

PLAP 4500: Pop Culture and American Politics
Spring 2021

Instructor: Alexander Welch, Ph.D.

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Office Hours: Wednesdays 4-6; by appointment over Zoom

Zoom Office Hours Link:

“Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; Truth isn't.” - Mark Twain

“Only through a deep and unfailing awareness of the structure and effects of information, through a demystification of media, is there any hope of gaining some measure of control over television, or the computer, or any other medium.” - Neil Postman

“I can be presidential, but if I was presidential, I would only have - about 20% of you would be here, because it would be boring as hell.” - Donald J. Trump

Overview: This course explores the relationship between popular culture and politics, how celebrities affect political events, the impact of popular culture on politics, and political representations in pop culture especially as they intersect with issues of race, gender, and sexuality. The first half of the course examines the rise of a celebrity-infused political culture and analyzes the changing influence of Hollywood on political campaigns. The remainder of the course considers political representations in TV, film, theater, and music, both in the American context as well as in international relations.

Required Texts (Amazon Links Attached):

[Brownell, Kathryn Cramer. 2014. *Showbiz Politics: Hollywood in American Political Life*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.](#)

[Wright, Lauren A. 2020. *Star Power: American Democracy in the Age of the Celebrity*. New York: Routledge.](#)

[Foy, Joseph J. 2008. *Homer Simpson Goes to Washington: American Politics through Pop Culture*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.](#)

[Irwin, William ed. 2013. *The Ultimate South Park and Philosophy: Respect my Philosophah!* West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell.](#)

[Young, Laura D. & Ñusta Carranza Ko. 2020. *Game of Thrones and the Theories of International Relations*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books. \(E-book available through UVA Library\)](#)

Texts that are Recommended, but not Required:

[Dyson, Stephen Benedict. 2015. *Otherworldly Politics: The International Relations of Star Trek, Game of Thrones, and Battlestar Galactica*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.](#)

[Scott, Gregory M. & Stephen M. Garrison. 2016. *The Political Science Student Writer's Manual*, 8th ed. Boston: Longman.](#)

[Harvey, Mark. 2018. *Celebrity Influence: Politics, Persuasion, and Issue-Based Advocacy*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press.](#)

Objectives:

- 1) Understand the centrality of popular culture in our lives and society, particularly the effects pop culture has on our political system, parties, and communication.
- 2) Understand the motives and biases media outlets have and how these biases manifest in the choices that media companies make in how they depict our world.
- 3) Analyze the emergence of a political system dominated by media, as well as the consequences of such a system.
- 4) Study and discuss the importance of pop culture in the “real world.”
- 5) Prepare students for careers in academia, journalism, government, parties, or related fields in which they may have to study these issues.

Outcomes: After completing the course, students should:

- 1) Be cognizant of the influence and impact pop culture, in all its forms, has on our politics and political system.
- 2) Be more informed consumers of media and critical of pop culture messages.
- 3) Have a better sense of the long and short-term historical trends of pop culture, its ubiquity, and the important roles celebrities have played in our politics.
- 4) Be able to conduct and write academic research papers.
- 5) Have improved research, writing, and analytical skills.

Important Dates:

February 16- Add/Drop Deadline

February 26- Research Paper Proposal Due at 5 PM ET

March 11- First Take-Home Midterm Due

March 23- Withdrawal Deadline

May 6- Research Paper Due

May 13- Second Take-Home Midterm Due

Grade Breakdown:

Attendance and Participation: 10%
 Office Hours Visitations: 5%
 Discussion Forum Posts: 10%
 First Midterm: 20%
 Second Midterm: 20%
 Research Paper: 35%

Grades:

A+: 98-100	B+: 88-89	C+: 78-79	D+: 68-69
A: 93-97	B: 83-87	C: 73-77	D: 63-67
A-: 90-92	B-: 80-82	C-: 70-72	D-: 60-62
			F: <60

All grades are final. You can ask questions about your grades, but there are no regrades or do-overs, nor are there make-ups if you miss a window for an exam, except in emergency situations. **I will not accept late work.** Relatedly, **all due dates and times are in Eastern Time.** If you will be spending the course in another time zone, please prepare, accordingly.

Remember, grades do not measure your worth as a person and will be utterly insignificant once you graduate from the University of Virginia. Actively participating in class and doing your best work will earn you recommendations from former professors and TAs; attempting to haggle your way to an A- instead of a B+ will not.

Structure of the Course: An ordinary session will feature an introduction/review of the week's themes, lasting anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour. The rest of the time is for discussion of the readings and materials. **You are expected to be prepared with questions** and ready to contribute to discussions. In other words, come to each session with discussion questions written down, and probably some prepared talking points, as well. To facilitate this, I ask that you make one forum post a week; details are below. I hope that the small size of the class is conducive to some great discussions and community-building this semester, and that all students feel comfortable making contributions to our seminar discussions.

