

American Politics Through Film
POLSCI 201 Summer 2015
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Course Description and Objectives

American politics have been the subject of the arts from the very beginning of the nation. From the writings of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine to the modern films of Michael Moore, politics is a subject that has captivated the creative talents of generations of Americans. Writers and directors have made films celebrating, criticizing, and questioning American democracy since the early days of film. From D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* to today, film has been perhaps one of the leading mediums for political expression.

Movies can bring into focus political events and issues to a mass audience in a way that everyday debate cannot. Through the stories they tell and the lessons they teach, film can enlighten a broad swath of American society unlike perhaps any other form of expression. The ability to bring these ideas to millions of Americans is something that is unique to film. Movies can also serve as a method of teaching us about politics. We will use film as a tool to teach us about American democracy and the issues and questions surrounding.

First, we will look at political institutions by examining what movies say about two of the most prominent American political institutions: the president and Congress. Both of these offices must be elected, and elections in America is the second topic we will study. Taken together, the films from these first two weeks will examine democracy from different angles. Who runs for office? Who is elected? How does politics affect these people, and what do they do once they are elected?

Then, we will look at several important themes. Our third week is dedicated to the role of the media— what we think it does, and what we think it should do. Next is America's long and contentious debate over racial equality—a debate that is often (but incorrectly) characterized as having only two sides. Finally, we will examine the role of international relations in creating national fear from the Cold War to the present day.

Required Films and Readings

Most films are available from the UMass library, and all are available from Netflix (though not all are available to stream instantly). Many are available from Amazon Instant Video or Blockbuster on Demand, and most should be accessible through local libraries as well. Students should consider joining one of these services. Many of them offer free trial periods. I will provide a comparison chart on Blackboard to help students decide how best to procure each film. Movies are listed in the order they should be watched. This is often, though not always, chronological order. Whether in chronological order or not, the films are listed in the order that best explores the development of each week's theme. Lecture notes will be posted on Moodle to help explain each film, but these notes should not substitute for viewing the movies themselves.

The required textbook is:

A Novel Approach to Politics: Introducing Political Science through Books, Movies and Popular Culture, 3rd Edition (2013)

Other readings will be available on Blackboard.

Assignments

Short Papers – 10% each

These 3-4 page papers will be short reactions to the readings for a given week. They will ask you to compare or contrast among the films/readings for that week. Instructions for each paper will be posted no later than the Monday before the paper is due (all short papers are due at 11:59 p.m. on Sunday of the designated week) so that you can consider the questions for the short paper as you do the readings through the week.

Short papers are due:

11:59 p.m. on Sunday, May 24

11:59 p.m. on Sunday, June 7

11:59 p.m. on Sunday, June 14

11:59 p.m. on Sunday, June 21

Essays – 20% each

Essays are 5-7 pages in length, and they will ask you to compare/contrast films, readings and themes across weeks or modules. I will post the essay prompts no later than one week prior to the assignment being due.

Essays are due:

11:59 p.m. on Sunday, May 31

11:59 p.m. on Friday, June 26

Discussion Board Participation – 20%

There will be a discussion board dedicated to each week's films and readings. Students are encouraged to interact with each other, ask questions, offer their impressions of the movies, etc. Students are required to post one question based on readings and movies each week. Discussion posts are due by noon each Thursday. You may have not read or watched all the material assigned at that point, but your answer should be grounded in some of them. Students must also reply to at least one other student's post by the end of the week (11:59 p.m. on Sunday). Students are encouraged to post and discuss films beyond the requirements for class.

Grading Scale

The grading scale for this course is:

A 93 - 100.00 **B-** 80 - 81.99 **D+** 68 - 69.99

A- 90 - 92.99 **C+** 78 - 79.99 **D** 62 - 67.99

B+ 88 - 89.99 **C** 72 - 77.99 **D-** 60 - 61.99

B 82 - 87.99 **C-** 70 - 71.99 **F** 0 - 59.99

Class Policies

Online Summer Session

Online summer courses are very different than during the course of the semester. We will be going over 14 weeks of material in only 5. You will be focused on this class unlike those during the semester when you may be taking 5-6 at once. You will need to manage time appropriately, and a good computer and internet connection will be essential to pass the course and complete work when due.

