

# APPROACHES AND THEORIES OF POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY

## Abstract

Political psychology is a field derived from both fields of psychology and political science. Its a field that provides insights into the roots of decision making pertaining to voting, administration and political behavior.

This field has been developed overtime by understanding the actions and reactions of wars that took place in the past, other political events which include decisions made by lawmakers, policies adopted by political and non-political organizations, social movements and other events that have influenced history in general. The field of political psychology has been influenced and has also developed theories based on the comprehension of the behavioral revolution and authoritarianism.

In this article, the different theories of social psychology, psychodynamic and other personality theories in psychology and how they have explained underlying political behavior. Cognitive approaches including the effect of heuristics and attitudinal choices on behavior have also been addressed. Psychobiographies of political figures such as Joseph Stalin have also been studied to understand the underlying cause and existence of certain political behaviors.

The scope of political psychology is also studied by understanding the dialectical aspects of links amongst individuals and from individuals to society. The implications of the study of political psychology in its understanding of the concepts of nationalism and how it plays a key role in influencing international relations and soft power.

**Keywords:** Political Psychology; Personality; International Relations; War; Authority

## Authors

### **Dr. Deepa Marina Rasquinha**

Assistant Professor  
Department of Clinical Psychology  
Manipal College of Health Professions  
Manipal, Udupi, Karnataka  
deepa.rasquinha@manipal.edu

### **Saurav Das**

Department of Clinical Psychology  
Manipal College of Health Professions  
Manipal, Udupi, Karnataka  
saurav.das@learner.manipal.edu

### **Smrithi Rannore**

Department of Clinical Psychology  
Manipal College of Health Professions  
Manipal, Udupi, Karnataka  
smrithi.rannore@learner.manipal.edu

### **Dr. Kavyashree K. B**

Assistant Professor in Psychology

## I. INTRODUCTION

Have you ever wondered what occurs in the mind of a citizen while voting for a political leader? Or what influences the decisions of political leaders? Were you curious about why conflicts between nations occur, for example, the Russia-Ukraine war, or about the United States' backed insurgencies in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan? While these questions are largely political in nature and the answers to the above questions are often sought after by political scientists worldwide, it is also important to note that these questions cannot be answered without the help of the discipline of psychology.

Political psychology as a field stands at the confluence of these two disciplines. Political psychology is the study of psychological processes underlying political phenomena. In other words, political psychology helps explain why we take the political decisions that we undertake, what motivates political leaders to shape history the way that it has been shaped in the past and in the present, and how we see ourselves as political beings. It must be noted here that political psychology of the present has focussed a lot on explaining political phenomena around the world, rather than using political phenomena to explain the mental processes or psychological functioning of human beings.

To begin with, political psychology has acquired from the field of psychology, the principles of scientific methods, which include empiricism and falsifiability. The field of political science, on the other hand, is considered to be in stark contrast to Psychology, with greater emphasis placed on theories given by various political psychologists which have rarely been tested on an experimental basis to prove whether these theories stand true. This shows the difficulty in merging these two budding fields. However, considering the breadth of topics covered in these fields, specialized sub-fields like evolutionary psychology and cognitive neuropsychology may eventually help in further understanding the political behavior of human beings by giving biological bases for understanding the same.

## II. BRIEF HISTORY OF POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY

To understand the present progress in the field of political psychology, we need to delve into its past. Although the study of a relationship between psychological behavior and political decisions can be traced back to ancient Greece and to the era of Enlightenment, which includes philosophers like John Locke and Jeremy Bentham. Modern political psychology emerged in the early 20th century between World Wars I & II. Political psychology as a field traces its roots to Harold D. Laswell's writings which assessed different individual and group psychological processes to understand how they impacted political behavior.

