

PSC 300: American Politics Through ‘The West Wing’ and ‘The Newsroom’ Maymester 2014

Instructor: Eric van der Vort

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Office Hours: Weekdays, 11:30am-12:30pm

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Course Location: CH001

Course Schedule: 12 May – 23 May 2013, 1:00pm – 5:00pm

Course Description:

Aaron Sorkin’s critically-acclaimed series ‘The West Wing’ and ‘The Newsroom’ have invited viewers into an idealized version of the executive branch and the media. Both shows feature intelligent, witty and, most of all, idealistic characters who work toward some better end, whether that be the improvement of American politics or turning the tide on the state of the American media. Both shows feature these capable staffs overseen by larger-than-life figures in the persons of President Josiah Bartlet and Newsnight anchor Will McAvoy, who help their staffs fight through battles political and personal. Widely praised and often the focus of intense debate among fans and the popular press, each show has been divergently interpreted as commentaries on the state of American politics and media, pointless liberal fantasies or as wholly inaccurate portrayals of how the world actually works.

In this course, we will work to disentangle fact and fiction in ‘The West Wing’ and ‘The Newsroom’ with a goal in mind for each series. For ‘The West Wing,’ we will interrogate the series with an eye toward asking how it portrays the Presidency. We will examine the show’s depiction of presidential power and the presidency’s role in a system that separates powers and institutional roles, and in the process, we will compare the show’s portrayal to the political reality of the presidency. For ‘The Newsroom,’ we will examine the show with the intention of examining what role the show believes the media should play in a democracy. We will examine what the show’s portrayal of the media’s role in a democracy and compare this portrayal to the role taken on by contemporary media. Taking iconic episodes from each series as our starting point, we will pursue these two goals over the course of the term.

Course Objectives:

At the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Compare popular expectations against reality about the role of the presidency and the media in American democracy.
- Analyze fictional representations of American democracy and their thematic content.

Course Readings:

All readings will be available on Blackboard unless otherwise noted. All readings should be completed before class begins on the date assigned. There is no required textbook.

Episode Viewing:

All selected episodes will be shown during class time for both units. We will be viewing select episodes of *The West Wing* and the first season of *The Newsroom*. As these viewings will form the bases for many of your written responses and exams during the course, you may wish to take notes during the episodes. *The West Wing* is also available to view on Netflix, Amazon Prime, etc. *The Newsroom* is available through HBO's website, if you have access; otherwise, I have sole control of the library's only copy of the DVD through the course of Maymester.

Course Expectations:

Because of the truncated Maymester format, all expectations for this course are heightened. I thus encourage you to put other commitments on pause for the two weeks we will spend together. While I understand that work, life and the lure of warm weather all place demands on our attention, this course will be my primary focus for its two week duration, and I hope that it will be yours as well. You are expected to attend class every day, having done all of the readings and having completed the daily written assignments. Our in-class sessions will be primarily discussion based, and it will make everyone's day more enjoyable if you come prepared to make thoughtful contributions to class based on the readings and the episodes we view in class.

Grading:

Final grades will be based on the following items:

- In-class participation: 35%
- Attendance: 10%
- First exam: 15%
- Second exam: 20%
- Daily written responses: 10%
- Daily reading quizzes: 10%

Participation:

As I note above, the course will be heavily discussion-based. We should have no shortage of topics, given the content and style of the course. Student participation should be informed, insightful and frequent. I do not believe there is any reason for making a trade-off between the three. I recognize that some students will have stronger backgrounds and interest in American politics, but I expect that all students will join in discussions at some point during each session. If you fail to join in our class discussions regularly, I will call on you to join in. Discussion and speaking *in class* are a critical element of success in this course, as they are in life.

Attendance:

Attendance in the Maymester format is particularly important. Missing a single day is the equivalent of missing a full week in a traditional semester. As a result, there will be no excused absences except in accordance with university policy, such as absences documented through the Office of Student Assistance or the Dean's Office of the College of Arts and Sciences or religious observations registered at the beginning of the term through MySlice. Attendance forms a small portion of the final grade, but absences will also negatively impact your participation grade.

Exams:

There will be two exams for this course. Both will be take-home exams that will be handed out on Friday at the end of each unit. Both exams will consist of one question. Your response to the first exam should be no more than 1,000 words in length, will be handed out in class on Friday, May 16 and will be due by 10am on Monday, May 18. The second exam should be no more than 1,500 words in length, will be handed out in class on Friday, May 23 and will be due by 10am on Monday, May 25. Both exams will be submitted via Blackboard.

Reading Quizzes:

The readings for this course will total roughly 30-50 pages a day. We will discuss these in class, and you are expected to have completed them before entering the classroom. There will be a reading quiz every day, with approximately 1-3 questions on it related to the day's readings. These quizzes will be quite easy for those who have done the required readings, and should serve to help, rather than harm, your grade. Quizzes will be conducted with good, old-fashioned pen and paper.

