**Politics 200: Mass Politics in a Media Age**  
Fall 2011  
Tuesday and Thursday, 3:00 to 4:15 in King 106  
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Office Hours: Monday and Thursday, 11:00 to 12:00 in Rice 203

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**Course Description**
American politics has fundamentally changed over the past quarter century. Sound bites are shorter, cynicism is higher, hard news is giving way to soft news, and new media have made political information ubiquitous. In this media-driven world, do we—as democratic citizens—fulfill our obligation to be ‘good citizens’? Do we make rational voting decisions? Are we politically engaged? In a related vein, do politicians, the media, and our political institutions promote or obstruct our efforts to be good citizens? In this course, we will address these questions with the goal of developing a thorough understanding of the relationship between citizens, the media, and politicians in a rapidly changing media age.

**Course Objectives**
This course has three principle objectives:

1. To introduce you to a wide range of scholarly research that deals with mass political behavior in a hyper media environment. We will cover work on democratic competency, engagement, and participation. We will also delve into scholarship that analyzes the interaction between politicians, citizens, and the media.

2. To encourage you to think critically about the political environment in which you live. There will be plenty of opportunities for you to contemplate the current state of political affairs in the United States. Ultimately, I hope that you will think seriously about the issues we discuss and the central question of this class: In this media-driven world, do we—as democratic citizens—fulfill our obligation to be ‘good citizens’?

3. To provide you with an opportunity to hone a wide range of academic skills. You will have the normal chances to write and speak about the course material but you will also have the chance to engage in hands-on work through structured simulations.

**Class Structure**
Research in educational psychology suggests that people have different learning styles—some learn best from reading or hearing things, others are visual learners, and still others learn best by doing things in a hands-on manner. With this in mind, the class will incorporate a number of different teaching methods to help students learn the material in the most effective way possible. Classes will generally mix lecture (auditory), participation (hands-on), and an occasional electronic presentation (auditory and visual).

*Lecture:* A good portion of our class time will be devoted to lectures. Lectures will generally follow the topics covered in the readings; however, they will also include new and important information that students can expect to see on the exams. The Power Point lecture slides will be made available on Blackboard after class.

*Structured Discussion:* You are required to participate actively in this class because it is one of the best ways to learn the material. To meet this objective, I will ask questions and facilitate structured discussions to ensure that you have a chance to express your reactions to various political issues. Discussion and debate rest at the heart of politics so active participation is strongly encouraged.
Electronic Presentation: From time to time, a video or other electronic presentation will be shown. You should watch these presentations carefully as they provide valuable information that will help you complete the class successfully.

Requirements and Grades
Grades will be based on the following assignments. You are required to complete all of these assignments to pass the course.

Class Participation: 15%
Discussion Question Essays (3): 15% each (due on Oct. 9th, Nov. 13th, and Dec. 20th)
Midterm Exam: 20% (on October 20th)
Final Exam: 20% (on December 13th)

Class Participation (15%): As not everyone is equally verbose, participation grades will be based on the quality, not the quantity, of participation. Quality participation requires consistent attendance, thoughtful contributions, and a positive attitude toward the class and its activities—even if something irks you, hiding your disdain and/or pretending that you actually like it will improve your participation grade! Your participation in structured class activities (e.g., reporting the news, campaign communications project) will also factor into your participation grade.

Discussion Question Essays (15% each): You are required to write three discussion question essays. Appendix 1, at the end of this document, provides details on how these should be written. You must submit your first paper on or before Sunday, October 9th at 9:00 pm, your second on or before Sunday, November 13th at 9:00 pm, and your third on or before Thursday, December 20th at 9:00 pm. Each paper must be submitted via Blackboard in a single MS Word file. Late essays will NOT be accepted without prior approval from the College. If your paper is not properly uploaded to Blackboard by the deadline, you will receive 0—so plan accordingly!

Exams (20% each): There will be two in-class, closed-book, 75-minute exams in this course. The first will occur on October 20th and the second will take place on December 13th. Questions on each exam will be drawn from the readings and information presented during class. The second exam will focus primarily, but not exclusively, on material from the second half of the course.

Final letter grades will be assigned in the following way.

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Courtesy
Please exercise common courtesy (e.g., no talking at inappropriate times, texting) so that you and your classmates can get the most out of lectures and discussions. Some of the topics we will be discussing are controversial; it is fine to disagree with one another, but please do so in a respectful manner. Also, please be sure to show up on time—we’d hate to start without you!