A key concept in the field of political psychology was that of the *Authoritarian Personality*, of which *Right Wing Authoritarianism* is a part. This concept was developed by people who had immigrated from Nazi Germany to the United States including Max Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, and Theodor Adorno. Adorno et al developed the F-scale (Fascism scale), which measured ethnocentricity, extremism, submission to authority, cruelty and lack of altruistic behavior towards people belonging to the out-group, restriction towards free thinking and tendency for ultra-conservatism. The above

constructs mostly contributed to the understanding of behavior of political leaders through the trait approach of psychology.

The field of political psychology is also influenced by early studies that led to a “behavioral revolution” in the field of political psychology. These primarily include studies of political participation and voting conducted in the United States of America. Some iconic examples are *The People’s Choice* (Lazarsfeld, 1944), and *The American Voter* (Campbell et al, 1960). Finally, as this field was being recognized as one of significant importance, the International Society of Political Psychology was established in 1978 to document the scientific findings of this field.

### **III. VARIOUS APPROACHES AND THEORIES OF THE FIELD**

The field of political psychology has quite an illustrative past, but the field of political psychology as we know it today emerged only after World War II. The field started to heavily focus on personality theories and how they affect political behavior. This includes the numerous personality theories of psychology including, psychoanalytic, trait, motive and genetic theories of personality. It also includes various approaches to understanding political behavior which include the psychoanalytical, behavioral and humanistic schools of psychology.

A very important part of this phase of political psychology was the focus of psychology on psychoanalytical and psychodynamic theories to explain political behavior which entailed a closer look at the past of an individual’s life to understand his/her unconscious, id-ego conflicts and ego-defence mechanisms to better understand an individual’s political behavior.

Among the first personality theories was Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytical theory. His theory focussed on the role of unconscious motives to explain human behavior. According to him, the human personality could roughly be divided into 3 parts - the id, ego and superego. Where the id represents the part of the personality which is guided by animal instincts like sex and hunger, the superego represents the part of the personality that adheres to morality and the ego is part of the personality that compromises between the contrasting needs of the id and the superego. Here, the id and ego are governed by the pleasure principle and reality principle respectively.

Freud’s theory states that often the contrasting needs of the ego and the superego cause conflicts between id and the ego or the id and superego. The former can lead to neurotic anxiety while the latter leads to moral anxiety. To prevent the breakdown of the ego, people use ego-defence mechanisms like denial, regression, repression, projection and denial to deal with the above-mentioned conflicts.

Since Freud’s theory states that personalities are shaped within the age of 5, this approach looks at how behavior is affected by subconscious and unconscious motives and according to this theory, it is the repression of these unacceptable subconscious motives that causes the subsequent behavior. Hence, according to this theory, political decisions that are often taken have an undercurrent of hidden unconscious motives. Say for example, extremism on an individual level may be explained by a characteristically harsh childhood experience.

Other theories include psychodynamic theories of personality. Among these, a popular personality theory that explains political behavior is given by Erich Fromm, a German social psychologist. He proposed that humanity's separation from the natural world has produced feelings of isolation and loneliness which is termed 'basic anxiety'. According to him, basic anxiety capitalism and consumerism is the primary cause of basic anxiety, as humans have lost their connection with their nature by extensively focusing on material needs. Hence, with the evolution of time, humans have developed 'existential needs' to reconnect. These needs include relatedness, rootedness, a sense of identity, transcendence and a frame of orientation.

His needs stated what motivates individuals to make their political decisions, although these needs are quite humanistic in nature. According to Fromm, relatedness refers to the drive to unite with individuals, which could be achieved through love, power and submission. Rootedness refers to a need to feel at ease with one's surroundings. Fromm's third need is a sense of identity, which refers to the need of human beings to identify with a particular group. The need for transcendence refers to the need to achieve a higher purpose and to be creative. The last need for a frame of orientation states that human beings require context, a clear understanding of their goals and a definite way to achieve them.