Finally, **I expect each student to visit me at least twice in office hours throughout the semester**, even if it is just to say hi and introduce yourself. Visiting me at least twice in office hours is worth 5% of your final grade, and it is a really good idea in the lead-up to due dates for papers and before exams, as well as any other time.

Readings: All required readings are to be read in advance of our seminar. The "recommended" readings are not required, but may be useful for your research papers, or just your general interest in the topics. Our exams and discussions will only focus on the materials from the required readings.

Netiquette Policies: Since this is an online class, all of our interactions will be done over Zoom. Unless I state otherwise, **you are to have your webcams on throughout the entire session.** If internet connectivity will be an issue for you, please reach out to me ASAP. Moreover, I expect you to be paying attention, staying off of other websites, and actively asking questions and responding to questions. I will be recording lectures for this class, but not the discussion portion. The lecture recordings will be made available on Collab under “Online Meetings.”

Attendance: Zoom creates reports about your attendance, so I will not go through a roll call at the start of each class. If you miss three sessions, your final grade will be lowered by an entire letter grade. If you miss four sessions, you will fail the course. Attendance and participation are **VITAL** to your success in this course. By joining this course, you are agreeing to attend our weekly seminars and fully participate.

If UVA cancels in-person classes, we will cancel the seminar for the week. However, forum posts are still due at the regular time and I will post a pre-recorded lecture for you to follow.

Forum Posts: Each week, you are to make a post to the “Discussions” tab of Collab. These posts will take the “3, 2, 1” format. You are to list the following in your posts: 3 things you learned from the weeks, 2 things you found interesting, and 1 discussion question, which can either be a question to generate discussion or a clarification question pertaining to the readings.

These posts are due by noon on the day of our seminar (ie: every Thursday at 12 PM ET).

Papers: You will submit a research paper of 15+ pages this semester on a topic of your choice. You must submit a one-paragraph proposal by **February 26th** at 5 PM ET containing your core research question and a proposed methodology. You will also, once a month, have to submit a research paper progress update, stating what you have done and what you plan to do next. This is NOT a paper you can write in one night, or even a week; **you will have to work on it throughout the semester.** See the end of the syllabus for more information.

Take-Home Midterms: You will have two midterms for this class, both of which are take-home, essay-based midterms. For each midterm, you will have five questions from which to choose. You must write three essays that are *at least* five paragraphs in length. You will have one week to complete the midterm. You are allowed to use notes, readings, and textbooks to help you, but nothing from outside of the class.

Class Policies: All normal university policies are in effect. In addition to the ever-present Honor Code, plagiarism is a serious academic offense that, as the demise of former Montana Senator John Walsh demonstrates, can follow you for the rest of your

life. **I will report you to the Honor Committee if I have reason to believe you have plagiarized.**

You are to submit your take-home exams and papers when they are due. There will be no retakes if you miss a window for submission.

In our debates and normal discussion sections, we will inevitably discuss topics that might generate some controversy, and that is a good thing (if we all agreed on everything, our discussions would be rather dull affairs). All I ask is that when such disagreements occur, that you all respect each other and argue in a civil manner. There is no ideological line that we follow in this class, so you should be prepared to have your beliefs challenged and re-considered. The purpose of a university education is to intellectually grow by being challenged, learning new things and considering different perspectives. Our classroom policies and behaviors should help foster this goal.

Finally, **HAVE FUN!** This course should be both challenging and enjoyable.

Academic and Nonacademic Support Resources at UVA: I will work to provide a safe and equitable learning environment in this course; and, at the same time, I recognize that what happens in the classroom will be just one element of your session at UVA. Although I may not always be able to address your questions and concerns, I hope you won't hesitate to contact me about any issues that may be affecting your experience in this class.

Additional resources that are available to you include:

UVA Writing Center: The Writing Center is a wonderful way to enhance your writing ability throughout your time at UVA. Trained tutors work with you at any stage of the writing process on any writing assignment for any class with the ultimate goal of strengthening your ability and confidence as a writer. They will not proofread your papers, but they will help guide you through troublesome areas of the writing process or simply give you feedback that can help you learn things about yourself as a writer. This is a free and very valuable resource. Please, take advantage of it. The writing center is located at 314 Bryan Hall but will provide sessions online. To make an appointment go to virginia.mywconline.com.

Resources for Addressing Sexual Violence:

The University's central site is: <http://www.virginia.edu/sexualviolence/>. You can also contact the [Office of the Dean of Students](#): 434- 924-7133 (or after hours and weekends call 434-924-7166 for the University Police Department; ask them to refer the issue to the Dean on Call);

[Sexual Assault Resources Agency](#) (SARA) hotline: 434-977-7273 (24/7); [Shelter for Help in Emergency](#) (SHE) hotline: 434-293-8509 (24/7); [UVA Women's Center](#): 435-982-2361; and [Student Health \(CAPS\)](#).

