Politics 200: Mass Politics in a Media Age
Spring 2014
Tuesday and Thursday, 11:00 to 12:15 in King 106
Michael Parkin
775-6197
mparkin@oberlin.edu
Office Hours: Wednesday, 2:00 – 4:00 in Rice 203

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 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 chances to write and speak about the course material as well as the opportunity to engage in hands-on work through structured activities.

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 you 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 you can expect to see on 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. I will ask questions and facilitate structured discussions to ensure that you have a chance to express your thoughts on various political issues. Discussion and debate rest at the heart of politics so active participation is required.

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: 10%
Reporting the News: 10% (on Tuesday, March 4th before 10:00 am)
Campaign Ad: 10% (on Thursday, April 22nd before 10:00 am)
First Exam: 20% (on Thursday, March 20th)
Second Exam: 20% (on Thursday, May 8th)
Final Paper: 30% (due before Wednesday, May 14th at 4:00 pm)

Class Participation (10%): As not everyone is equally verbose, participation grades will be based on the quality, not the quantity, of your 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! Also, because this is a class on media and politics, you are required to follow the news on a daily basis using a reputable source (e.g., The New York Times, CNN, The PBS News Hour).

Reporting the News (10%): In early March, you will work as part of a 4- or 5-person team to produce a nightly news story (see details below). Your video report must be uploaded to YouTube before 10:00 am on Tuesday, March 4th. You will be graded as a team on your ability to produce an effective news report that demonstrates knowledge of key lessons from class material.

Campaign Ad (10%): In late April, you will work as part of a 4- or 5-person team to produce a campaign ad for a candidate or issue of your choice (see details below). Your team must upload its ad to YouTube before 10:00 am on Thursday, April 22nd. You will be graded as a team on your ability to produce an effective ad that incorporates lessons from class material.

Exams (20% each): There will be two in-class, closed book, 75-minute exams. The first will occur on March 20th and the second will take place on May 8th. Questions on each exam will be drawn from the readings and information presented during class. The second exam will focus almost exclusively on material from the second half of the course.

Final Paper (30%): You are required to write an 8 to 10 page (double spaced) research paper that deals with a course topic of your choice. You must, however, have the topic approved by the professor before you start writing. Your paper must be submitted to Blackboard as a single MS Word file on or before Wednesday, May 14th at 4:00 pm. 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! Please see Appendix A for more information on the paper.

Final letter grades will be assigned in the following way.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A+</td>
<td>96+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>92-95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>88-91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>84-87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>80-83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>75-79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>70-74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>65-69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-</td>
<td>60-64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>50-59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>0-49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Courtesy
Please exercise common courtesy (e.g., no talking at inappropriate times, web surfing) 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!

Although you are welcome to take notes on a laptop, you must also bring a pen and paper to each class. If I find that your laptop use is disruptive or distracting to others (e.g., you are checking Facebook rather than paying attention), I will ask you to turn off your computer and take notes the old-fashioned way.

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 freedom 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://new.oberlin.edu/office/dean-of-students/honor/students.dot.

Disabilities
Any student with a documented disability should see me immediately to discuss 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 for further consideration. All required readings are available on Blackboard. Most of the optional readings are available online (through the library website) although please see me if you cannot find something.

Class One (February 4th): Introduction and Class Overview

Class Two (February 6th): 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. What does it mean to be a ‘good citizen’? What are our expectations and why do they matter? We will then look at how citizens feel about politics and government—i.e., how they view “the authority of the state.” Do they have a healthy level of skepticism or have citizens become overly cynical?

Required Readings:

Optional Readings:

Class Three (February 11th): Citizen Competency: Political Knowledge and Information Processing
Most conceptions of “good citizenship” emphasize the importance of citizen competency—i.e. the willingness and ability to engage with political information. Dalton calls this “autonomy,” which “implies that good citizens
should be sufficiently informed about government to exercise a participatory role.” This class explores what people know about politics and how they think about political issues. Underlying this discussion is a question about the extent to which people know enough to be entrusted with picking their leaders and voicing opinions on political matters.

Required Readings:

Optional Readings:

Class Four (February 13th): Political Participation: Engagement and Activity
Many lament the level of political participation in the United States and express concern about the willingness of some to fulfill one of the most basic duties of citizenship. This class explores the nature of political participation and the factors that motivate increased levels of political involvement. We are essentially interested in who participates, why and how?

Required Readings:

Optional Readings:

Class Five (February 18th): The Evolving Nature of News Coverage
This class begins our analysis of the political news media. We start by developing a sense of the changing news environment and exploring the motivations that drive reporting. We focus specifically on the factors that
motivate reporters, the changing nature of mainstream coverage, and what this all means for the pursuit of good citizenship.