Another crucial approach in psychology is the humanistic approach. The Humanistic school of Psychology is a new world approach in the field of psychology that stood in stark contrast to the behavioral and psychodynamic schools of psychology, prophesizing that every individual is born as a person who is innately good and strives to achieve the best version of his/her self. This school involves Abraham Maslow's search for self-actualization or the complete realization of one's potential in life. This school also includes Rollo May's theory of existentialism. Here, existentialism is about the importance of understanding the self and giving meaning to life by attributing meaning to life which includes but is not just restricted to spirituality.

Political behavior can also be understood by trait theories of personality. Traits refer to stable personality characteristics that remain relatively consistent. Here, contributors to trait theories in the field of psychology have also helped understand political behavior in individuals. Some important theorists who have contributed to trait theories include Gordon Allport, Hans Eysenck, Raymond Catell and David McClelland. While Allport theorized about the cardinal, central and secondary traits, Eysenck identified personality traits on three personality dimensions - Introversion-Extroversion, Neuroticism and Psychoticism. Raymond Catell's 16 personality factor theory is also quite important as it is among the first theories that understood personality traits at a greater depth, thus helping better understand how individuals are predisposed to react in a given situation.

Some prominent personality tests used for studying personality traits include the Big Five Personality traits and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). The Big Five measures five personality traits - Openness to experience, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, Extroversion and Neuroticism with each trait measured on a continuum. On the other hand, MBTI figures out the type of personality based on four sets of opposing traits which are, Introversion vs Extroversion, Intuition vs Sensing, Thinking vs Feeling and Judging vs Prospecting. The combination of these traits combines to give a total of sixteen personality

types. These tests have helped understand individuals' traits and can to an extent explain how an individual can potentially react to different situations.

Other important studies of personality from the trait approach include leader analysis frameworks like James David Barber's (1972) *Presidential Character*, and Margaret G. Herman's (1983, 1984, 1986, 1999, 2001) *Leader Trait Assessment (LTA)*. The former uses psychobiographies to understand how a leader's early life and political activities influence their personality and leadership while in office, while the latter analyses interviews of leaders to assess the specific traits of leaders.

A good example of how psychobiographies were used to understand the changes in behavior of political leaders is the psychobiography of Joseph Stalin. This is especially well documented by the paranoia that can be observed in Stalin's behavior and the highly centralized nature of the Bureaucratic institutions of the Soviet Union during his rule after Adolf Hitler annexed parts of the Soviet Union, which Birt's (1993) analysis portrays personal grievance as the attack was perceived as a personal slight.

Motive theories understand the goals of individuals, which help in predicting behavior of individuals. A prominent motive theory is McClelland's Big three motives - Need for Power, Need for Achievement and Need for Affiliation. Another influential motive theory is Abraham Maslow's theory of motivation which involves the following needs - Basic physiological needs, Security needs, Belongingness needs, Esteem needs and self-actualization. These theories help understand what motivates people to act in a specified manner and what causes people to do the same.

Genetic theories of behavior study the genetic correlates of behavior, and search for possible genetic inheritance in behaviors. This has been studied by the sub-field of behavioral genetics, under the wider ambit of the sub-field of evolutionary psychology. This studies human behaviors such as altruism, aggression and self-esteem and how genetics may play a role in inheriting these behaviors and to what extent it determines the presence of the aforementioned behaviors.

Cognitive approaches are also quite important in political psychology, studying how human beings understand their political environment to make decisions. In this approach, concepts from social psychology, including attribution theory, heuristics, anchoring effect and other cognitive biases are used to understand the political behavior of individuals. A very important part of the cognitive approach is the rational choice theory which states that humans consider themselves to make rational decisions, decisions that are made regarding the costs and reward of a decision, making a choice that justifies the cost of deciding by the incentives of it.

