴ We tend to recoil from the view presented by much research in social psychology, which suggests that (for most people, at least) the character of the situation we are facing—*where* we are—matters more than our *own* characters to a greater extent than we could ever imagine. And we like to think that our political behaviors—how we vote, what form our political participation takes, how tolerant we are, and so on—are shaped by who we are as well. But is this true? This is the central question this book poses and the issue around which the organization of the book revolves.

One interesting thing to note is that this kind of distinction between the individual and his or her environment appears in practically every discipline which analyzes social behavior. In political science and especially in the subfield of international relations, a distinction is drawn between “levels of analysis” or “agents” and “structures.”¹⁵ International relations theory reflects a division between dispositionists (especially those who study the psychological aspects of foreign policy decision-making) and situationists (including neorealists like Kenneth Waltz and neoliberals like Robert Keohane). In the analysis of foreign policy, situationist theories do exist, but have been drawn mostly from organizational theory rather than social psychology.¹⁶ In economics, there is a common distinction made between macro- and microeconomics (the latter examining the economics of the individual business or firm, the former the workings of the whole economy). In sociology, history, and other disciplines, there has long been a similar debate between those who believe that individuals drive events and those who counter that situational forces are more critical.

A second interesting point is that political psychology has drawn mostly from the dispositionist side of the mother discipline of psychology. As Rose

McDermott notes, much political psychology—at least as conventionally defined as an academic “discipline”—operates at the individual level of analysis,¹⁷ or is dispositionist in the sense that it assumes that individual actors “matter” and that their behavior can be traced to meaningful differences in our beliefs and personalities. Nevertheless, a large body of work within social psychology is far more hospitable to situationism than it is to dispositionism. Research on the ways in which social situations can shape behavior has had less impact on the development of political psychology than have Freudianism and modern cognitive psychology, each of which studies the human mind (though in rather different ways). Moreover, it is not always acknowledged in literature on political psychology that the findings of social psychologists like Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo among others—though profoundly political in their implications—depart significantly from the idea that individual attributes are critical in shaping an individual’s behavior. The reasons for this are unclear, but we shall spend a good half of this book looking at prominent situationist arguments that attempt to explain some fundamental aspects of political behavior.

A third interesting thing to note about approaches which argue that individuals do make a difference take two basic but sharply different forms which should be contrasted with one another. One perspective, often but not always rooted in arguments which make use of behavioral genetics or evolutionary psychology, claims that all human beings are born “hard-wired” with inherited dispositions which are essentially *the same*. The well-known classical “realist” Hans Morgenthau, for instance—offering a rather dark view of human nature which drew upon the tradition of Hobbes and Machiavelli—argued that human beings are characterized by what he called the *animus dominandi*, or the desire to accumulate power. The persistence of war throughout human history, he claimed, can be attributed to human nature or the fact that man’s basic predispositions never change, and we are essentially stuck with this stubborn trait and have to work with it as best we can.

As we shall see in Chapter 4, Stanley Milgram (in what was mostly a situationist argument) also used this kind of approach to claim that we are born with certain predispositions already built in. He speculated that, via natural selection, obedience to hierarchical authority had conferred evolutionary advantages upon the human race. He thus used an element of dispositionism to try to explain what he saw as the “inherent” human tendency to obey. Similarly, Dominic Johnson’s argument about overconfidence in war—something we often term hubris—relies on the claim that overconfidence has conferred similar advantages.¹⁸ According to Johnson, human beings have developed an evolutionary bias towards overconfidence, an enduring trait which he terms “positive illusions.” Although it is inappropriate in the modern world—indeed,

it can be highly destructive—this bias may have been encouraged initially by natural selection because it offered advantages to our ancestors (maximizing our chances of survival and our fighting abilities, for instance).

It is important to note, however, that many dispositionist approaches explicitly *do not* make this kind of “dispositions-are-the-same-for-everyone” type of argument. Indeed, the notion that all neurobiological approaches to politics (or “biopolitical” perspectives) must inevitably assume that we are all the same or that human beings inherit more-or-less identical genetic traits is one of the biggest mistakes or misconceptions which people have about the field. In their book *Predisposed: Liberals, Conservatives, and the Biology of Political Differences*, John Hibbing, Kevin Smith, and John Alford react sharply against the kind of situationism inherent in the arguments of people like Zimbardo and Milgram, but they also disagree markedly with the claim that we all share the *same* dispositions:

Predispositions . . . can be thought of as biologically and psychologically instantiated defaults that, absent new information or conscious overriding, govern response to given stimuli . . . a final critical and often misunderstood element of predispositions is that they are not equally present in all people. Just as the content of the predisposition varies from person to person, so too does the degree to which a predisposition is present at all.¹⁹

Drawing on neuroscientific and biopolitical approaches, they argue that “liberals” and “conservatives”—in the sense that those terms are used in an American political context—quite literally perceive different worlds when they look at the same stimuli or situations, and that these differences can be traced to identifiable neurobiological traits. We will return to this topic in Chapter 11, “Biopolitics, Neuropolitics, and Genopolitics,” but for now you should note that both genetic and neurobiological approaches allow for very significant variations in people’s dispositions.

Finally, it is important to realize that the distinction between dispositionists and situationists is *not* exactly the same thing as, or directly equivalent to, the rather more familiar “nature versus nature” debate.²⁰ When the first edition of this textbook came out, some students at my own university instinctively reacted in just this way. “Aha, the nature versus nature debate!” they cried. In fact, though, the situationist–dispositionist dispute is a bit finer grained in the way we will use those terms in this book. The nature versus nurture debate—a very old one in both philosophy and psychology—focuses on the extent to which behavior is *genetically inherited*, or derived from learning, the situation, or the environment. While Plato (for instance) suggested that certain things are inborn or genetically inherited, John Locke on the other side of the debate

believed in the *tabula rasa*, which suggests that the mind starts out as a blank slate (a key argument of the behaviorists, as we'll see in Chapter 3). According to this view, everything we believe or do is the result of learned experience (a response to a variety of situations, in other words). But these kind of genetic arguments are only *one* way that one can make a dispositionist argument in political science, and dispositionism is not at all restricted to genetics. It is possible that we start out as blank slates, for instance, and that we develop predispositions early in life which are in some sense a reaction to situations. But then these can be so enduring that once they come about, they can *persist* throughout our lives. In other words, we need not assume that there is anything genetic or inherited about human beings at all, and still end up being a dispositionist. And of course, two individuals can react in an entirely different way to the same situation, which also leads us to focus on the dispositions within us in explaining behavior.