Resources for Addressing Racial Violence or Other Instances of Harassment or Discrimination:

<http://www.virginia.edu/justreportit/>. You can also contact the [Office of the Dean of Students](#): 434-924-7133 (or after hours and weekends call 434-924-7166 for the University Police Department; ask them to refer the issue to the Dean on Call); and [Student Health \(CAPS\)](#).

In addition, the Center for Teaching Excellence (formerly the Teaching Resource Center) has assembled a wide-ranging list of sites and offices that can help respond to both academic and non-academic concerns. You can find it at:

<http://trc.virginia.edu/resources/support-for-uva-faculty-and-students/>.

As your teachers and as people, know that we care about your well-being and stand ready to provide support and resources as we can. As a faculty member and graduate student, I am a “Responsible Employee,” which means that I am required by University policy and federal law to report anything you tell me about sexual violence to the University's Title IX Coordinator. The Title IX Coordinator's job is to ensure that the reporting student receives the resources and support that they need, while also reviewing the information presented to determine whether further action is necessary to ensure the safety of you and the University community. If you would rather keep information confidential, there are “Confidential Employees” you can talk to on Grounds (http://www.virginia.edu/justreportit/confidential_resources.pdf).

The worst possible situation would be for you or your friend to remain silent when there are so many here willing and able to help.

Contacting Me: Email is, by far, the best way to reach me. My email address is: atw5tg@virginia.edu.

One final note- these are trying times for all of us. If you are facing some difficulty that is inhibiting your ability to do your best in this class, please do not hesitate to reach out to me. As your professor, I care about you and your success and well-being, not only in this course, but far more importantly, in life.

Course Schedule

To paraphrase Captain Barbossa, “the syllabus is more like guidelines than actual rules.”
Some of the material, especially after the midterm, might change.

Unit 1: Intro and Background Material

February 4th- Welcome and Introduction to the Class

Postman, Neil. 1985. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. New York: Penguin Books. Chapters 4, 6.

Postman, Neil. 1998. “Five Things we Need to Know about Technological Change.”

Recommended:

Hall, Stuart. 1981. “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular” in Samuel, Raphael, ed. *People’s History and Socialist Theory*: 231-235, 237-239.

February 11th- Research Methods, Measurements, and Term Paper Overview

Hillygus, D. Sunshine. “The Practice of Survey Research: Changes and Challenges.” Chapter 2.

Delli Carpini, Michael X, and Bruce Williams. 1994. “The Method Is the Message: Focus Groups as a Method of Social, Psychological, and Political Inquiry.” *Research in Micropolitics*, 4, 57-85.

Prasad, B. Devi. 2008. “Content Analysis: A Method for Social Science Research.” In *Research Methods for Social Work*, ed. D. K. Lal Das and V. Bhaskaran. New Delhi: Rawat, 173-93.

Bainbridge, Jason. “Textual Analysis and Media Research” in *Media and Journalism, New Approaches to Theory and Practice*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hall, Stuart. 1979. “Encoding and Decoding.”

Recommended:

Hochschild, Jennifer. 1981. *What’s Fair*: 17-26. (For an overview of the methodology of in-depth interviews)

Waltz, Kenneth. 1979. *Theory of International Relations*, Chapter 1. (Excellent piece for understanding the concept of a social science theory)

Katz, Elihu, Jay G. Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch. 1974. "Uses and Gratification Research." *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 37 (4): 509-523.

Press, Andrea L., and Elizabeth R. Cole. 1999. *Speaking of Abortion: Television and Authority in the Lives of Women*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Chapter 1 (1-24) & Appendix A. (Example of Focus Group Research)

Gilens, Martin. 1996. "Race and Poverty in America: Public Misperceptions and the American News Media." *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 60 (4):515-41. (Example of Content Analysis)

Pennington, Rosemary. 2016. "Dissolving the Other: Orientalism, Consumption, and Katy Perry's Insatiable Dark Horse." *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 40(2), 111-127. (Example of Textual Analysis)

February 16- Add/Drop Deadline

Unit 2: Celebrity Culture and Politics

February 18- Building a Celebrity Culture

Questions of the Week: Should celebrities be political? Why or why not? How have celebrity politics influenced us and how has their influence changed?

Brownell, Introduction, Chapters 1, 3, 5-7

Regina G. Lawrence and Amber E. Boydston. 2017. "Celebrities as Political Actors and Entertainment as Political Media" in Van Aelst, P. & Walgrave S. *How Political Actors Use the Media*, Palgrave: London/New York.

WATCH:

[George Clooney's Speech at the 2006 Oscars](#)

Recommended:

Harvey, Mark. 2018. *Celebrity Influence: Politics, Persuasion, and Issue-Based Advocacy*. University of Kansas Press. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press.