Other important aspects of cognitive approaches may include image theory, attitudes, social identity theory, attitudes and emotions. Here, image theory refers to how other individuals are viewed by an individual and how he/she is likely to act based on that perception. Attitudes refer to the behavioral predisposition of individuals toward an object or a person, and social identity theory explains how individuals view themselves as a part of society, how they identify with social groups and how they differentiate themselves from other groups, or in other words, how they perceive in-group and out-groups. The above

theories help in understanding and predicting patterns of behavior in individuals as both individuals and as a part of the society they belong to.

#### **IV. APPLICATIONS AND SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Political psychology grows on understanding the dialectical link between the society and every individual. Hence be it social or international relations, understanding one person's behavior, in turn, leads to understanding political behavior that ranges over a wide scope of components. Comprehending emotions like nationalism or actions determining political preferences, national or international relations, and political growth points toward understanding the scope of various specializations of psychology, economics, sociology, history and international relations.

Another important concept that has been studied under the cognitive approaches of political psychology is nationalism. For over a century now, nationalism has been fuelling political behavior. But what is nationalism? A feeling, an emotion? Why is it felt? Nationalism stems from the psychological need for belonging and the generation of one's identity according to Abraham Maslow, an American psychologist. By belonging to an ethnic group or those who identify with a nation are most likely to share notions regarding the group they identify with.

Benedict Anderson (1983), a political scientist termed the concept of 'imagined community' to understand nationalism, he depicted a nation as a socially constructed community where people perceive themselves as in-group which people ought to defend and even sacrifice for.

The notion of nationalism started gaining ground post the French revolution. Nationalism has indeed impacted our daily lives in myriad ways - World wars I & II were a consequence of German nationalism; the celebration of Independence days by erstwhile colonies to mark the overthrowing of of the yoke of foreign powers in countries like India, the US, Pakistan and Egypt - are examples of how nationalism influences the cognition of citizens.

This feeling of unity, being part of a group can be explained by social psychology. This can be best explained by in-group and out-group behaviors and how it influences the behavior of individuals. Therefore, by understanding nationalism and group behavior we can be understood to understand political events like social movements, rebellions, foreign policies etc. It can also be used to study differences between the feeling of nationalism in comparison with loyalty towards other types of groups, like sports teams, a college group or even families and communities - groups that are not or are relatively less influenced by politics.

A major area where political psychology plays a role is in understanding international relations in relation to economics. An example of the above is the recent economic fallout due to the Russia-Ukraine war. Due to the war, other countries have imposed sanctions on Russia due to which oil prices across the globe have risen. Understanding the psychological processes at play here could be key. Countries have imposed sanctions, their objective could be so that citizens of Russia would begin to focus more on their personal lives, recognising a

downfall hence driving a political behavior change in their country. Political psychology supports the reasoning behind why a certain war has occurred, why a political leader would have commanded a certain move or the reasoning behind another country's responses towards a certain move of another.

World politics is also influenced by what can be called "soft power." Soft power is the is a power enjoyed by people, organizations or nations by which it holds the power to appeal and influence the decisions of another. It's the type of power which involves political ethics, culture and international relations. Soft power is embedded in what is termed as the meta-power that is determined by healthy exogenous and endogenous social relations which is important for every country to work together in harmony.

Meta-power holds agenda control. Agenda control is a bargaining process where all ideas and issues are raised and discussed which helps any system format a structured boundaries to live by. The perfect example of this would be the formation of the constitution of any country where a sitting was taken place to solely discuss the all aspects of the country and for the country, to establish rules and guidelines for a country to base its proceedings on.

Soft power also supports the interdependence of all nations have on each other in the global market space. During this very pandemic, constant supplies of medical equipment and resources were supplied and ideas of the solution were exchanged. The global market stood strong with its network for support which further stood in the benefit of every citizen of every country. Thus, political psychology can delve into understanding power dynamics and tactics used by decision makers and how it influences behavior both on macro-level (nationwide, regionwide) and micro-level (community-wide) behaviors ofn different groups.