To save confusion, it is most helpful to think of the situationist–dispositionist debate as one which is waged between advocates of *internal* and *external* causes. In other words, this is really a dispute about whether a person's behavior is driven by the external situation or by his or her internal predispositions (which can vary a great deal). Of course, it can be hard to tell in practice (looking from the outside) which drives behavior in a particular case. "If Beth is a mean, aggressive person to others because her sister beat her up as a kid," Fiske and Taylor ask, "is the cause of her current behavior internal or external?"²¹ My problem when the scheme we will use in this book is presented to them. A pure situationist would argue that *nearly everything* is ultimately situational. In other words, our cognitive structures—the mental categories we use to make sense of the world—are the product of experience. Many if not all of our dispositions are presumably the result of the situations we have been through. To continue Fiske and Taylor's example, there is a sense in which Beth's behavior is situationist in so far as it derives from circumstances she faced in the past. On the other hand, the root of Beth's behavior might be hard-wired, in the sense that aggression might plausibly be rooted in all of us as human beings. Or there might be a great deal of variation between Beth and her friends; perhaps some people are born aggressive, while others are not. These latter arguments are unambiguously dispositionist.

The Ingrained Nature of Political Behavior

This is a book about political behavior, so it makes sense to be very clear at the outset what this term means. Broadly defined, political behavior refers to any type of activity designed to meet some political or broadly strategic end. It

encompasses the full range of political activities in which we engage, from extreme behaviors like terrorism and war to more "mundane" behaviors such as the act of voting or joining a local meeting. It includes the study of decision-making—both by voters and by elites in government—but is broader than this. It also encompasses questions as diverse as "why does racism occur?," "why do human beings engage in genocide?," "what determines how people vote?," and "why do states go to war?" As you will see in what follows, there are different ways of answering these questions. Some follow the logic of economics in assuming that human beings are fundamentally rational, weighing up the costs and benefits of various actions available to them, while others are inspired by the social or group focus of sociology. Still others draw on cognitive neuroscience or genetics. Political psychologists, therefore, offer only one set of answers to questions like those posed above. Nevertheless, the purpose of this book is to show how compelling such answers can be.

As Aristotle famously noted, man (and woman) is "a political animal." Hatemi and McDermott put it rather nicely in their edited volume of that name:

Politics occurs when siblings expect parents to arbitrate fights and when lovers argue. Politics encompass much of what people think of as "gossip" when they talk about who did what to whom and why. And politics are certainly brought to bear when we think about the performance of any coalitional groups, including sports teams, police and fire departments and terrorist cells.²²

There appears to be something deeply ingrained about politics and political behavior. And there is a growing recognition, as we shall see in this book, that explaining why we do what we do requires an understanding not only of traditional political science, but of history, psychology, sociology, biology, physiology, ethology, and behavioral genetics as well.

Even though politics is something in which humans routinely engage—indeed, we cannot help "being political" much of the time—it is not a *uniquely* human form of activity, for there is a great deal of evidence that our close evolutionary cousins are "political" too. In his path-breaking *Chimpanzee Politics*, for instance, Frans De Waal shows that chimpanzees "strategically manipulate" one another.²³ Their brains, he argues, are sufficiently developed for them to engage in what has been called "Machiavellian intelligence." De Waal argues that:

when Aristotle referred to man as a *political animal*, he could not know just how near the mark he was. Our political activity seems to be part of

an evolutionary heritage we share with our close relatives . . . the roots of politics are older than humanity.²⁴

Just like human beings, they form alliances and coalitions. Building on this insight, later research (such as that of Robin Dunbar) has suggested that the ability to behave strategically depends on the size of an animal's neocortex. Ethologists have found that hyenas, dolphins, and elephants all do politics as well! Spotted hyenas, for instance, have a fairly large neocortex, which allows them to engage in behavior of great complexity relative to animals which have simpler brain structures.²⁵

What Determines Our Behavior?

There is an inherent "gray area" between the concepts of dispositionism and situationism. As noted above, almost any theory that does not rely on biology or genetics can be characterized as situationist, since our dispositions are partly shaped by the situations we happen to have experienced throughout our lives. But there are two important points that must be made here: first of all, the reader should note again that when we characterize a theory as "dispositionist," we need only mean that dispositions affect behavior in a proximate or immediate sense. Although our partisan identifications or our attitudes towards the use of military force may have been shaped by situations *originally*, these eventually become lasting dispositions which vary little across elections and wars. Second—and even more importantly—most dispositionist approaches assume that individuals *vary* in their reactions to situations. Barack Obama probably took rather different lessons from the 2003 Iraq war, for instance, than, say, George W. Bush or Dick Cheney. People frequently take differing internal attitudes and beliefs away from precisely the same external situation.

There are different forms of dispositionism, so there are different kinds of situationism as well. Some theories look at direct pressures at the level of the immediate social group, as in the work on groupthink discussed in Chapter 6. Other direct and indirect forms are illustrated by Stanley Milgram's experiments, where social etiquette, the force of authority figures, and other social norms seem to shape behavior (Chapter 4). Other forms of situationism are even more general and subtle in nature, as in Philip Zimbardo's Stanford experiment where widely accepted notions of how guards and prisoners ought to behave seem to have almost insidiously shaped the behavior of his subjects (Chapter 5). The situation may be the immediate social context, a group to which one belongs in the workplace, the wider social groups that shape our identities within society, and the push and pull of the allegiances we

develop towards our nation and state. And as we shall see in Chapter 17, what I shall call Kenneth Waltz's "hyper-situationist" perspective—in which states respond almost exclusively to the roles assigned to them by the international system—represents the situational logic writ extremely large.

No attempt will be made in this book to resolve fully the debate between situationism and dispositionism—at least until the concluding chapters—and the reason for this partly has to do with the author's objective in writing a book of this kind. There are essentially two styles of teaching: some instructors exclusively present their conception of the world and expect their students to accept it, at least after they have had the satisfaction of knocking down their views (should they dare to offer them) using skilled and pre-prepared put-downs which they have honed to a fine art over the years. The tone of the previous sentences tells you immediately that the present author is going to at least claim to be a teacher of the second sort: one who presents the student with rival views and then leaves it up to him or her to decide. There are two reasons for that: first of all, the teaching of politics should always be approached with a certain degree of humility. There are no definite answers to many questions in politics, and anyone who claims to have uncovered the "laws" of political behavior should be treated with a heavy dose of skepticism. Second, this book was written by an author young enough to recall being taught using both styles, and he found the first to be exceptionally grating when he was on the receiving end of it (especially where he disagreed with an instructor's all-too-evident world view!).