Written Reflections:

As part of your work for the course, you are required to complete 5 written reflections. These responses are intended to be brief reflections on whatever elements of that day's theme, readings, discussion and episodes you found most interesting. These responses should be no more than 300 words (as a reference, the course description on the first page is roughly 300 words). They may contain reflections, questions about the material, continuation of the class discussion or some combination of the three. Responses must be submitted on Blackboard by 10am, before class begins.

Academic Integrity:

Be familiar with the university rules on plagiarism and do not violate them. Plagiarized work (including any material downloaded from the web and not cited as such) will be given a failing grade and students turning such work in **may** also be given an F in the class. In addition, work for this class may not be turned in to fulfill requirements for another class. Finally, any violations of the academic integrity policy will be reported to the Academic Integrity Office. More information can be found here. <http://academicintegrity.syr.edu/>

Reasonable Accommodation:

Our community values diversity and seeks to promote meaningful access to educational opportunities for all students. Syracuse University and I are committed to your success and to supporting Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as amended and the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990). This means that in general no individual who is otherwise qualified shall be excluded from participation in, be denied benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity, solely by reason of having a disability.

If you believe that you need accommodations for a disability, please contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS), located in Room 309 of 804 University Avenue (315-443-4498). ODS is responsible for coordinating disability-related accommodations and will issue students with documented disabilities Accommodation Authorization Letters, as appropriate. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact ODS as soon as possible. Please present any Accommodation Letters to me as early as possible, and at least before the midterm exam. For further information, their website is: <http://disabilityservices.syr.edu>

You are also welcome to contact me privately to discuss your academic needs, although I cannot arrange for disability-related accommodations.

Schedule:

Unit 1: The West Wing: The Presidency and American Democracy

12 May (Session 1): Introduction

Episodes: "Pilot" (S1E1)

Readings:

James Fallows, "Obama, Explained" (available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/03/obama-explained/308874/>)
Nelson, "Evaluating the Presidency" (BB)
Tulis, "The Two Constitutional Presidencies" (BB)

13 May (Session 2): The Presidency and Domestic Affairs

Episodes: "Let Bartlet Be Bartlet" (S1) and "Game On" (S4)

Readings:

Wildavsky, "The Two Presidencies" (BB)
Edwards and Wayne, *Presidential Leadership* chapter 12 (BB)
Federalist #70 (available at <http://www.constitution.org/fed/federa70.htm>)

14 May (Session 3): The Presidency and Foreign Affairs

Episodes: "Enemies Foreign and Domestic" (S3) and "Posse Comitatus" (S3)

Readings:

Polsky, "The Presidency at War"
Federalist #69 (available at <http://www.constitution.org/fed/federa69.htm>) *skim*

15 May (Session 4): The Presidency and American Idealism

Episodes: "The Midterms" (S2) and "Swiss Diplomacy" (S4)

Readings:

Huntington, "American Ideals versus American Institutions" (BB)
John F. Kennedy's First Inaugural Address (BB)
Barack Obama's First Inaugural Address (BB)

16 May (Session 5): The Presidency and Diminished Expectations

Note: First exam handed out in class.

Episodes: "Two Cathedrals" (S2) and *House of Cards* (S1E1)

Readings:

NYT Magazine: "The Post-Hope Politics of 'House of Cards'" (available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/02/magazine/the-post-hope-politics-of-house-of-cards.html>)
Brendan Nyhan, The Green Lantern Theory of the Presidency (available at <http://www.brendan-nyhan.com/blog/2009/12/the-green-lantern-theory-of-the-presidency.html>)

Unit 2: The Newsroom: The Fourth Estate and American Democracy

19 May (Session 6): The Role of the Press

Note: first exam due today by 10am by email.

Episodes: S1E1&2

Readings:

Shanto Iyengar, *Media Politics*, Ch. 2 “The Press and the Democratic Process” and Ch. 4 “Reporters, Official Sources, and the Decline of Adversarial Journalism” (BB)

20 May (Session 7): The State of American Media

Episodes: S1E3&4

Readings:

Stroud and Muddiman "The American Media System Today" (BB),
Ladd "The Era of Media Distrust and Its Consequences for Perceptions of Political Reality" (BB)

21 May (Session 8): Media’s Impact on Society and Government (Does It Have One?)

Episodes: S1E5&6

Readings:

Putnam, “Bowling Alone” (Ch. 1 and 13) (BB)
Federalist #84 (BB)

22 May (Session 9): Can Media Promote Civility?

Episodes: S1E7&8

Readings:

Jurgen Habermas “Political Communication in Media Society” (BB)
Mutz and Reeves “The New Videomalaise: Effects of Televised Incivility on Political Trust” (BB)

23 May (Session 10): The Role of the Press Reconsidered

Note: second exam handed out in class.

Episodes: S1E9&10

Readings:

New York Times v. Sullivan, New York Times Co. v. United States (selections) (BB)

26 May: second exam due by 10am by email.