

# Political Science 302

## Free Will, Nature, and Nurture in Politics and Society

University of Washington  
Spring 2024

Professor Mark Alan Smith

office hours:

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2:00-3:00 in Gowen 29, and by appointment (Zoom)

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### Overview of Class:

Do we choose our political values and opinions, or do they result from forces such as genes, socialization, the mass media, and the persuasive power of political elites? Why and when do people commit horrific acts of violence? Why do religious beliefs and practices vary so much from person to person? Where do sexual orientation and gender identity come from? How much control do we have over our personal achievements and the course of our lives?

Broadly speaking, answers to questions such as these invoke one or more of three responses: free will, meaning that we freely choose our actions, opinions, and worldviews; nature, meaning that we follow the paths set by our shared and varying human natures; and nurture, meaning that we are the products of particular social, economic, and political environments. Focusing on the findings of contemporary research, this course will explore free will, nature, and nurture from the vantage point of political science and several other academic disciplines including philosophy, sociology, anthropology, neuroscience, psychology, and behavioral genetics. By comparing the methods and assumptions of different disciplines, the course also helps situate political science within the modern university.

### Learning Objectives:

At the end of the course, students should be able to:

- Explain how several disciplines use free will, nature, and nurture to understand why people think and act as they do
- Evaluate evidence on the causes of people's beliefs and actions
- Apply free will, nature, and nurture to a range of problems in political science and other disciplines

### Required Book:

Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success*

### Course Requirements:

The grading is based on a paper, a midterm exam, and a final exam. The paper will be filtered through Turnitin, a piece of software designed to aid in the detection of plagiarism.

**Grading:**

Acknowledgment of course policies: 1%

Paper: 29%

Midterm exam: 29%

Final exam: 41%

**In-person, no recordings:**

The course will be in-person, without recordings. Copies of all lecture slides will be posted at the course's Canvas page shortly after each class session. Thus, if you need to miss a class, you will have access to the notes from it.

**Religious Accommodations:**

Washington state law requires that UW develop a policy for accommodation of student absences or significant hardship due to reasons of faith or conscience, or for organized religious activities. The UW's policy, including more information about how to request an accommodation, is available at Religious Accommodations Policy, <https://registrar.washington.edu/staffandfaculty/religious-accommodations-policy/>.

Accommodations must be requested within the first two weeks of this course using the Religious Accommodations Request form, available at <https://registrar.washington.edu/students/religious-accommodations-request/>.

**Disability Accommodations:**

Disability Resources for Students (DRS) offers resources and coordinates reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. If you have not yet established services through DRS, but have a temporary or permanent disability that requires accommodations (this includes but is not limited to mental health, attention-related, learning, vision, hearing, and physical or health impacts), please contact DRS at 206-543-8924, or [uwdrs@uw.edu](mailto:uwdrs@uw.edu). See also the DRS website at <http://depts.washington.edu/uwdrs/>

**Academic Honesty:**

Cheating and plagiarism will not be tolerated under any circumstances. A suspected instance will be reported and disciplinary actions may ensue. For further detail about the University of Washington's academic honesty policy, see <https://www.washington.edu/cssc/for-students/academic-misconduct/>

**Plagiarism and Turnitin:**

The UW has a license agreement with Turnitin, an educational tool that helps prevent or identify plagiarism from Internet resources. Your instructor will use the service by requiring that assignments are submitted electronically through Canvas and checked by Turnitin. The Turnitin report indicates the amount of original text in your work and whether all material that you quoted, paraphrased, summarized, or used from another source is appropriately referenced.

**Technology Policy:**

Laptops are allowed during class only for purposes of note-taking and to access course materials. In the interest of minimizing potential distractions to other students from having a

laptop in the seat in front of them, students using laptops will be asked to sit in the back. Outside of special circumstances, it is violation of the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) for students to make or distribute recordings of class sessions.

#### **ChatGPT:**

The course's paper prompts will explain course policies with respect to ChatGPT.

#### **Other Course Policies:**

1. In cases of illness and other extenuating circumstances, the instructor will consider requests for a deadline extension or a makeup exam, so long as a student makes the request ahead of time. The instructor will not look favorably upon requests received after a deadline has passed.
2. There may be instances where a student needs to request an extension but is not comfortable sharing any details with the instructor. The student nevertheless needs to contact the instructor before the deadline. The student can reference something general as the reason for the request, such as a "health problem" or "personal situation."
3. In cases where a student encounters an emergency within four hours of a deadline and needs to ask for an extension, the student's request will include (as an attachment) the work they have completed so far, which could include notes, an outline, and/or a draft.
4. Cases of cheating and plagiarism will be referred to UW's Community Standards and Student Conduct Office.
5. Once an in-person exam begins, a student will not be allowed to leave the room until they submit the exam.
6. A grade of incomplete for the quarter will be given only in cases where a student has been doing satisfactory work up until the last two weeks.
7. Unless authorized through Disability Resources for Students (DRS), students are not permitted to make recordings of lectures or sections.

#### **Schedule of Topics**

Note: I might change some of the readings, videos, and podcasts from what is listed below, but I will always give you advance notice. The course's Canvas site will link to each day's materials.