While we will probably never be able to solve the riddle this book poses for good, one of its central purposes is to encourage you to think deeply about it as you read through chapters which make a case for one position or the other in explaining political behavior. As you will see as you read on, the remaining chapters are organized around the situationist–dispositionist distinction, and later chapters are intended to push you gently in one direction or the other without ever telling you exactly what to think. After reading this book you may determine you are a situationist, or a dispositionist; alternatively, you may adopt a more subtle approach which blends the two according to (say) the area of political behavior we are trying to explain. But that is up to you. As one prominent news organization in the United States likes to put it, "you decide."

The Organization of the Book

Once we accept the idea that individuals *do* matter in politics and that situations do not totally predetermine responses, the next question becomes "how much and when do they matter?" Those influenced by social psychology contend that

individual factors matter less than social pressures and the structure of the situation. Those influenced by cognitive psychology and the much older psychoanalytic or psychodynamic tradition, on the other hand, tend to make the opposite argument. Broadly speaking, psychologists examining political questions have tended to favor the first approach, while political scientists have tended to draw on psychological theories which privilege the second.

This basic distinction provides the organizational basis of this book. In Part I, we examine a variety of especially influential approaches derived from social psychology which emphasize the nature of the situation as opposed to individuals and their characteristics. We begin with the ultimate situationist analysis, behaviorism. This is an approach which had an especially powerful influence on political psychology during the 1950s and 1960s, when the focus of both psychology and political science turned away from the study of the mind in favor of an emphasis on the supposedly more “scientific” concept of behavior. Examining the ideas of B.F. Skinner in particular, in Chapter 3 we shall consider Skinner’s argument that we would all be better off in a political state that deliberately conditioned its members to engage in “socially desirable” behaviors.

During the early 1960s, Stanley Milgram carried out what are probably the most ingenious (and, some would say, infamous) experiments ever conducted. Milgram’s work has had a major impact on the way we understand political obedience within authority structures, but for the moment the reader should note simply that his findings favor the notion that most—though perhaps not all—of us are capable of committing acts that violate our most basic moral precepts and beliefs, provided that the acts are encouraged and sanctioned by the social pressure of an authority we view as legitimate. Milgram’s work is used in Chapter 4 to try—in a very preliminary way—to understand the phenomenon of genocide, with a particular but not exclusive focus on the Nazi Holocaust of the 1930s. In the following chapter, Philip Zimbardo’s equally fascinating study of the behavior of “prisoners” and “guards”—the famous Stanford experiment—is placed under the microscope. Again, the focus here is on the demands of the situation, and the ways in which socially defined roles shape our behavior. Zimbardo’s work is used in Chapter 5 to shed light on the Abu Ghraib scandal.

Chapter 6, the last chapter in this section, examines group behavior, with particular emphasis on the work of Irving Janis and the ways in which individual behavior changes in response to group pressures. In his celebrated book *Groupthink*, Janis argued that even the brightest individuals may “buckle” under social pressures of various kinds in decision-making groups; this often leads, Janis argued, to disastrous courses of action that might not have been pursued had the options been fully considered by individuals acting on their

own.²⁶ Here we will also devote particular attention to the two case studies that Janis himself felt best illustrated the phenomenon of groupthink—the 1961 Bay of Pigs fiasco and the 1965 decisions to “Americanize” the war in Vietnam, as well as criticisms of Janis’s approach and more recent perspectives on group decision-making.

Part II, the dispositionist section of the book, looks at individually based psychological theories. Whether justifiably or not, it has to be said that this body of work has had more influence on political psychology to date than the first, perhaps because it takes the idea that individuals matter rather further than the approaches so far discussed.

As we shall see in depth in Chapter 7, psychoanalytical approaches to understanding behavior had an early formative impact on the development of political psychology as a field in its own right. The work of Sigmund Freud and his followers left a strong imprint at the outset, in part because this new field within political science was founded at a time when psychodynamic theories were very much in vogue. Naturally, then, the figures instrumental in the movement which led to its development—notably Charles Merriam and Harold Lasswell—imported Freudian-style approaches to the study of politics.

The psychoanalytic imprint on political science spawned a whole tradition which is commonly referred to as psychobiography or psychohistory, and even today those influences continue to be felt. Works like Alexander George and Juliette George’s *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House* and Doris Kearns Goodwin’s *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* set the standard within this influential subgenre, often arguing that childhood experiences are critical to future personality development and political performance.²⁷ Taking their cue from their former teacher at the University of Chicago, Harold Lasswell—who saw political behavior in part as the displacement of private or personal conflicts onto public life—George and George, for instance, argued that Woodrow Wilson’s inflexibility on issues such as the passage of the League of Nations Treaty stemmed from a need to compensate for Dr. Joseph Wilson’s supposed tendency to deny his young son affection and emotional rewards. In Chapter 7 we will examine this and other psychobiographic classics, as well as even more controversial but much newer contributions to this tradition.

The term “personality” is an elusive one which has been used in different ways in the literature on political psychology. It is sometimes utilized as a shorthand term for all of a person’s individual characteristics, including his or her beliefs. James David Barber’s *The Presidential Character*—a much criticized but endlessly thought-provoking study of presidential personality, and the leading work of comparative psychobiography—has been so influential that no textbook on political psychology could conceivably leave it out.²⁸ This

is examined along with other personality-based theories in Chapter 8, taking account of both the strengths and weaknesses of this kind of analysis. With the passage of time, however, approaches based on the study of leaders' beliefs—most notably, operational code analysis—have partially supplanted the focus on more amorphous concepts like personality, and the evolution of this kind of work is covered in this chapter as well.

Chapter 9 deals with the so-called “cognitive revolution” of the 1980s and 1990s. This movement within psychology has sought to sweep away many of the older Freudian-tinged approaches while still maintaining a basically dispositional stance, and it has placed a new emphasis on the way that behavior is shaped by knowledge structures present in human memory. Schemas, scripts, analogies, and other knowledge structures are seen as the “building blocks” of the human mind, which then fundamentally influence the ways in which we process information. From this perspective human beings have increasingly come to be thought of as “cognitive misers” who often employ cognitive short cuts and heuristic devices when making decisions. Though this kind of cognitive economy is often necessary in a world in which we are constantly being bombarded with information, it is fraught with perils of various kinds.