Other important phenomena that need to be understood by political psychology include how social media and AI have affected human behavior. Social media has been a boon to mankind by bringing the world closer together, making it much easier to eep in touch with friends, family and acquaintances. It has also opened up avenues for businesses to flourish all over the world by making the whole world a global village.

However, this does come at the cost of the mental health of individuals - cases of addiction to mental health has dramatically increased, online bullying has shattered many a person's confidence and hacking has also had severe repercussions on different countries, societies and individuals. AI is also promising to change the landscape of jobs in the near future by increasing automation, thus doing away with human workforce.

In this fast changing landscape, how these changes have impacted individuals, how different social groups have used social media platforms to share opinions, campaign and even in some cases show hostility, how these changes have influenced a change in the decision making of lawmakers are questions whose answering is the need of the hour.

Another area where political psychology can bring about a revolution is in the understanding of positive psychology and using the principles of positive psychology to understand political behavior. The focus on character strengths and virtues of individuals and how those affect political decisions can indeed be a topic for interest as it can better explain the altruistic behavior of human beings. Also, understanding how positive affect, flow, subjective well-being and resilience affect political psychology would also be key in

understanding political behavior from the view of Jeremy Bentham's, "the greatest happiness of the greatest number."

Although consumerism and the concept of well-being influencing political decisions is interesting since the focus is on happiness, positive emotion and optimism are generally observed in positive psychology. However, there needs to be more research done to understand how political behavior is linked to both hedonic and eudaimonic happiness and about how positive psychology can be linked to political philosophies. All of the above and more are discussed in a very niche field aptly titled positive political psychology, a field which has been compiled by Masaya Kobayashi in 2021. Although his paper has extensively delved into understanding political philosophies and action through the lens of positive psychology, Kobayashi's journal article is the only paper currently available that mentions this field. Quite possibly, he could also have coined this term and brought this field about in existence. Hence, further research is needed to explore the potential of this field and to understand it in greater depth.

## V. CONCLUSION

To conclude, political psychology is a budding field that intends to understand the psychological correlates of political decisions, and the explanation of psychological processes influencing political behavior. However, little effort has been put to understand psychological processes via understanding political behavior. Despite that, the different approaches to understanding political psychology have to a great extent been successful in explaining political phenomena, with the progress of this field tipped to continue influencing our understanding of politics.

Therefore, the field of political psychology helps us understand the reasoning and understanding of politics through concepts and theories in the field of psychology. It aims to explain every kind of political behavior by consistent and substantial analysis, thus helping to predict future political behavior. However, for this field to be able to successfully do that, it would require a lot of research to eventually reach that stage, as many concepts in psychology and many political phenomena still remain to be explained by political psychology.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Beri, D. (2022, June 16). *Cognitive Perspective of Political Behavior*. Psychology Today. Retrieved August 18, 2022, from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/non-weird-science/202207/cognitive-perspective-political-behavior>
- [2] Blais, J., Chen, P. G., & Pruyers, S. (2021, June 21). *Editorial: Political Psychology: The Role of Personality in Politics*. Frontiers. Retrieved August 8, 2022, from <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2021.737790/full>
- [3] Chandran, S. (2011, June 9). *How Does Psychoanalysis Help in Reconstructing Political Thought? An Exercise of Interpretation*. SSRN. Retrieved August 20, 2022, from [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1860705](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1860705)
- [4] Cottam, M. L., Mastors, E., Preston, T., & Dietz, B. (2015). *Introduction to Political Psychology: 3rd Edition* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- [5] Cottam, M. L., Mastors, E., Preston, T., & Dietz, B. (2015). *Introduction to political psychology: 3rd edition*. Routledge.
- [6] *Erich Fromm, A Frame of Orientation and Devotion (1973)*. (n.d.). Panarchy. Retrieved August 15, 2022, from <https://www.panarchy.org/fromm/orientation.html>