Kruse, Kevin. 2015. *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America*. New York: Basic Books. Chapter 5, "Pitchmen for Piety."

Brownell, Chapters 2, 4, Conclusion

February 25: Celebrities in Politics – Running for Office

Wright, all

Santa Ana, Otto. 2017. "The Rhetoric of our Celebrity Demagogue." *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, 42, 2 (Fall): 267-283.

Recommended:

Schäfer-Wünsche, Elisabeth and Christian Kloeckner. 2016. "Politics of Celebrity: The Case of Donald Trump." Lecture Series: "The Road to the White House." University of Bonn.

Rodgers, Daniel T. 2016. "How the USA Ended Up with Trump." *The World Today*, 72, 5 (September & October): 14-16.

Street, John. 2019. "What is Donald Trump? Forms of 'Celebrity' in Celebrity Politics." *Political Studies Review*, 17, 1: 3-13.

March 4: Celebrities in Politics – Comedy Representations

First Midterm Released

Questions of the Week: Is any of this funny? How does political humor affect our political ecosystem?

Foy, Chapter 8

Baumgartner, Jody C. Jonathan S. Morris, & Natasha L. Walth. 2012. "The Fey Effect: Young Adults, Political Humor, and Perceptions of Sarah Palin in the 2008 Presidential Election Campaign." *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 76, 1 (Spring): 95-104.

Becker, Amy B. 2017. "Trump Trumps Baldwin? How Trump's Tweets Transform SNL into Trump's Strategic Advantage." *Journal of Political Marketing*, 19, 4: 386-404.

Hart, Roderick P. and E. Johanna Hartelius. 2007. "The Political Sins of Jon Stewart." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 24: 263-272.

Bennett, W. Lance. 2007. "Relief in Hard Times: A Defense of Jon Stewart's Comedy in an Age of Cynicism." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 24: 278-283.

Waisanen, Don J. & Amy B. Becker. 2015. "The Problem with Being Joe Biden: Political Comedy and Circulating Personae." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* (2015): 1-16

Sixsmith, Ben. 2020. "Sarah Cooper Isn't Funny." *Spectator*.

WATCH:

[Sean Spicer Press Conference \(SNL\)](#)

[2020 Democratic Debate \(SNL\)](#)

[Sarah Palin and Hillary Address the Nation \(SNL\)](#)

[Sarah Cooper: How to Medical](#)

Recommended:

Compton, Josh. 2016. "Live from DC: *Saturday Night Live* Political Parody References in Presidential Rhetoric." *Comedy Studies*, 7, 1: 62-78.

Gray, Jonathan, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson. 2009. *The State of Satire: The Satire of State: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network World*. New York: NYU Press.

March 11: No Class

First Midterm Due

Unit 3: Fictional Representations of Politics and Culture

March 18: Fiction and Political Attitudes

Should fiction shape our attitudes? Why does it?

Foy, Introduction

Irwin, Introduction, Chapters 2, 4, 11

Feldman, Stanly & Lee Sigelman. 1985. "The Political Impact of Prime-Time Television: 'The Day After.'" *The Journal of Politics*, 47, 2 (June): 556-578.

Mulligan, Kenneth & Philip Habel. 2013. "The Implications of Fictional Media for Political Beliefs." *American Politics Research*, 41, 1: 122-146.

March 23: Deadline to Withdraw

March 25: South Park, The Simpsons, and Sitcoms

Question: How do popular television comedies affect of our views of politics and political issues?

Irwin, Chapters 13-17

Foy, Chapters 1-3

Frim, Daniel. 2014. "Pseudo-Satire and Evasion of Ideological Meaning in *South Park*." *Studies in Popular Culture*, 36, 2 (Spring): 149-171.

Janssen, David. 2003. "Time to Lose Faith in Humanity: *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and the Satiric Tradition." *Studies in Popular Culture*, 26, 1 (October): 27-36.

Thompson, Ethan. 2009. "Good Demo, Bad Taste: South Park as Carnavalesque Satire" in Gray, Jonathan, Jeffrey P. Jones, & Ethan Thompson, ed. *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*.

Andrews, Travis M. 2018. "How 'South Park' Became the Ultimate #bothsides Show." *The Washington Post*.

April 1: The Fictional Presidency

Question of the Week: How is the presidency portrayed in pop culture? How accurate or inaccurate are these depictions?

Foy, Chapters 5, 10, 11

Lehmann, Christopher. 2001. "The Feel-Good Presidency: The Pseudo-Politics of *The West Wing*." *The Atlantic*.

Podhoretz, John. 2000. "The Liberal Imagination." *The Weekly Standard*.

Frame, Gregory. 2016. "The Leader of the Free World? Representing the Declining Presidency in Television Drama." In B. Kaklamanidou, & M. Tally (Eds.), *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television: Washington as Fiction* (pp. 61). (Routledge Advances in Television Studies). Routledge.