Human beings are not just passive receptors and processors of information—what has been termed “cold” cognition—but are also influenced by “hot” processes such as anger, love, sadness, and so on. What was perhaps an overzealous focus on the cold aspects of cognition by political psychologists working in both the elite and mass behavior traditions during the 1980s and 1990s has in turn provoked a compensating emphasis on affect and emotion, and work in this vein is the topic of Chapter 10. Although there are considerable problems involved in the attempt to study emotion in a rigorous way, Chapter 11 examines one potential way forward with an overview of some very new and exciting developments in the study of neuropolitics and genopolitics. These promise the potential development both of new theoretical approaches of relevance to politics as well as novel ways of testing our hypotheses, old and new. For instance, we are beginning to see the development within political psychology of something called “neuropolitics” (the study of the interaction between the brain and politics), as well as a related but logically separable trend towards “genopolitics” (the study of the genetic or evolutionary basis of political attitudes and behavior). Both have been encouraged by the development of advanced techniques such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). Advances in such techniques that scientists use to map the human brain are now being used in the study of voting behavior, for instance, to examine the emotions experienced by voters as they look at political stimuli such as campaign ads.

The third and final section (Chapters 12 to 18) is more empirical. It attempts, in a preliminary way, to bring situationism and dispositionism together, and this conceptual device is used here to categorize theories which have tried to explain various empirical areas of political behavior. Chapter 16, for instance, asks to what extent acts of terrorism are typically carried out by psychologically “abnormal” individuals. Many people simply assume that terrorists must be mentally abnormal in some way or even deranged, but recent research on the psychology of terrorist behavior, by John Horgan, Andrew Silke, and others, has largely discounted this widely popular theory. Attempts to uncover a single “terrorist personality” (or to ascribe abnormalities like narcissism to all terrorists) have essentially come to naught, so in many ways we are left with the same conclusion Milgram drew in the case of genocide: namely, that most ordinary men and women are capable of committing acts of extreme violence. This chapter examines the research in this area which ascribes terrorism to situational forces and in particular the dynamics of group behavior. We will also examine theories of nationalism and ethnic conflict, racism and political intolerance, voting behavior, political communication and international security, asking in each case whether dispositionist or situationist approaches best account for the area of behavior in question. Finally, in Chapter 18 we will wrap up our discussion by looking at new directions that the field may be taking, and suggesting ways in which situationism and dispositionism might be integrated with one another.

Having introduced the organizing frameworks that we are going to use in this book, we next need to explain what the study of political psychology involves. What is political psychology? When did students of political science first become interested in the application of psychological theory to political behavior? How has political psychology been studied in the past, and which psychological theories have influenced the ways in which we study political phenomena? These are the topics addressed in the next chapter.

Notes

- 1 George Lakoff, *The Political Mind: A Cognitive Scientist's Guide to Your Brain and Its Politics* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), p.9.
- 2 Rose McDermott, “The Feeling of Rationality: The Meaning of Neuroscientific Advances for Political Science,” *Perspectives on Politics*, December 2004, p.691.
- 3 Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group that Predicted the Destruction of the World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956). See also Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson, *Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts* (New York: Harcourt, 2007).
- 4 For readers primarily interested in the economic route to explaining human behavior, I recommend Kenneth Shepsle and Mark Bonchek, *Analyzing*

- Politics: Rationality, Behavior, and Institutions* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997). For a wide-ranging critique of this perspective, see Donald Green and Ian Shapiro, *Pathologies of Rational Choice: A Critique of Applications in Political Science* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).
- 5 This distinction is discussed in Daniel Kahneman's invaluable *Thinking Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011), pp. 269–70.
 - 6 For a discussion of Libet's experiment, see for instance David Eagleman, *Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012).
 - 7 Jonah Lehrer, *How We Decide* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2009), pp. 134–36.
 - 8 Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (New York: Random House, 2007).
 - 9 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
 - 10 Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 19–21.
 - 11 If you are sitting in the average university classroom right now, the carpeting probably is cheap and flammable.
 - 12 And one could add that perhaps running for the exit is really a dispositionist response as much as a reaction to the situation, since perhaps we have evolved a preprogrammed, self-preserved disposition over thousand of years which serves the useful purpose of preventing the species from dying out.
 - 13 Lee Ross and Richard Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation: Perspectives of Social Psychology* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1991).
 - 14 *Ibid.*, p. 320.
 - 15 See for instance Kenneth Waltz, *Man, The State and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959); J. David Singer, "The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations," *World Politics*, 14: 77–92, 1961; Alexander Wendt, "The Agent–Structure Problem in International Relations Theory," *International Organization*, 41: 335–70, 1987; Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).
 - 16 Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, second edition (New York: Longman, 1999). The major exception is Irving Janis's work on groupthink, which draws on a rich tradition within social psychology. We shall examine this work in Chapter 6.
 - 17 Rose McDermott, *Political Psychology and International Relations* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004), p. 3.
 - 18 Dominic Johnson, *Overconfidence and War: The Havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). See also Dominic Johnson and James Fowler, "The Evolution of Overconfidence," *Nature*, 477: 317–20, 2011.
 - 19 John Hibbing, Kevin Smith, and John Alford, *Predisposed: Liberals, Conservatives, and the Biology of Political Differences* (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 24.
 - 20 John Hibbing, "Ten Misconceptions Concerning Neurobiology and Politics," *Perspectives On Politics*, 11: 475–89, 2013.
 - 21 Susan Fiske and Shelley Taylor, *Social Cognition* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1984), p. 92.
 - 22 Peter Hatemi and Rose McDermott, *Man Is By Nature A Political Animal: Evolution, Biology, and Politics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 1–2.

- 23 Frans De Waal, *Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex Among Apes*, Twenty-fifth Anniversary Edition (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 207.
- 25 Sharleen Sakai, Bradley Arsznov, Barbara Lundriga, and Kay Holskamp, "Brain Size and Social Complexity: A Computed Tomography Study in Hyacinthidae," *Brain, Behavior, and Evolution*, 77: 91–104, 2011.
- 26 Irving Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), pp. 2–13.
- 27 Alexander George and Juliette George, *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House: A Personality Study* (New York: Dover, 1956); Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).
- 28 James David Barber, *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House*, fourth edition (New York: Pearson Longman, 2009).

Suggested Further Reading

- John Hibbing, Kevin Smith, and John Alford, *Predisposed: Liberals, Conservatives, and the Biology of Political Differences* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
- Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011).
- Jonah Lehrer, *How We Decide* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2009).
- Lee Ross and Richard Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation: Perspectives of Social Psychology* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1991).

Films

- Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* (2007): Excellent documentary featuring the people actually involved at the prison, directed by Rory Kennedy.
- Schindler's List* (1993): Award-winning recreation of Oskar Schindler's strange heroism during World War II, using Hollywood actors, directed by Stephen Spielberg.