**March 26** Free will, nature, and nurture in political science and other disciplines.

Read/listen/watch: Closer to Truth, The Big Questions in Free Will (2016)

**March 28** Free will in Western philosophy. Read/listen/watch: Julian Baggin, Do We Have Free Will? (2015); Paul Bloom, The War on Reason (2014); Robert Sapolsky, The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst (2018)

**April 2** Religious ideas, determinism, and free will. Read/listen/watch: Jayaram V, Perspectives on What Karma Means (2021); Richard Phillips, The Origin of Sin (2021); Jane Dempsey Douglass, Predestination (1985); WhyIslam, Concept of God in Islam (2014)

**April 2** Acknowledgment of course policies due

**April 4** Free will and moral responsibility. Read/listen/watch: Adrian Raine, Making a Murderer (2021); Paul Bloom, Natural Born Killers (2013); Michael Shermer, Free Will and Moral Responsibility in a Secular Society (2014); Stephen Cave, There's No Such Thing as Free Will (2016)

**April 9** Free will in political science: structure and agency. Read/listen/watch: Raj Chetty, Improving Equality of Opportunity (2019); Taze Rai, How Could They? (2015); Brian Klaas, Fluke: Chance, Chaos, and Why Everything We Do Matters, LSE event (2024)

**April 11** Nature and evolutionary psychology. Read/listen/watch: Frans de Waal, Moral Behavior in Animals (2012); Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, The Mind Is not a Blank Slate (2015); Cristine Legare, Why Social Science Needs Evolutionary Theory (2018); Laith Al-Shawaf, Seven Key Misconceptions about Evolutionary Psychology (2019); Laith Al-Shawaf, Evolutionary Psychology: Predictively Powerful or Just-So Stories? (2020)

**April 16** Nurture and cultural anthropology. Read/listen/watch: Kwame Anthony Appiah, Honor and Moral Revolutions (2014); Whet Moser, American Violence and Southern Culture (2012); Michele Gelfand, Understanding the Cultural Codes that Drive Behavior (2019); Pew Research Center, What's Morally Acceptable (2014)

**April 18** Nature and nurture: reconciling evolutionary psychology and cultural anthropology. Read/listen/watch: Susan Clancy, Abducted: How People Come to Believe They Were Abducted by Aliens, talk at Microsoft (2016); Hidden Brain, Olympic Victory and Defeat (2016); Alison Gopnik, The Gardener and the Carpenter, talk at Google (2016); Rebecca Saxe, How We Read Each Other's Minds (2009)

**April 23** Midterm exam

**April 25** Nature and nurture in behavioral genetics, part I. Read/listen/watch: Robert Plomin, How DNA Makes Us Who We Are (2019); Gideon Lewis-Kraus, Can Progressives Be Convinced that Genetics Matters? (2021)

**April 30** Nature and nurture in behavioral genetics, part II; applying free will, nature, and nurture to success, achievement, and socio-economic status. Read/listen/watch: Freddie deBoer, Individual Genetics, Group Environments (2020); Ed Yong, A Waste of 1000 Research Papers (2019); Nancy Segal, Twin Misconceptions (2017); Gretchen Reynolds, One Twin Exercises, The Other Doesn't (2015)

**May 2** Free will and willpower; discussion of Gladwell book. Read/listen/watch: Malcolm Gladwell, Outliers, Introduction and chapters 1-4, 6, 8-9, and the Epilogue (2008)

**May 7** Group identity and politics. Read/listen/watch: Laurie Santos, The Roots of Racism in Rhesus Monkeys (2011); Seth Andrews, Let's Not Wake Up Like This (2019); Thomas Edsall, America, We Have a Problem (2020)

**May 9** Political attitudes and behaviors, part I. Read/listen/watch: Robert Kurzban, Why Everybody (Else) Is a Hypocrite, talk at The Amazing Meeting (2014); Hannah Holmes, Red Brain, Blue Brain (2014); John Hibbing, Liberals and Conservatives: The Biology of Political Differences (2019); Christopher Federico, The Psychology of Political Behavior (2019)

**May 14** Political attitudes and behaviors, part II. Read/listen/watch: Julia Galef, Soldiers and Scouts: Why Our Minds Weren't Built for Truth, talk at Long Now Foundation (2019), just the first 50:45; Shadi Hamid, How Politics Replaced Religion in America (2021)

**May 16** Political attitudes and behaviors, part III. Read/listen/watch: Roy Baumeister, Do You Really Have Free Will? (2013); Glenn Wilson, The Psychology of Politics (2012); Francis Fukuyama, The Origins of Political Order, talk at the Carnegie Council (2014)

**May 20** Paper due by 8:00 PM. You will upload your paper to the course's Canvas site.

**May 21** Nature and nurture in religion. Read/listen/watch: Justin Barrett, The Naturalness of Religion (2011); Ara Norenzayan, The Idea that Launched a Thousand Civilizations (2012); Kristin Laurin, Belief in God: A Cultural Adaptation with Important Side Effects (2017); Azim Shariff, Psychological and Social Consequences of Religious (Dis)belief (2015)

**May 23** Nature and nurture in sex and gender. Read/listen/watch: Judith Butler, Your Behavior Creates Your Gender (2011); Wikipedia entry on fa'afafine; Carole Hooven, Testosterone: The Hormone that Dominates and Divides Us, talk at Harvard Museum of Natural History (2022); Scott Barry Kaufman, Taking Sex Differences in Personality Seriously (2019)

**May 28** Nature and nurture in sexual orientation. Read/listen/watch: The Economist, A Scientific Study Has Established That There Is No 'Gay Gene' (2021); Robert Sapolsky, The Toxic Intersection of Poverty and Stress (2019). (Although it's not on today's topic, the Sapolsky interview complements themes from earlier class sessions.)

**May 30** The political and policy implications of beliefs about free will, nature, and nurture. Read/listen/watch: Elizabeth Suhay, The Political Science of Genetic Explanations (2018); Discovery Institute, The Wedge Document (1998); J. P. Moreland, Neuroscience and the Soul (2013); Robert Frank, Before Tea, Thank Your Lucky Stars (2009)

**June 6** Final exam, 4:30-6:20