Jones, Patrick & Gretchen Soderlund. 2017. "The Conspiratorial Mode in American Television: Politics, Public Relations, and Journalism in *House of Cards* and *Scandal*." *American Quarterly*, 69, 4: 833-856.

Recommended:

Rollins, Peter C. & John E. O'Connor. 2003. *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press. (Individual Chapters Available on JSTOR)

April 8: Pop Culture and Gender & Sexual Politics

Question of the Week: How does pop culture portray issues of gender and sexuality?

Foy, Chapters 6, 13

Irwin, Chapters 12, 18, 19

Cavalcante, Andre. 2014. "Anxious Displacements: The Representation of Gay Parenting on *Modern Family* and *The New Normal* and the Management of Cultural Anxiety." *Television and New Media*, 1-18.

Glass, Stephanie. 2017. "Feminism in *Parks and Recreation*: A Narrative and Audience Analysis." Wittenberg University.

Golding, Dan. 2019. *Star Wars After Lucas: A Critical Guide to the Future of the Galaxy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Chapter 4: "An Awakening: Diversity as the Politics of *The Force Awakens*."

Recommended:

Feltmate, David and Kimberly R. Brackett. 2014. "A Mother's Value Lies in Her Sexuality: *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, and *South Park* and the Preservation of Traditional Sex Roles." *Symbolic Interaction*, 37, 4 (November): 541-557.

April 15: No Class, Break Day

April 22: Pop Culture and Race

Question of the Week: How do media portray race and how does it matter for our politics, culture, and society?

Boykoff, Jules & Ben Carrington. 2020. "Sporting Dissent: Colin Kaepernick, NFL Activism, and Media Framing Contests." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*. 55, 7: 829-849.

Burroughs, Todd S. 2018. "Black Panther, Black Writers, White Audience: Christopher Priest and/vs. Reginald Hudlin." *Fire!!!*, 4, 2 (Paneling Blackness): 55-93.

Bruyneel, Kevin. 2016. "Race, Colonialism, and the Politics of Indian Sports Names and Mascots: The Washington Football Team Case." *Native American and Indigenous Studies*, 3, 2: 1-24.

Pennington, Rosemary. 2016. "Dissolving the Other: Orientalism, Consumption, and Katy Perry's Insatiable Dark Horse." *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 40(2), 111-127.

Baez, Jillian. 2018. "Navigating and Negotiating Latina Beauty." In *Search of Belonging: Latinas, Media and Citizenship*. University of Illinois Press.

WATCH:

[Black Jeopardy \(SNL\)](#)

[Stuart Hall on Race, Gender, and Class in Media](#)

Recommended:

Dyer, Richard. 1997. "The Matter of Whiteness." *White: Essays on Race and Culture*.

Ionica, Cristina. 2015. "A Legal Right to Genocidal Paranoia: *South Park*, Racism, and the Trayvon Martin Case." *Modern Language Studies*, 45, 1 (Summer): 36-45.

April 29: Game of Thrones and Representation of International Politics

Question of the Week: What kind of politics does Game of Thrones advocate for?

Young and Carranza Ko, Chapters 2, 3, 5, 6, Conclusion ([E-Book Available via UVA Library](#))

Clapton, William and Laura J. Shepherd. 2017. "Lessons from Westeros: Gender and Power in *Game of Thrones*." *Politics*, 37 (1): 5-18.

Beauchamp, Zach. 2017. "Game of Thrones, Season 7: Each Character's Strategy, Ranked by Political Science." *Vox*.

Musgrave, Paul. 2019. "IR Theory and 'Game of Thrones' Are Both Fantasies." *Foreign Policy*.

WATCH:

["When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die"](#)

["Power is a curious thing"](#)

["Power is power"](#)

["Chaos is a ladder"](#)

Recommended:

Dyson, Stephen Benedict. 2015. *Otherworldly Politics: The International Relations of Star Trek, Game of Thrones, and Battlestar Galactica*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Daniel III, J. Furman & Paul Musgrave. 2017. "Synthetic Experiences: How Popular Culture Matters for Images of International Relations." *International Studies Quarterly*, 61: 503-516.

Fathallah, Judith M. 2017. *Fanfiction and the Author*. Amsterdam, University of Amsterdam Press. Chapter 4: "I am Your King: Authority in *Game of Thrones*."

Szucs, Zoltan. 2017. "Realism and Utopianism Reconsidered: A Political Theoretical Reading of *A Song of Ice and Fire*" in Cziganyik, Zsolt, ed. *Utopian Horizons: Ideology, Politics, Literature*. Budapest: Central European Press.

Young, Helen. 2019. "Whitewashing the 'Real' Middle Ages in Popular Media" in Albin, Andrew, ed., et al. *Whose Middle Ages? Teachable Moments for an Ill-Used Past*. New York: Fordham University Press.