A Brief History of the Discipline

“Political psychology” can be defined most simply as the study of the interaction between politics and psychology, particularly the impact of psychology on politics. If we can conceive of politics as the master discipline at the center of everything, linking to everything else—a rather contentious move, one must admit, but it was good enough for Aristotle—we can conceive of political science as a kind of Venn diagram with a center circle surrounded by overlapping ones. The intersecting area between economics and politics is called “political economy,” between sociology and politics “political sociology,” and so on. The intersection of mathematics and politics has developed its own specialized terminology—rational choice, formal theory, or game theory—but it is essentially “mathematical politics.”

History, genetics, biology, ethology, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, and many others could be depicted in Figure 2.1 as well, but you get the general idea. Although different social scientists will of course conceive of different “master disciplines” at the center, this kind of scheme will make some sense to most political scientists. We can conceive of political psychology most easily as a bridge between two disciplines. Beyond this simple definition, however, a glance at some past issues of the academic journal dedicated to the intersecting area we are concerned with in this book—entitled, appropriately enough, *Political Psychology*—reveals that there are many different subfields, specialisms, and approaches within it. Consequently, there are many different ways of teaching a course in political psychology.

One distinction within political psychology is that one camp is interested in *mass behavior* such as how people vote, the impact of public opinion on government policies, and so on. The other focuses on *elite behavior* and how elite perceptions shape government policies, the impact of personality on leadership, foreign policy decision-making, and so on. Another important distinction in the field, which we discuss later, is that which exists between explanations of political behavior influenced by social psychology, which

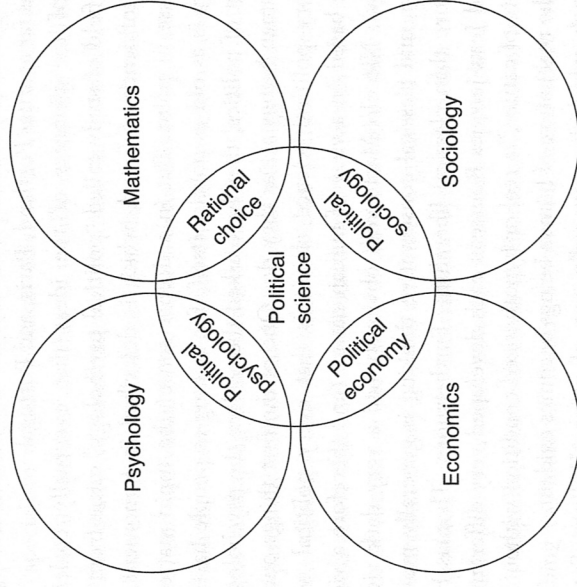


Figure 2.1 The relationship between political science and other fields

emphasize the impact of *situations* on behavior, and those influenced by cognitive psychology and the older tradition of abnormal psychology, which stress the importance of *individual* characteristics in shaping the way we behave.

Three observations ought to be made at the very outset about political psychology as a subspecialism within the study of political science. First of all, it is in comparative terms relatively new as a *recognized academic field*. Although pioneers like Harold Lasswell were studying the modern influence of psychology on politics as long ago as the 1920s, not many courses in political psychology were offered until the early 1970s. A *Handbook of Political Psychology*, the first of a subsequent series, appeared in 1973.¹ At the same time a professional apparatus began to be created around the subject. The year 1977 saw the founding of the *International Society for Political Psychology* (ISPP), and the journal *Political Psychology* was founded two years later.

Second, the topic called “political psychology”—in this instance defined as a recognized field taught in universities—is genuinely *international* in focus. While it is especially dominated by U.S. scholars, it is becoming increasingly popular in Europe, Australasia, and other parts of the world as well. The study of political psychology is a genuinely international enterprise today. As noted, political psychology is rather unusual in the sense that its major

representative body—the ISPP—is truly global in nature, holding its meetings in places as far apart as Portland, Paris, and Portugal.

Many of the pioneers of the ideas that eventually coalesced into an academic field of study called “political psychology” came from Europe. The Viennese influence of Freud, which is described in a moment, provides an obvious case in point. But in a deeper sense, the topic matter of political psychology is as old as politics itself, for as long as people have reflected on the subject of politics, they have asked themselves the psychological question of why human beings act as they do. One of the first things one discovers in introductory political science classes is that every political world view is ultimately based on a view of human nature (and therefore a view of human psychology). Niccolò Machiavelli obviously had a very dark view of human psychology, and classical conservative thinking is generally more pessimistic on this score than classical liberalism. Furthermore, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau each developed very different conceptions of the “state of nature,” a real or hypothesized condition without government, in which the real nature of human beings becomes evident.

In a book which is now sadly out of print, William Stone and Paul Schaffner brilliantly trace the various deeper historical influences that had been brewing for centuries before political psychology emerged as a recognized academic subject in the twentieth century.² “The recognition of a strong Germanic impetus to political psychology . . . does not suffice to do full justice to the continental contributions. Contrary to widely held beliefs, the field of political psychology as such originated with conservative authors in Latin countries,” they argue. In France, for example, conservative thinkers such as Hippolyte Taine and Gustav Le Bon began to develop “scientific” explanations of human political psychology in the 1800s. And in England—rather ironically given the relative neglect of the topic in U.K. universities—as early as 1908 Graham Wallas, a professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), published a book which certainly qualified him as one of the founding fathers of the discipline. In his *Human Nature in Politics*, first published that year, Wallas issued a warning to those who saw every human decision and action as the result of a rational, intellectual process. “When men become conscious of psychological processes of which they have been unconscious or half conscious,” Wallas advised, “not only are they on their guard against the exploitation of those processes in themselves and others, but they become better able to control them from within.”³ The greatest contributions, of course, came from Vienna and Frankfurt. Thinkers such as Sigmund Freud and Erich Fromm in particular would have a special impact on the development of the field in the United States, as detailed shortly in this chapter’s section on personality studies.

A third important thing to note is that political psychology is rather unusual as a specialism within political science in that much (though by no means all) of it operates at what is usually called the individual level of analysis. The study of international relations in particular commonly distinguishes between three basic kinds of explanation or “levels of analysis”: systemic, state, and individual.⁴ Are state actions driven by a state’s power or position within the international system? Or are the internal characteristics of states critical in shaping their outward behavior? Or is it ultimately the psychology of particular leaders that drives a state’s foreign policies?

