

## General Examination for the Minor in Political Psychology

September, 2011

Department of Political Science  
Ohio State University

Instructions. Answer one question from Section A, one question from Section B, and two questions from Section C, for a total of four questions.

### Section A: Theory in Political Psychology

1. Fields of scientific inquiry should be definable. What, exactly, is political psychology? How would you describe the field to a skeptical colleague? How has the meaning of political psychology changed over time, and does it mean different things to scholars working in different substantive domains? Is the diversity of political psychological theories and methods a strength or weakness of the field?
2. Political scientists have long debated the applicability of rational choice theory for understanding political decision-making. Many political psychologists, not surprisingly, believe that various psychological theories are more appropriate for explaining political decisions. Briefly summarize the key points in this debate, and describe your own position. Take an example of a specific political decision, and describe how rational choice theory and a specific psychological model (in turn) have been used to explain this decision. Compare the effectiveness of the two models in this particular case. Do you believe it is possible, or even desirable, to combine the insights from rational choice and psychological models? Defend your response.

### Section B: Research Methods in Political Psychology

1. Discuss some of the key differences between a survey and an experiment. For each, explain if it is a defining difference, or if it is a difference merely in common practice. Be sure to isolate and explain what TRULY distinguishes these two methods. How might they be combined? Finish with a discussion of some question, problem, or phenomenon in political psychology that has been investigated with both methods. What are the characteristic strengths that each method presents?
2. Most of the empirical evidence on public opinion was obtained through survey research. Recently, many psychologists and survey researchers have begun to examine in-depth the psychological processes involved in the answering of survey questions. What have we learned about these processes? How might we adjust our research techniques to take advantage of the latest thinking about the psychology of the survey response? Can these studies tell us anything useful about political thinking outside the survey setting?

### Section C: Topics in Political Psychology

1. Identity has become a popular concept in international relations. What does it mean and how should we conceptualize it? What do we know about its relationship with inter-group conflict and cooperation? What additional insight do we gain in our understanding of international relations by employing the psychological notion of social identity?
2. There is debate among specialists on international relations about the importance of norms. Sometimes norms are connected to notions of justice and even conceptions of honor and

fairness. What do we know about the effect conceptions of fairness and honor have on decision-making? Do these sorts of considerations matter much when material interests are on the table? How could research in the realm of international relations contribute to the research done in economics and psychology in this regard or vice versa?

3. It is commonplace in contemporary analyses of international relations to argue that perceptions matter. Perceived threat is at the heart of neorealism. Many argue that mental constructions of the situation or the representation of the problem shape choice and the application of norms. Perceived power has become as widely recognized explanatory variable as any notion of objective power. At the same time, how to conceptualize cognition, identify it, and measure it in ways that links it to appraisal has evolved considerably. What is the best way to think about and measure mindsets and perception in the foreign policy realm?
4. At times, a good bit of importance is attached to the personality of leaders or to common personal styles extant in a culture. What is personality? How has it been conceptualized and measured? Is it different than a value system or a cognitive style? Do personalities vary systematically across national or cultural boundaries? If they do, what are the implications of this for international relations and political psychology?
5. There is increasing interest in biological explanations of political phenomena. Compare and contrast these three emerging areas of research in political psychology, by discussing specific research studies in each tradition: (1) genetics; (2) neuroscience; (3) evolutionary psychology. Which of the three do you think has, or will likely have, the greatest impact on our understanding of political judgment and behavior?
6. Scientists attempting to understand racial and ethnic politics in the US often draw on the psychological literature concerning intergroup relations, including research on stereotyping and prejudice. Describe two general theories of intergroup relations that have been applied in the study of racial and ethnic politics. Evaluate the success or failure of these applications. Conclude by discussing how a consideration of the political context could broaden or modify psychological theory.
7. Much of social cognition research was criticized for being too "cold," that is, for ignoring the role of affect and motivation in guiding thought and behavior. What do we know about how affect and motivation interact with cognitive processes to influence political judgment and behavior? Do emotions play a substantial role in shaping citizens' political decisions? If so, when? Is such a role problematic? What, in your view, are some of the limitations of political science research on affect and emotions?
8. Are social and political values important for public opinion? Define values, taking care to distinguish between the terms value, beliefs, affect, and attitude. Make an argument about the role of values in structuring political opinions. What happens when values come into conflict?