May 6: Representing the Politics of “Real America” (Asynchronous)

Question of the Week: What is “Real America” and how should it be represented in media?

Final Paper Due

Irwin, Chapters 5-10

Foy, Chapters 7, 14

Postman, Neil. 1985. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. New York: Penguin Books. Chapters 8, 11.

Weiss, Joanna. 2018. “How Trump Inspired the *Roseanne* Reboot.” *Politico*.

Bettie, Julie. 1995. “Class Dismissed? *Roseanne* and the Changing Face of Working-Class Iconography.” *Social Text*, 45 (Winter): 125-149.

May 13: Second Midterm Due, 6 PM ET

Research Paper Requirements

Option 1: Empirical Research Paper

Overview: A student may choose to write an empirical paper over a research question of his or her own interest. The topic must be relevant to the course and defensible as covering some aspect of pop culture and politics. Students selecting this option will have the ability to earn up to a 105%.

A 1 paragraph synopsis of the proposed paper is due on Friday, February 26th. Final drafts of papers are due by the start of class on Tuesday, May 4th.

Formatting and Logistics:

Length: 15+ pages

Spacing: Double-spaced, eliminate extra space between paragraphs

Font: Times New Roman, 12 pt.

Paper Margins: 1" in every direction

Style: APA/APSA

Submission: Collab under "Assignments" in .doc or .docx format

To be empirical the paper must address a question and engage in research to answer this question in a manner consistent with the methodology taught in a social science research methods course. A discussion of the process is included later in this syllabus and on Collab, but I am assuming that if you are taking a 4000-level seminar that you have been introduced to empirical research methods. If you have not, please come and see me in office hours early and often. There are seven basic points to doing empirical research:

1. Determine what you want to study. What is your research Question?
2. How can this question be answered?
3. Tell us your proposed answer(s). This is your hypothesis.
4. Decide how to study the problem (qualitative/quantitative/both).
5. Do the study (investigate and test hypotheses).
6. Tell us what you found (support/non-support for hypotheses).
7. Tell us what the findings say about your question and theory.

I highly recommend to students who have not taken a research methods course that they do not attempt an empirical research project without first consulting with the course instructor.

Because this is a course centered on political communication and behavior, you have several options for the kind of research you can do. If you would like to use a different method, you will need instructor approval. The readings underneath the methods are available on Collab for your use.

- **Experimental Survey-** you can set up an experiment that manipulates aspects of a survey to a treatment group and compares the results with a control group. It is difficult to imagine that you will be able to successfully conduct any other kind of experiment, given the current climate, but an experimental survey should be easy enough to do. Some resources for using this method:
 - Hillygus, D. Sunshine. “The Practice of Survey Research: Changes and Challenges.”
 - Asher, Herbert. 1988. *Polling and the Public*, chapters 3 and 8 (“Wording and Context of Questions” and “Analyzing and Interpreting Polls”).
- **Content Analysis-** you can systematically study social media content generating quantitative data to compare media outlets, social media sites, or whatever else you may be interested in. Some examples of content analysis:
 - Prasad, B. Devi. 2008. “Content Analysis: A Method for Social Science Research.” In *Research Methods for Social Work*, ed. D. K. Lal Das and V. Bhaskaran. New Delhi: Rawat, 173-93.
 - Gilens, Martin. 1996. “Race and Poverty in America: Public Misperceptions and the American News Media.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 60 (4):515-41.
 - Tankard, James W., Jr. 2001. “The Empirical Approach to the Study of Media Framing.” In *Framing Public Life: Perspectives on Media and Our Understanding of the Social World*, ed. Stephen D. Reese, Oscar H. Gandy and August E. Grant. Mahwah, N.J. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 95-105.
 - Gamson, William A., and Andre Modigliani. 1989. “Media Discourse and Public Opinion on Nuclear Power: A Constructionist Approach.” *American Journal of Sociology* 95 (1):1-37.
- **In-Depth Interviews/Focus Groups-** these methods are empirical, but not necessarily mathematical. You will be facilitating deep discussions of your issue and drawing out trends and patterns from these discussions, and you will need to include descriptive statistics about your subjects. **Note: if you use these methods, you will have to include transcripts of the interviews/focus groups as an appendix. This is time-consuming and tedious, but necessary.**
 - In-depth Interviewing:
 - Hochschild, Jennifer. 1981. *What’s Fair*, 17-26.
 - Lane, Robert Edwards. 1962. *Political Ideology: Why the American Common Man Believes What He Does*. New York: Free Press. Introduction and Appendix A (1-11 & 481-493)
 - Chong, Dennis. 1993. “How People Think, Reason, and Feel about Rights and Liberties” *American Journal of Political Science* 37(3):867-899.
 - Focus Groups:

- Gamson, William A. 1992. *Talking Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, chapter 2 & Appendix A.
 - Delli Carpini, Michael X, and Bruce Williams. 1994. “The Method Is the Message: Focus Groups as a Method of Social, Psychological, and Political Inquiry.” *Research in micropolitics* 4:57-85.
 - Press, Andrea L., and Elizabeth R. Cole. 1999. *Speaking of Abortion: Television and Authority in the Lives of Women*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, chapter 1 (1-24) & Appendix A.
- **Big Data Statistical Analysis-** for this method, you would be downloading (or generating) data into datasets (ANES could be a good source for that kind of data) and running tests of association, causality, or regression. For the purposes of this course, I do not expect anything more advanced than a bivariate OLS Regression, but if you are skilled in statistical analysis, you are welcome to attempt more advanced methods. Here are some links for books that can help you do statistical analysis if you have never done this kind of research.
 - [Kropko, Jonathan. 2015. *Mathematics for Social Scientists*](#). (Available on Collab, pgs. 46-53 and 198-204 are good introductions to OLS Regression and multivariate regression).
 - [Johnson, Janet B., H.T. Reynolds & Jason Mycoff. 2019. *Political Science Research Methods*, 9th ed.](#)
 - [Cameron, Colin & Pravin Trivedi. 2010. *Microeconometrics Using Stata*](#).
 - [Rabe-Hesketh, Sophia & Anders Skrondal. 2012. *Multilevel and Longitudinal Modeling Using Stata, Vol 1: Continuous Responses*](#). (This is if you really want to get into the difficult, advanced forms of regression. I neither expect, nor require, you to come anywhere near this.)

Guide for Writing Empirical Research Papers

A research paper should pose a question about some relevant event or behavior. This question should be easily recognizable and found somewhere in the first page of your paper. Included in the introduction of your paper should be a defense of why anyone should care about finding an answer to your question. You must conduct a literature review that critically evaluates how other scholarship has addressed the general area of your question (or in some cases, how other scholarship has addressed your question specifically). The literature review serves two purposes: One, it allows you to develop a theoretical explanation of how events or behaviors occur. Two, it allows you to determine and explain how your paper adds to our knowledge of the event or behavior (strengthening your argument about why we should care to read your paper).

A quick note regarding policy analysis papers is in order. A policy analysis paper is a special breed of empirical research paper where the question is directly about the quality

of a particular policy. The goal is to assess through empirical analysis whether or not the particular policy is effective in attaining desired outcomes.

Your proposed answer to the research question is your hypothesis. The hypothesis suggests factors that contribute to or impede the event or behavior in question. Hypotheses infer something about events or behaviors based on interpretation of some observation(s). What this means is that in political science we are in the business of inferring causation, if you want to simply report what is, take a journalism class. The hypothesis is a testable claim.

After offering a hypothesis regarding your questions you test the answer using quantitative or qualitative methods for strength and validity. This process requires specifying how you are measuring and interpreting causal factors. The process also means reaching findings (inferences) about whether or not your hypothesis provides a qualified answer to the research question.

Research papers end with a conclusion section that ties everything together. What do we learn about the event or behavior from the research you have conducted? What does this tell us about the world and its future?

Research relies on the evaluation of multiple sources. If you rely on one or two sources for most or all of your research you have engaged in plagiarism. Papers that include plagiarism earn an automatic 0 and the students will be referred to the Honor Committee. Popular media should generally be avoided as a source of information (although use of sources such as the *New York Times*, *London Times*, etc. for specificity of events and statements made by people is acceptable). Textbooks should also generally be avoided as a source of information (if you have a question about whether or not a book is a textbook, just ask your professor). Generally, for a paper of 20 pages in length you would desire about 25 to 30 quality sources of information.

Style and grammar do matter. Because grammar matters, proofread!!! Because grammar matters do not use dangling modifiers, end sentences with prepositions, use sentence fragments, etc. Because style matters, look at a style manual and use appropriate citation style (not citing the source of information used in your paper is plagiarism), use appropriate bibliography styles, and always number your pages appropriately.

In Political Science, two styles are prevalent in the scholarly literature—APSA, which is a revised form of APA, and Turabian, also known as the Chicago Manual of Style (which was originally edited by Katherine Turabian). For this course, I require the use of APSA.