Honor Code
Oberlin College policy mandates that your performance in this class adhere to the honor code. In general terms, this means that you will be given significant freedoms in exchange for your promise to not cheat, plagiarize material, fabricate information, or participate in any other dishonest academic activity. If you have any questions about the honor code, I encourage you to visit: http://www.oberlin.edu/students/life/rulesregs_pdf/Rules+Regs06_HonorCode.pdf.
Disabilities
Any student with a documented disability should see me immediately so that we can make reasonable accommodations.

TOPICS AND READINGS
You are to do all of the required readings listed below by the date assigned on the syllabus. The optional readings are simply there to help you if you choose to answer the discussion question on that topic.

All required readings are available on Blackboard—log in with your email username and click on “Readings.” Most of the optional readings are available online (through the library website) although please see me if you cannot find something.

September 6th: Introduction and Class Overview
Obviously, this class is about introducing the course material and going over the syllabus. We will also talk about any procedural matters that need attention.

September 8th: The ‘Good Citizen’ and Feelings About Politics and Government
Before thinking about how politics in the media age affect us as citizens, we ought to consider what it means to be a ‘good citizen’. We’ll start this class by addressing some of the most fundamental questions of democratic citizenship. Why do we have government? What does it mean to be a ‘good citizen’? Do Americans live up to the ideals of the ‘good citizen’? We’ll then discuss how Americans generally feel about politics and government. How have feelings about politics and government changed over time and what has caused this change? Are Americans too critical of their government or are they too complacent?

Discussion Question 1: There is considerable distrust and dislike of American government, politics, and politicians. Is the current level of distrust and dislike good or bad for American democracy?

Required Readings:

Optional Readings:
September 13th: Citizen Competency: Political Knowledge and Engagement

Good citizenship presumably requires some level of citizen competency to deal with political issues. However, there is some question about how much demonstrated competency is required for someone to be a ‘good citizen’. This week we’ll address this debate by analyzing the current level of American political competency. Do Americans know enough about politics to be entrusted with picking their leaders and voicing an opinion on policies?

Discussion Question 2: To what extent is political ignorance harming American democracy?

Required Readings:


Optional Readings:


September 15th: Political Participation

Many argue that active political participation is a necessary component of good citizenship and many have commented on the traditionally low level of voting participation in the United States. However, Americans are quite politically active in other ways. In this class, we will look at the level of political participation in the U.S. and then discuss whether it ought to be higher and ways that it might be improved.

Discussion Question 3: Is increasing mass political participation, by definition, a good thing? Is it “elitist” to believe that it may not be?

Required Readings:


Optional Readings:

September 20th: Assessing The Changing Political News Environment
This class is aimed at developing a sense of the changing political news environment and assessing its value in our democratic society. Do the media do a good job covering politics? Many people like to ‘blame the media’ for political shortcomings found among the U.S. citizenry—e.g., “people would know more about politics if the media gave them better information” or “the media makes politics seem sleazy so citizens are overly cynical.” We’ll analyze how the media covers politics and see if these common assertions have merit. In particular, we’ll look at how the media covers (and doesn’t cover) major political events and whether the media offers ‘quality’ political information.

Discussion Question 4: Would citizens feel a stronger attachment to the political world if the news they received delved more honestly, analytically, and historically into the problems we face as a society? (from Bennett, p. 136)

Required Readings:

Optional Readings:

September 22nd: Explaining the Changing Political News Environment
As the last class made clear, there are significant concerns about the quality and purpose of contemporary political reporting. In this class, we’ll investigate the factors that explain why the news media operates as it does. We’ll focus on three related determinants: economic pressures, government deregulation, and journalism norms. As you’ll see, the political news media is caught between its public service responsibilities—i.e., its watchdog role in a democracy—and its corporate motives for generating profits.
Discussion Question 5: What, if anything, might motivate media companies to offer more public service content—i.e., in-depth and thoughtful news, commentary and political discussion?

Required Reading:

Optional Readings:

September 27th: Media Objectivity and Potential Bias
The press plays a critical role in any democracy but questions remain about the proper role of the media. Should reporters adhere to strict objectivity or do they have a social obligation to ‘muckrake’? Is the media biased and, if so, does this interfere with their role as democracy’s watchdog? This class explores these and other questions pertaining to media objectivity and bias.

Discussion Question 6: Should reporters attempt to be completely neutral and unbiased in their reporting? Why or why not?