Late Assignments

Late assignments will be penalized one-third of a letter grade for each day they are late. For example, an A would become an A- if it comes in one day late. I will not grant extensions unless they are requested in advance and before the due date. These will only be granted for medical reasons or other serious personal issues only with a doctor's note or other documentation.

Office Hours

I will hold weekly office hours using Blackboard's chat feature (accessible via the left-hand menu on the course website). I am also happy to answer any questions via e-mail or make appointments to discuss any questions or concerns in real time via Blackboard's chat feature.

Academic Honesty

This course will adhere to the University of Massachusetts policy on honesty and plagiarism. (<http://www.umass.edu/academichonesty>). Any plagiarism will result in an "F" for the assignment, and possibly the course. Any cheating or plagiarism will be reported to the University Academic Honesty Board.

Netiquette

Please read the Netiquette document for this course for information relating to tech support, grammar/writing style, course logistics, etc. I hope that you will consider yourself more than a student in this course, but as part of a community dedicated to exploring the development of American politics. In that vein, students must respect classmates and their perspectives. Disagreement and debate will produce a more interesting discussion, but you ought to relate to your classmates in a manner that you yourself would want to be addressed.

Disability Statement

If any student has any documented disability, I will be happy to make reasonable accommodations. These must be reported to me, as well as to the Office of Disability Services within the first two weeks of the course. I will be happy to work with individual students and the Office of Disability Services to ensure success in the course.

Class Schedule

Part 1: American Political Institutions, Democracy, and Film (May 18-24)

Films:

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939)

Lincoln (2012)

Advise and Consent (1962)

Readings:

Van Belle, Chapter 1

Van Belle, Chapter 5

Matt Bai- "The Tantalizing Lure of the Outsider Candidate" SEE BLACKBOARD

Introductory discussion post due by noon on Thursday, May 21

Short Paper 1 due by 11:59 p.m. on Sunday, May 24

Part 2: Elections and Democracy (May 25-May 31)

Films:

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962)

The Candidate (1972)

Primary Colors (1998)

Readings

Van Belle, Chapter 3

Van Belle, Chapter 10

Discussion post due by noon on Thursday, May 28

Essay 1 due by 11:59 p.m. on Sunday, May 31

Part 3: The Role of Media in Our Democracy (June 1-June 7)

Films:

All the President's Men (1976)

Goodnight and Good Luck (2008)

Network (1976)

Readings:

Van Belle, Chapter 11

Tom Junod: "Why Does Roger Ailes Hate America?" (2011) – SEE BLACKBOARD

Tom Junod: "Jon Stewart and the Burden of History" (2011) – SEE BLACKBOARD

Discussion post due by noon on Thursday, June 4

Short Paper 2 due by 11:59 p.m. on Sunday, June 7

Part 4: Race, Power, and Inequality Through American History (June 8-14)

Films:

The Birth of a Nation (1915)

To Kill a Mockingbird (1962)

Selma (2014)

Readings:

Van Belle, Chapter 2,4

John Nickel: "Disabling African American Men: Liberalism and Race Message Films" (2004) – SEE BLACKBOARD

Nelson George: "Still Too Good, Too Bad or Invisible" (2013) – SEE BLACKBOARD

Discussion post due by noon on Thursday, June 11

Short Paper 3 due by 11:59 p.m. on Sunday, June 14

Part 5: International Relations and American Democracy (June 16-22)

Films:

Charlie Wilson's War

Dr. Strangelove (1964)

The Manchurian Candidate (2004)

Readings:

Van Belle Chapter 11

Molly Haskell: "Whatever the Public Fears Most, It's Right Up There on the Big Screen" (2004)

– SEE

BLACKBOARD

Mark Osteen: "The Big Secret: Film Noir and Nuclear Fear" (2004) – SEE BLACKBOARD

Ann Hornaday: "Where's the Paranoia?" (2013) – SEE BLACKBOARD

Discussion post due by noon on Thursday, June 19

Short Paper 4 Due by 11:59 p.m. on Sunday, June 22

Essay #2 Due by 11:59 p.m. on Friday, June 27