Many of the theories one encounters within political science tend to operate at levels above that of the individual; in other words, they emphasize the importance of context or the nature of the times rather than the nature of individuals. Neorealist theory—which attributes a great deal of state behavior to a nation’s position within the international system (whether it is a superpower, a middle power, a weak power, and so on)—provides a particularly good example.⁵ Equally, Marxism tends to discount the role of individuals in history, ascribing to “material” factors a powerful causal effect which overwhelms the significance of particular individuals. Many theories derived from Marxism, such as dependency theory and world-systems theory, make much the same core assumption. Though it stems from a very different tradition, classic pluralism views the state as responsive to the competition between large organized groups, similarly leaving little room for individuals and their psychologies to “matter.”

As we have seen already, situational constraints are also emphasized by social psychology, which has had a particular impact on psychologists who turn to political topics. Nevertheless, “political psychology” as studied within political science has always had a particular appeal to those who believe that political actors—their beliefs, past life experiences, personalities, and so on—are at least somewhat significant in determining political outcomes. It has an instinctive appeal to those who believe that individual actors matter; that history is not just the story of how structures and contexts shape behavior, but of how individuals can themselves shape history and politics.

This is one thing most analysts of political psychology have in common. Beyond this, however, there is no real agreement as to which theories are most useful for the purpose of analyzing human behavior and decision-making. As William McGuire has noted in an oft-cited chapter, the nature of what he calls the “poli-psy relationship” has evolved through a number of historical phases during the last eighty years or so.⁶ The kind of theories that have been in vogue within the discipline of psychology has changed over time; moreover, since psychology has mostly influenced political science (rather than the other way round), the trends in political psychology have tracked or followed trends

within the mother discipline of psychology. McGuire identifies three broad phases in the development of political psychology:

- 1 the era of *personality studies* in the 1940s and 1950s dominated by psychoanalysis;
- 2 the era of *political attitudes and voting behavior studies* in the 1960s and 1970s characterized by the popularity of “rational man” assumptions; and
- 3 an era since the 1980s and 1990s which has focused on *political beliefs, information processing, and decision-making*, and has dealt in particular with international politics.

Personality Studies

Many of the early studies within political psychology—that is, in the 1940s and 1950s—focused on personality, and reflected in particular psychoanalytic theory, then prevalent within psychology. This led to the appearance of many works of what might be called “psychohistory” or “psychobiography.” An early and still vibrant approach to studying leadership, these focus on the personality characteristics of political leaders, and on how these characteristics affect their performance in office. Amongst other things, Freudian or psychoanalytic theory analysis is particularly suited to the analysis of personality because it breaks down the drives or motivations that lie, or are alleged to lie, within human beings. Sigmund Freud regarded many of these motivations as *unconscious* in nature, revealing themselves only through dreams and slips of the tongue (the famous “Freudian slips”). According to Freud, we are all born with what he called an *id*, an *ego*, and a *superego*.⁷ Freud believed that the *id* is essentially the child within us. It seeks pleasure and instant gratification. In the case of a baby or a very young child, they seek whatever feels good at the time, with no consideration for the morality of the situation or anything else. The *id* isn’t concerned with external reality or about the needs of anyone else. When the *id* wants something, nothing else is important. It is operated by what Freud called the “pleasure principle.”

Within the next few years, as the child interacts more and more with the world, the second part of its personality develops. Freud called this part the *ego*, which is based on the “reality principle.” The *ego* understands that other people have needs and desires and that sometimes being impulsive or selfish can hurt us in the long run. It’s the *ego*’s job to meet the needs of the *id*, while taking into consideration the reality of the situation. By the age of five, or the end of the phallic stage of development, the child’s *superego* develops. The *superego* is the moral part of us and develops due to the moral and ethical

restraints placed on us by our parents or guardians. Many equate the *superego* with the conscience, as it dictates our belief in what is right or wrong.

In a healthy person, according to Freud, the *ego* needs to be the strongest of the three components so that it can act as a mediator between the demands of the *id* and the *superego*, while still taking external reality into consideration. If the *id* becomes too strong, self-centered, impulsive behavior rules the individual’s life. On the other hand, if the *superego* becomes too strong, rigid, uncompromising, and moralistic behavior takes over. The *ego*’s task of mediating between these two impulses is far from straightforward and may create various psychological conflicts. The *id* is a kind of devil on one shoulder, while the *superego* is the angel on the other; both speak to us simultaneously, creating a kind of motivational tug of war within. We listen to both impulses, take in their differing perspectives and then make a decision. This decision is the *ego* talking, the one looking for that mediating balance between the two other elements. But because this balancing act is often difficult to do, Freud argued that the *ego* has certain “defense mechanisms” which help it function. When the *ego* has a truly difficult time reconciling the impulses of both *id* and *superego*, it will employ one or more of these defenses. They include displacement, denial, repression, and transference, all of which (Freud believed) served as insulation mechanisms to protect the *ego*.

Along with the former American ambassador William Bullitt, Freud himself would venture into the writing of political psychobiography.⁸ But his primary impact on the genre came via his influence over others. The role of the unconscious motives, childhood development, and compensatory defense mechanisms would all have a particularly marked impact on the development of political psychobiography during these early years. Most of all, it was Charles Merriam and Harold Lasswell, two of the founding fathers of political psychology, who took Freud’s ideas and applied them to the study of politics. Merriam was a primary intellectual influence on Lasswell as his teacher, but because it was the latter who put these ideas down on paper and developed them, Lasswell is often seen as the first American political psychologist and sometimes the first political psychologist *per se*. Lasswell’s book *Psychopathology and Politics*, published originally in 1930, was a landmark in this respect, as was *Power and Personality*, which first appeared in 1948.⁹ Unlike many later political psychologists, Lasswell actually took the time to train himself in what were then the latest developments in Freudian psychoanalysis. As a result, he came to argue that what he called the “political personality” results from the displacement of private problems onto public life. His main contention was that “political movements derive their vitality from the displacement of private affect upon public objects.”¹⁰ Power may be sought to overcome low self-esteem, for instance, being “expected to

overcome low estimates of the self, by changing either the traits of the self or the environment.¹¹ Individuals who went into politics, in other words, often sought political power as a compensation for something else.