Required Readings:
Optional Readings:


September 29th: The Reality of Reporting the News: Preparation
To really understand the news, we have to understand how the news gets reported. We’ve read and talked about how journalists do their job, and now it’s your chance to walk in their shoes—i.e., to face the challenges they face on a daily basis. During this class, you’ll partner with two other students to report on an actual news story of your choice. As a team, you’ll pick a topic, organize your investigation, conduct interviews (if necessary), write a script and then produce a 1-minute video report that would conceivably air on the national nightly news. We’ll spend some time during this class watching TV news reports and learning some basic video editing skills to get you started. Your video report must be uploaded to YouTube by 10:00 am on October 4th. You must then submit, also by 10:00 am on October 4th, the YouTube link (i.e., the URL or web address) to Blackboard under “Media Report.”

Required Reading:

- How to Use iMovie: http://support.apple.com/kb/HT2479

October 4th: The Reality of Reporting the News: Presentations
During this class, each team will present their video report to the class for feedback. Each team will give a short introduction, show their video, and then answer questions. Remember, your work on this project will have a significant effect on your participation grade.

October 6th: Media Effects Theories
The media is widely regarded as one of the most important and influential political information sources citizens have. Scholars have, therefore, made considerable efforts to understand how the media affects public opinion and political behavior. This work ranges from abstract theories to precise systems based on an understanding of human cognition. We will review these theories and address the following questions: Does media reporting always influence citizens? Does the media have too much power over citizen opinions? How do citizens interpret and process media information?

Discussion Question 7: Does the news media have too much influence over what Americans think about politics?

Required Readings:

First Discussion Paper is due Sunday, October 9th at 9:00 pm

October 11th: The Internet and Political Reporting
The Internet has undoubtedly changed the nature of political news reporting. Journalists now compete with bloggers for top stories, and activists can distribute their own information even in the middle of an uprising. All of this raises key questions about the role of the Internet in the political news industry. Does the Internet improve the quality of political reporting? Does it enhance the democratic capabilities of citizens?

Discussion Question 8: On the whole, have bloggers improved or worsened political reporting in the United States?

Required Readings:
- Nicholas Lemann. 2006. “Amateur Hour: Journalism without Journalists” The New Yorker 1-5

Optional Readings:
October 13th: The Internet’s Policy Implications
In this class, we’ll discuss and debate two key policy issues that have arisen in the Internet age. The first deals with some of the key crime and safety issues related to cyber socializing—e.g., cyber stalking/bullying, social media use in school, etc. The second looks at control of the Internet—what, if anything, can governments and corporations do to regulate online access and content?

Discussion Question 9: What, if any, websites or Internet activities should the U.S. government censor, regulate or otherwise control?

Required Readings:

Optional Readings:

October 18th: Midterm Review
This class will serve as a review session for the midterm exam. I’ll describe the exam format, summarize the material covered so far, and answer any questions that you might have. Please come prepared to ask questions.

October 20th: Midterm Exam
During this class, there will be a 75-minute, closed book exam covering all of the course material presented thus far. The exam will take place in our regular classroom.

October 25th and 27th: Fall Break

November 1st: The Rise of Infotainment
This class will focus on the ways in which TV news reporting, in particular, has changed. Politics on TV is not what it used to be! In many ways, the politics we now see on TV (from the nightly news to comedy shows and talk shows) is more entertaining but this raises questions about its utility in a democracy. We may also watch a short clip in which Jon Stewart and Ted Koppel discuss changes in campaign reporting overtime.

Discussion Question 10: Who does a better job covering American politics: the fake news shows on Comedy Central or the network news channels (NBC, CBS, ABC, Fox)? (Please define what you mean by “better” in your answer.)

Required Readings:

Optional Readings:

November 3rd: The Effect of Infotainment
Today’s class looks at the effect that infotainment has on citizens. In particular, we’ll investigate its impact on political knowledge, trust and behavior. Indeed, there has been considerable debate about the value of infotainment. Some see it as mere entertainment about politics that “dumbs down political discourse” while others contend that it provides useful political information by engaging viewers who might otherwise be uninterested.

Discussion Question 11: Do citizens gain anything useful (e.g., political knowledge, insight, opinions) from infotainment or is it merely entertainment that dumbs down the quality of political discourse?

Required Readings:

Optional Readings:

November 8th: Campaign Coverage in a New Media Age
How well does the media cover political campaigns? Do reporters focus on things that might help us as ‘good democratic citizens’ or do they focus on the things that they think might catch our attention? In this class, we will consider these questions by analyzing the nature of contemporary campaign coverage.
Discussion Question 12: Does media coverage of political campaigns generally enlighten or confuse voters?