- [7] Feist, J., & Fiest, G. J. (2006). *Theories of personality*. McGraw-Hill.
- [8] Fiorina, M. P., & Shapiro, I. (2000, February 26). *Political Scientists Debate Theory of 'Rational Choice'*. The New York Times. Retrieved August 16, 2022, from <http://myweb.liu.edu/%7Euroy/eco54/histlist/pol-sci-rational.htm>
- [9] Gallarotti, G. M. (2011). Soft power: what it is, why it's important, and the conditions for its effective use. *Journal of Political Power*, 4(1), 25–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379x.2011.557886>
- [10] Horowitz, I. L. (1979). Paradigms of Political Psychology. *Political Psychology*, 1(2), 99–103. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3791112>
- [11] Kobayashi, M. (2021, December 16). *Political Philosophies and Positive Political Psychology: Inter-Disciplinary Framework for the Common Good*. NCBI. Retrieved August 20, 2022, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8729262/>
- [12] Kobayashi, M. (2021a, December 13). *Political Philosophies and Positive Political Psychology: Inter-Disciplinary Framework for the Common Good*. Frontiers. Retrieved August 20, 2022, from <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.727818/full>
- [13] Krosnick, J. A., Stark, T. H., & Chiang, I. A. (n.d.). *The Two Core Goals of Political Psychology*. Stanford.edu. Retrieved August 1, 2022, from <https://pprg.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/The-Two-Core-Goals-of-Political-Psychology.pdf>
- [14] Layton, L. (2013). *Psychoanalysis And Politics: Historicising Subjectivity*. NCBI. Retrieved August 20, 2022, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3653236/>
- [15] Ma Tesol, F. B. (2020, November 24). *Positive Psychology vs. Humanistic Psychology*. LinkedIn. Retrieved August 16, 2022, from <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/positive-psychology-vs-humanistic-faith-beatty-ma-tesol/>
- [16] McGraw, K. M. (2000). Contributions of the Cognitive Approach to Political Psychology. *Political Psychology*, 21(4), 805–832. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3792032>
- [17] Nicholson, S. P., & Perez, E. O. (2022, March 17). *Advances in Political Psychology*. ISPP. Retrieved August 18, 2022, from <https://ispp.org/news/advances/>
- [18] Pande, B. M., & Pant, N. (2002). *Contemporary India: A Social Sciences textbook for class X*. National Council of Educational Research and Training.
- [19] Perera, A. (2020, September 4). *Self-Actualization | Simply Psychology*. SimplyPsychology. Retrieved August 17, 2022, from <https://www.simplypsychology.org/self-actualization.html>
- [20] Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. (2004). *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (1st ed.). American Psychological Association / Oxford University Press.
- [21] *Political Psychology*. (n.d.). Encyclopedia.Com. Retrieved August 15, 2022, from <https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/applied-and-social-sciences-magazines/political-psychology>
- [22] Staerklé, C. (2015). Political Psychology. *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 427–433. <https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-08-097086-8.24079-8>
- [23] *What is Rational Choice Theory? - Social Work Theories*. (2022, June 9). CORP-MSW1 (OMSWP). Retrieved August 18, 2022, from <https://www.onlinemswprograms.com/social-work/theories/rational-choice-theory/>
- [24] Wikipedia contributors. (2022, August 26). *Soft power*. Wikipedia. Retrieved August 22, 2022, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soft\\_power](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soft_power)
- [25] Wikipedia contributors. (n.d.). *Raymond Cattell*. Wikipedia. Retrieved August 16, 2022, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raymond\\_Cattell](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raymond_Cattell)
- [26] Yuanyuan, W. (2017). The Application of Positive Psychology in Ideological and Political Education. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research (ASSEHR), Volume 152, 152*, 198–201. <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwi-zuqmg-D5AhVpVYBHVuwC4YQFnoECACQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.atlantispress.com%2Farticle%2F25886971.pdf&usq=AOvVaw2-T9CxAwAPiqsbzyEnDjk1h>