Alexander George and Juliette George's *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House* is heavily influenced by this kind of approach.¹² In fact, there is an intellectual chain connecting Merriam to Lasswell and the Georges: Merriam taught Lasswell the importance of the psychological aspects of politics, which he then passed on to the Georges at the University of Chicago, which became a kind of intellectual hothouse for the early development of political psychology in America. Though not overtly couched in Freud's language, the text traces much of Woodrow Wilson's adult political behavior to his childhood experiences at the hands of a supposedly stern Presbyterian minister father. Because the father allegedly never showed the son affection or congratulated him on his performance in general, Wilson sought the love of the American people as a kind of compensation. The fame and controversy of *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House* in turn influenced a whole host of works like Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* and Betty Glad's *Jimmy Carter: In Search of the Great White House*.¹³

Attitudes and Voting Behavior

In the second phase of the history of political psychology, the focus shifted from personality and culture to attitudes and voting behavior. Large-scale survey research, rather than the qualitative analyses of works of psychobiography, became the preferred method of the day. At this point, political psychology also moved from psychoanalysis to an approach more suited to the study of attitudes—cognitive consistency theory—and/or a perspective more suited to the “scientific” study of behavior. Behaviorism is the subject of our next chapter, so we will leave that topic for a moment, but according to cognitive consistency or cognitive balance theories, inconsistencies among a person's attitudes cause an uncomfortable state of tension. Leon Festinger famously referred to this as a state of “cognitive dissonance.”¹⁴ Because human beings are unhappy with inconsistencies of this sort, they are motivated to reduce the degree of dissonance in some way. For example, during World War II the United States formed an alliance with the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany. Clearly, this made the most virulent of anti-Communists in the United States decidedly uncomfortable, but these individuals could reduce the degree of dissonance by adding a third statement or belief to the mix: alliances are marriages of convenience, sometimes necessary to achieve moral ends. Robert Jervis's best-known work within international relations draws upon this kind of theorizing.¹⁵

Angus Campbell and his colleagues developed a model of voting in their book *The American Voter* which was explicitly psychological in its emphasis.¹⁶ While Paul Lazarsfeld and others had begun from the position that social and economic factors directly determine how one votes, Campbell and his colleagues argued that a subjective, psychological variable plays an *intervening* role between objective situationist factors and the vote. In their formative years, voters develop a long-term, enduring attachment to a particular political party.¹⁷ This can take the form of a knee-jerk, almost religious form of loyalty to one party. Campbell and his colleagues believed that these strong psychologically attached blocks of voters were relatively static over time, forming about two-thirds of the voting electorate. It was the one-third of “independent” voters—who for some reason failed to develop this psychological loyalty—who actually decided the results of presidential elections, since they formed a kind of “swing vote” at the center. This model also implicitly drew upon cognitive consistency theory, for it suggested that strong partisans simply screened out or rationalized away unfavorable information about their own party which came to them during the election campaign, and would vote for parties whose views they didn't even agree with on some issues (as Southern Democrats who opposed greater racial integration did for some years after the passage of the civil rights legislation of the mid-1960s). The work of Philip Converse in particular argued that most voters lacked an internally consistent system of attitudes and beliefs, relying instead on long-term party ties in deciding how to vote.¹⁸ Strong partisans would explain away poor economic performance as the product of something other than their party's own policy choices. Faced with the suspicion that Adlai Stevenson was a weak standard bearer for the Democratic Party in 1956, rock-solid Democrats would reduce the dissonance caused by simply downplaying or screening out the information. Rock-solid Republicans could be expected to do the same when their own standard bearer in 1964, Barry Goldwater, appeared extreme in his views and perhaps even dangerous to world peace.

At the same time, rational actor theory or rational choice—a field drawn not from psychology but from mathematics and economics, as we noted earlier—began to exert increasing importance as a model of voting behavior in its own right, forming a rival to the party identification model. This approach argued that voters were in fact more highly informed than the party identification approach had allowed for, assuming that voters actually cast their ballot on the basis of the “fit” between their own attitudes and the issue positions of the parties. Proponents of this approach often assumed, for example, that voters would cast their ballots on the basis of how well their own finances had fared over the previous four years, how well the country had fared, or some combination of the two. Anthony Downs' *An Economic Theory of Democracy* became the

foundational text for this new approach.¹⁹ The contrast with the party identification model could not have been more clear: while the latter suggested that voters cast their ballots on the basis of long-term attachments or loyalties, the many proponents of the new approach suggested that electors came pretty close to the idea of “pure rationality” in their voting decisions. These two approaches correspond to two rival models of decision-making which Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar describe as *Homo economicus* and *Homo psychologicus*, which co-exist rather uneasily today, as we will discuss shortly.²⁰

Political Beliefs, Information Processing, and Decision-Making

The third phase in the history of political psychology McGuire talks about can be seen coalescing during the second stage. Since the 1980s, cognitive approaches to political psychology—perspectives which emphasize the content of people’s knowledge structures in shaping decision-making and behavior in general—have been most influential within political psychology. This is not a single approach, but instead many perspectives; however, if one had to summarize the similarities between these various approaches, we could say that they all start from the assumption that human beings are inherently *limited* creatures. Human individuals, unlike say computers, have a limited capacity to process incoming information, and many cognitive psychologists talk of humans as having a “limited cognitive capacity.” What do they mean by this? Well, ideally, to make a fully rational decision, you require *all* the relevant information relating to that decision and you need to consider all the possible alternative courses of action available to you. But in the real world, we know that actual human beings possess neither perfect information nor inexhaustible stamina. The world is an incredibly complex place, and the average individual is constantly bombarded with information which no one brain can actually assimilate.

Suppose that every time you made a decision—of any kind—you had to gather all the information relevant to that decision. Let’s say, for instance, you wished to make a fully rational, fully informed decision about where to eat each night. To meet the exacting standards of pure rationality, you would in principle have to read all the menus of all the cafes and restaurants in your town or city. You would have to taste the leading dishes in each dining option that night, comparing taste and quality and price and deciding which represented the optimal choice given your preferences. In that way, you would as economists put it “maximize your utility,” selecting the best option relative to its cost. Of course, in reality human beings very rarely behave in this way. Instead, we often process information by means of what are generally called cognitive

“short cuts” or heuristics. These are devices for prematurely cutting short the search for information, which allow us to lump for one decision or another far more quickly than we otherwise would. In practice, we often pick the same restaurant or cafe we ate at last week or last month, with the expectation that if the food and/or price was good last time, it probably will be again.