Required Readings:

Optional Readings:

November 10th: Mediated Campaign Appeals: Candidate Struggles for Positive Attention
Campaigns work very hard to ensure that they receive positive media coverage. In this class, we’ll focus on strategies that political campaigns use to persuade voters through the media. We’ll consider mediated persuasion attempts through things like debates, party conventions, appearances, and “media events.” We’ll also look at the challenges of getting good media coverage.

Discussion Question 13: Some candidates seem to be more successful than others at gaining positive media attention. What, in your opinion, is the key to gaining positive media attention?

Required Readings:
• Madison Gray. 2007. “Campaigning in Late Night” *Time* retrieved from http://www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1657421,00.html

Optional Readings:

**Second Discussion Paper is due Sunday, Nov. 13th at 9:00 pm**

November 15th: Direct Campaign Appeals: Paid Advertising
Candidates are increasingly presented with new opportunities to appeal directly to voters, without media interference. In this class, we’ll look at one of the most important strategies candidates use to reach voters: paid TV advertising. We’ll consider the history of political advertising, the strategy behind political ads, and the effect they have on voters. We’ll also entertain a discussion about the role of negative ads—do they actually work and what effect do they have on our democratic system?

**Discussion Question 14:** Should negative campaign ads be banned from American elections?

Required Readings:
Optional Readings:

November 17th: Developing a Campaign Ad: Strategy and Technical Workshop
During this class, you’ll work in teams of three to create a 30-second campaign ad for a real or fictitious candidate of your choosing. You’ll start by conceptualizing the ad and organizing it on storyboards. You’ll then start to shoot the ad before editing it together using video editing software. You must upload your ad to YouTube and post the link on Blackboard under “Campaign Ad” before 10:00 am on November 22nd.

Readings: (things to check out to get some inspiration)
- Collection of Presidential TV ads from way back: http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/
- Collection of recent TV ads from various office levels: http://projects.washingtonpost.com/politicalads/
- Collection of recent TV ads from various office levels: http://adspotlight.nationaljournal.com/
- Information and papers on congressional TV ads: http://www.polisci.wisc.edu/tvadvertising/
- Past Ads Produced for This Class: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y5jjaz4zqNA
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blqycnQmR_E

November 22nd: Campaign Communication Presentations
This class is devoted to presenting your campaign ads. Each team will give a brief introduction, show their ad, and take questions. Remember, your work on this project will have a significant effect on your participation grade.

November 24th: Thanksgiving

November 29th: Direct Campaign Appeals: Online Campaigns
The Internet has provided candidates with a whole new way to appeal directly to voters. Through campaign websites, organized blogging, and viral campaigning, candidates can reach voters in ways that were unimaginable only 10 years ago. In this class, we will discuss online appeals—how they are done and their effect on voters.
Discussion Question 15: Gibson claims that new media have “revitalised American politics.” To what extent is this really true? Has Internet campaigning really given the people more of an active voice in the electoral process or are we following ourselves?

Required Reading:

Optional Readings:
- Jon Henke. 2007. “New Media Deserves its own Seat at the Table” Campaigns and Elections. 62-65

December 1st: Media and the Government
The media relies on the government for stories and the government relies on the media to ‘get the word out’. The relationship between these two principle political actors is not always simple, however. This week’s readings look at the relationship between the media and government with a particular focus on the co-dependent power struggle between them.

Discussion Question 16: Should journalists be free to report stories that could threaten national security? Why or why not?

Required Readings:

Optional Readings:
December 6th: Media and International Politics
We’ll conclude our lectures with a discussion of the media’s role in international politics. In particular, we’ll look at how international political actors use the media and how the number of political actors has expanded with new media technology.

Discussion Question 17: Social media was said to have played a role in recent uprisings throughout the Middle East, especially in Egypt. Some argue that social media was invaluable while others contend that it merely helped what would have happened regardless. How likely is it that the Egyptian (or other) uprising would have succeeded without social media?

Required Readings:

Optional Readings:

December 8th: Final Exam Review
This class will serve as a review session for the final exam. I’ll describe the exam format, summarize the material covered in the second half of the course, and answer any questions that you might have. Please come prepared to ask questions.

December 13th: Final Exam
During this class, there will be a 75-minute, closed book exam focusing primarily on course material covered since Fall Break. The exam will take place in our regular classroom.

Third Discussion Paper is due Thursday, December 20th at 9:00 pm
Appendix 1: Discussion Question Guidelines
Polt 200: Mass Politics in a Media Age

Assignments and Deadlines: You are required to provide written answers to three of the discussion questions from the syllabus. Your first answer is due on or before Sunday, October 9th at 9:00 pm, your second on or before Sunday, November 13th at 9:00 pm, and your third on or before Thursday, December 20th at 9:00 pm. Late papers will NOT be accepted without prior approval from the College (computer explosions, problems with your roommate, bad weather, etc. will not justify an extension). Consider this your warning. Also, remember that Blackboard notes exactly when your paper is submitted and, yes, a paper that comes in at 9:01 pm on the due date is late and will not count. I strongly encourage you to submit your answers early to avoid any last minute stress and/or disappointment.