Rubric for paper grading: Empirical Research Paper

Question and Intro:

- A: good, well written intro, good question easily understood and explained
- B: ok intro and question
- C/D: poor intro and question
- F: inadequate intro and question

Literature Review and Theory:

- A: sound examination of relevant literature, well addressed theory
- B: ok or not quite there in either literature or theory
- C/D: poor work
- F: inadequate work

Hypothesis:

- A: well stated, derivable from theory, answers research questions
- B: ok, but not very strong
- C/D: improperly stated but still ok
- F: improperly stated, not derivable from theory, does not answer question

Data and Models or Case Studies:

- A: well explained and examined data, reasonable models/Cases well explained
- B: ok explanation and examination of data, ok models/Cases
- C/D: poor explanation, poor modeling for hypothesis testing
- F: inadequate data and models/Cases for the testing of hypothesis

Findings and Conclusions:

- A: properly explains model results, carefully examines and explains potential conclusions based on findings
- B: adequately explains results, adequately examines potential conclusions
- C/D: poor examination of results and poor, illogical, conclusions
- F: inadequate examination and reporting, missing reporting of conclusions

Style, Grammar, and Miscellaneous:

- A: Well-written, well-organized, clear, all formatting/logistical requirements followed
- B/C: Adequately written or organized
- D/F: Poorly written, poorly organized, or other major problem

Option 2: Critical Textual and Political Analysis of Pop Culture

Description: This option is for students who do not want to do an empirical analysis, but would rather engage in a systemic, rigorous, and theoretical analysis of a pop culture text (**one we have not covered in class**), to analyze what it says about politics and political issues. Students using this method will analyze and critique a text using at least one critical theoretical lens. **Students selecting this option will have the ability to earn a grade of up to 95%** for the assignment.

A 1 paragraph synopsis of the proposed paper is due on **Friday, February 26th**. Final drafts of papers are due by the start of class on **Tuesday, May 4th**.

Formatting and Logistics:

Length: 15+ pages

Spacing: Double-spaced, eliminate extra space between paragraphs

Font: Times New Roman, 12 pt.

Paper Margins: 1" in every direction

Citations: At least twelve academic sources

Style: APA/APSA

Submission: Collab under "Assignments" in .doc or .docx format

Theory: The most important aspect of this kind of paper are the theories that you will use as a lens to analyze your text(s). Some potential theories you can choose from include, but are not limited to: Critical Race Theory, Critical Theory, Marxism, Queer Theory, Feminist Theory, Psychoanalysis (Freudian Theory), Postcolonialism and its offshoots (Orientalism, Latinism, etc.), Black Feminist Theory, Reception Theory, Uses and Gratification Theory, Effects Theories (Strong, Minimal/Two-Step Flow, Hybrid), and Postmodernism.

There are numerous political theories you can use, as well, such as international relations theories (realism, liberalism, etc.), Lockean theories, Hobbesian Theory, Machiavellianism, Madisonianism, Social Contract Theory (Rousseau), Rawlsian Justice, ancient theories (Plato, Aristotle, etc.), and so on.

The theoretical lens(es) you choose will guide your writing. You will be asking the questions that the theory asks about the world, political systems, etc. Critical theories highlight different aspects of a text, ask different questions, and make different assumptions about the world. A political lens, for instance, asks how political systems are represented, how this representation may or may not matter for political success, and similar questions. A feminist lens would look at the media text and how it represents women, gendered power structures, and so on.

Suggested Outline

- Introduction- (1-2 pages)
 - State your topic
 - Announce the theory/theories that you will use in your analysis
 - Finish with a thesis statement that states specifically what your theory is able to tell us about your topic
- Media Text/Event/Topic, itself (1-2 pages)
 - Brief summary or report
 - Probably best to keep your focus narrow (ie: one episode of a show)
 - If doing a TV or film series, use this space to talk about the broad themes of the series.
- Theory (4-6 pages)
 - Describe the theories you will be utilizing
 - Discuss the kinds of questions the theory is interested in asking and what it examines
 - Tell us what assumptions the theory makes about the world
 - This is a good place to make use of the journal articles you need to use. Use these articles to develop a rich sense of what your theory is all about. Use JSTOR or some other database of journal articles to get these articles.
- Critical Analysis (7+ pages)
 - Apply the theoretical lens to the event/text, itself
 - Use specific examples from your topic to bolster your arguments (dialogues, camera angles, images, phrases, etc.)
 - Make sure to discuss the political messages of the pop culture text. Most critical lenses ultimately reduce everything to politics and power structures.
- Conclusion (1-2 pages)
 - Summarize findings
 - Emphasize your use of theory
 - Reiterate thesis
 - End on a strong note
- Works Cited (Separate Page)

Rubric for paper grading: Empirical Research Paper**Question and Intro:**

- A: good, well written intro, good question easily understood and explained
- B: ok intro and question
- C/D: poor intro and question
- F: inadequate intro and question

Theory:

- A: Well-articulated and developed theory
- B: ok or not quite there in either literature or theory
- C/D: poor work
- F: inadequate work

Analysis:

- A: Strong textual analysis, well-versed in theory, using strong examples
- B: Good textual analysis, good use of theory and good examples
- C/D: Some use of theory and some relevant examples in analysis
- F: No connections between theory and insufficient examples

Style, Grammar, and Miscellaneous:

- A: Well-written, well-organized, clear, all formatting/logistical requirements followed
- B/C: Adequately written or organized
- D/F: Poorly written, poorly organized, or other major problem

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