The pioneer in developing this more realistic account of human decision-making behavior was an organizational theorist and political psychologist known as Herbert Simon, who came up with at least two highly significant concepts with which he will always be associated: “bounded rationality” and “satisficing behavior.”²¹ Human decision-makers are rational, he suggested, but only within the bounds of the information available to them (which is often either limited or too substantial to process). As a consequence, we often “satisfice” instead of “maximize” our utility. In other words, we frequently plump for *the first acceptable option that will “do”* out of a potentially limitless set of choices. So, for example, when you haven’t already decided where to eat one evening, you usually don’t walk up and down the entire length of the street (and the one adjoining it) looking each place over and comparing prices and quality in minute detail; instead, you generally pick the first place which is satisfactory. And this, on a different scale, is what policy-makers often do, according to the bounded rationality perspective: faced with a potentially limitless range of solutions to a problem, they choose the first available option that is acceptable. So for example, if you have a massive number of options, from A to Z, you will start at A; if that’s not OK, you move to B, then on to C, and so on until you find an acceptable solution (say D). You won’t go through the whole lot. D may not be the optimal, utility-maximizing choice—the best may actually be L or Q or Y—but you can’t consider everything.

Another short cut we shall discuss later in this book is the use of analogical reasoning. This is essentially the use of past situations in order to understand the present and predict the future. Faced with a new or very uncertain situation, decision-makers very often rely on historical analogies to make sense of what’s going on. “What does this look like to me?” is the question we consciously (but often subconsciously) ask ourselves. What in my past experience, or my knowledge of history, provides clues as to what is going on here? International relations abound with the use of historical analogies, and the use of schemas, scripts, and analogies as cognitive short cuts has been especially well studied and extensively analyzed in the field of foreign policy analysis.

Neuropolitics and Genopolitics: A Fourth Phase?

In recent years, we have seen the emergence of two interrelated approaches, “neuropolitics” and “genopolitics.” We shall examine these in a lot more depth

in Chapter 11, but stated simply, the first examines the impact of the brain on politics and the other the impact of our genetic inheritance on politics (as we shall see later, these are closely related but separable approaches). One could contend that this is merely a continuation of the third phase, in the sense that it involves a renewed focus on cognition and decision-making. On the other hand, it is inspired not by the cognitive revolution of the 1970s and 1980s, but by newer approaches which stress the impact of emotion and its integral relationship to cognition, some of which argue that the former approach was not radical enough in its critique of *Homo economicus* and fails to really come to grips with how the human mind actually works. This fourth phase no longer treats human beings as if they were computers, for instance. This phase might also be seen as qualitatively different from the third in the sense that the methodological techniques it employs are entirely novel from a political science perspective, marked by the use of fMRI and EEG techniques from neuroscience and twin studies from behavioral genetics (to take but the two most prominent examples). We will return to this issue in the very final chapter of the book, but for now the reader should note that this is an exciting time to be doing political psychology. The subject was always interdisciplinary, as we have seen already, but one can now credibly argue that it is even *more* interdisciplinary than ever.

So far, we have outlined the differences between two very general approaches to the explanation of political behavior: situationism and dispositionism. We have described the history of political psychology in broad brushstrokes, setting the stage for the more detailed historical account that will follow in later chapters. And we have briefly described the *Homo psychologicus* approach which underpins this book and provides many of its underlying assumptions, as well as a rival perspective which draws upon economics. The next task, then, is to begin to pull apart the situationist and dispositionist perspectives, showing how these broad frameworks encompass a range of more specific theories and approaches. We shall begin this exercise with an example of a situationist theory par excellence: behaviorism, which treats human beings as a “blank slate.” Since we are all born without any basic predispositions, the approach contends, it is the social environment around us that essentially shapes our behaviors and, indeed, determines the kind of individuals we turn out to be.

Notes

- 1 Jeanne Knutson (ed.), *Handbook of Political Psychology* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1973).
- 2 William Stone and Paul Schaffner, *The Psychology of Politics*, second edition (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1988). This was incidentally one of the very first textbooks on political psychology (it first came out in 1974).
- 3 Quoted in Stone and Schaffner, *The Psychology of Politics*, p.17.
- 4 Kenneth Waltz, *Man, The State and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959); J. David Singer, “The Levels-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations,” *World Politics*, 14: 77–92, 1961.
- 5 Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).
- 6 William McGuire, “The Poli–Psy Relationship: Three Phases of a Long Affair,” in Shanto Iyengar and William McGuire (eds.), *Explorations in Political Psychology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993). Also reprinted in John T. Jost and Jim Sidanius (eds.), *Political Psychology: Key Readings* (New York: Psychology Press, 2004). This chapter draws on many of the insights from McGuire’s seminal piece, though it does not attempt to do so with the same breadth or depth.
- 7 Freud intended these simply as conceptual labels for components of human personality, not physically existing properties of the brain itself.
- 8 Sigmund Freud and William Bullitt, *Thomas Woodrow Wilson, Twenty-Eighth President of the United States: A Psychological Study* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1967).
- 9 Harold Lasswell, *Psychopathology and Politics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1930), especially pp.75–76; Lasswell, *Power and Personality* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1948).
- 10 Lasswell, *Psychopathology and Politics*, p.183.
- 11 Lasswell, *Power and Personality*, p.39.
- 12 Alexander George and Juliette George, *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House* (New York: Dover, 1956).
- 13 Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); Betty Glad, *Jimmy Carter: In Search of the Great White House* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1980).
- 14 Leon Festinger, *Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957).
- 15 Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).
- 16 Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald Stokes, *The American Voter* (New York: Wiley, 1964).
- 17 This model was imported into the study of British electoral choice by David Butler and his associates. See for instance David Butler and Donald Stokes, *Political Change in Britain: Forces Shaping Electoral Choice* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1969).
- 18 Philip Converse, “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics,” in David Apter (ed.), *Ideology and Discontent* (New York: Free Press, 1964).
- 19 Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).
- 20 Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar, “Information and Electoral Attitudes: A Case of Judgment Under Uncertainty,” in Shanto Iyengar and William McGuire (eds.), *Explorations in Political Psychology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), pp.322–28.
- 21 See for instance Herbert Simon, “A Behavioral Model of Rational Choice,” in *Models of Man, Social and Rational: Mathematical Essays on Rational Human Behavior in a Social Setting* (New York: Wiley, 1957); Simon, *Reason in Human Affairs* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1983).

Suggested Further Reading

- Morton Hunt, *The Story of Psychology*, updated and revised edition (New York: Anchor Books, 2007).
- Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011).
- William McGuire, “The Poli-Psy Relationship: Three Phases of a Long Affair,” in Shanto Iyengar and William McGuire (eds.), *Explorations in Political Psychology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993). Also reprinted in John T. Jost and Jim Sidanius (eds.), *Political Psychology: Key Readings* (New York: Psychology Press, 2004).

Film

- Science Odyssey: In Search of Ourselves* (PBS, 1998): A pretty good history of the discipline of psychology and its early development. The second half of the film contains a nice overview of the “Eugenics” versus “Behaviorism” debate, which leads well into the topic of the next chapter.

The Situation