Which Questions? You are free to answer any three of the questions on the syllabus. This means that you may answer a question that we have already covered in class or you may skip ahead to one that we have yet to cover. You also have the option of creating and answering your own question. Your proposed question must be relevant and must be approved, in writing, by me BEFORE you start to answer it.

Mechanics: Each paper must be 4-5 pages (double spaced) with normal font and margins. Please list your full name, the course title (i.e., Polt 200), and the date in the top left hand corner of the first page. Include the actual question, in italics, before starting your answer. Also include page numbers and a header or footer with your name on each page. All citations should be parenthetical in the text with a corresponding bibliography. Finally, please submit your paper (including your bibliography) as a single Microsoft Word file so that I can grade it using track changes—i.e., do not use Word Perfect, Pages, PDF, etc. Failure to follow these simple guidelines may result in a lower grade.

Organization and Argument Guidelines: Your answer should start with an introduction in which you clearly state your argument. Do not leave your argument to the end—this is not a suspense novel. The body of your paper should substantiate your argument with logical claims and empirical evidence. Your evidence should come from both class material (i.e., required readings) and outside research (i.e., optional and other readings). Think of your argument as a lawyer does—present a logical and substantiated case in which you explain to me (i.e., the jury) why I should believe what you believe. Make sure your argument is well organized, clear, logical, and supported by evidence. End your paper with a concluding paragraph (i.e., closing argument) in which you summarize the main points of your argument.

Writing Process: Keep a few simple suggestions in mind when writing your paper. Start your paper early so that you have enough time to do a good job. (I know you’ve heard that before, but I really mean it!) You should prepare to write your paper before you actually sit down to write it. Do some research and get your thoughts organized (e.g., write an outline). You might even bounce some of your ideas off me during office hours. You should also write more than one draft of your paper. It helps to write a draft, leave it for a while, and then go back to it. Finally, have someone else proofread your paper for grammatical errors—we often miss these in our own writing, and they can distract the reader from important points.

Grading and Feedback: I will grade your paper using track changes and return it to you via Blackboard. You should read my comments carefully and ask for clarification if anything is unclear. You are advised to incorporate this feedback into your subsequent papers. You should also be aware that I will assign a grade to your paper based on the following:

An “A” paper will have most or all of the following attributes:
- Main argument is very clear, original and convincing

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1 For example, you might write “According to Smith (2010: 213), dogs don’t like cats.” Or “Some authors contend that dogs do not like cats (Smith 2010: 213; Jones 2009: 113) while others claim that that is untrue (Brown 2008: 456)."
• Main argument is supported with sufficient and appropriate evidence from both class material and outside research
• The paper is organized appropriately and flows well with smooth transitions between paragraphs
• The writing is clear and effective; there are no grammatical or typographical errors
• All sources are correctly cited in the text and listed in the bibliography

A “B” paper will have most or all of the following attributes:
• Main argument is clear, fairly original and more or less convincing
• Main argument is generally supported with evidence from both class material and outside research
• Generally flows well although there are some minor problems with organization within and between paragraphs
• The writing adheres to grammatical conventions (i.e., few grammatical or typographical errors) but is not especially eloquent
• Most sources are correctly cited in the text and listed in the bibliography

A “C” paper will have most or all of the following attributes:
• Main argument is somewhat unclear, lacks originality and/or is less than convincing
• Main argument is supported with little evidence from either class material or outside research
• Significant problems with organization within and between paragraphs
• The writing is unclear and ineffective; there are grammatical and/or typographical errors
• Many sources are incorrectly cited in the text and/or missing from the bibliography

A “D” paper will have most or all of the following attributes:
• Main argument is unclear, unoriginal and/or unconvincing
• Main argument is not supported with evidence from either class material or outside research
• Little logical flow within and between paragraphs
• The writing is unclear and ineffective; there are significant grammatical and/or typographical errors
• Most sources are incorrectly cited in the text and/or missing from the bibliography

As you can probably tell, I do not think every paper is worthy of an A. Just because you “worked hard on the paper” and “really tried” does not mean it deserves an A. It is certainly possible to get an A on your paper although you will really have to do high-quality work. I am sure that you will agree that an A should actually mean something!