Required Readings:

Optional Readings:

Class Six (February 20th): Our Expectations of the News
Do the media do a good job covering politics? Many 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 consider the expectations that we have of the news and analyze the consequences of declining media trust.

Required Readings:

Optional Readings:

Class Seven (February 25th): Media Effects: Broad Theories and Perceptions of Reality
The media is widely regarded as one of the most influential political information sources available to citizens. Scholars have, therefore, made considerable efforts to understand how it affects public opinion and political behavior. We start our investigation of media effects by focusing on broad theories of how the media influences our sense of reality. We will explore how it shapes our perceptions of the world and the psychological process by which this happens.

Required Readings:

Optional Readings:

Class Eight (February 27th): The Challenges of Reporting the News
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. Students will work in teams of 4 or 5 to produce a 90-second video report that covers a news topic of their choice. Each student will volunteer for a specific role (i.e., Producer, Camera, Writer, Editor, Reporter) before being assigned to a team. Each team will then pick an actual news topic—it cannot be fictional—and produce a 90-second spot that could conceivably air on the local nightly news (e.g., Cleveland’s WKYC). (You may want to watch some local news clips before you start.) Your decisions about story choice and presentation should be informed by the literature we have read in this class. Your video must be uploaded to YouTube by 10:00 am on Tuesday, March 4th. More detailed instructions will be provided during this class.

Required Reading:
• Reporting the News Instructions

Class Nine (March 4th): Delivering the News
Teams will present their videos during this class. Each team should prepare a very brief introduction (no more than 30 seconds) that provides some background and explains their objectives. Teams must also complete a one-page summary of their project (see handout). Viewers will then evaluate the reports based on a number of criteria, including how they engage with the suggestions made by authors like Bennett, Wolfsfeld, Zaller and Schudson. These evaluations will be used to assign each team a grade.

Required Reading:
• One-Page Project Summary
• Reporting the News Evaluation Form

Class Ten (March 6th): Media Effects: Subtle Effects and Information Processing
This class continues our investigation of how the media affects public opinion and political behavior. We will move from broad theories to more precise effects based on an understanding of human cognition. We will specifically focus on the movement towards subtle effects (i.e., framing, agenda-setting, and priming), and explain their application and limitations.

Required Readings:

Optional Reading:

Class Eleven (March 11th): Self Selection and the Rise of Partisan Media
Media effects are obviously conditioned by self-selection—i.e., the ability of users to determine which media to use and which media to avoid. Self-selection has become increasingly prevalent with the rise of partisan media. Citizens are increasingly turning to their favorite partisan news source and disregarding what “the other side” has to say. This class focuses on the rise of self-selection and partisan media, and explores the impact this has on our ability to be ‘good citizens’.

Required Readings:

Optional Readings:

Class Twelve (March 13th): Media Objectivity and Potential Bias
Media objectivity has long been a matter of debate. Should reporters adhere to strict objectivity or do they have a social obligation to ‘muckrake’? Is the media biased and, if so, what effect does this have on citizens? This class explores these and other questions pertaining to media objectivity and bias. We will specifically focus on the process by which biased information may or may not affect consumers.

Required Readings:
Optional Readings:


Class Thirteen (March 18th): First Exam Review
This class will serve as a review session for the first exam. I’ll describe the exam format, summarize the material covered so far, and answer any questions you might have. Please come prepared to ask and answer questions.

Class Fourteen (March 20th): First 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.

March 25th and 27th: Spring Break

Class Fifteen (April 1st): “Fake News”: The Rise of Infotainment
Politics on TV is not what it used to be! Citizens now routinely encounter politics on entertainment-based shows, including The Daily Show and The Colbert Report. While this has made politics more entertaining, it raises questions about the utility of news consumption in a democracy. This class is devoted to understanding the rise of infotainment. Why have “fake news shows” become so popular, and what does this say about American politics and media more generally?

Required Readings:


Optional Readings:


Class Sixteen (April 3rd): The Effect of Infotainment: “Are We Amusing Ourselves to Death?”
Shows like The Daily Show and The Colbert Report have become increasingly popular, which raises questions about their effect on those who watch them. Some complain that shows like these have a deleterious effect on viewers while others claim that there is more good news than bad news when it comes to their impact. This class focuses on the effect that infotainment is having on citizens, and the process by which these effects are realized.

Required Readings:

Optional Readings:

Class Seventeen (April 8th): The Online Democratization of News and Politics
Since its inception, scholars and commentators have debated the Internet’s ability to enhance democracy. This class delves into this debate by assessing the Internet’s effect on democratic politics in the United States and beyond. We will consider the degree to which the Internet has reshaped the news media environment, given citizens access to more and better information, and challenged the authority of government institutions.

Required Readings:

Optional Readings:

Class Eighteen (April 10th): Campaign Coverage and Mediated Appeals: Debates and Conventions
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? This class considers these questions by analyzing the nature of contemporary campaign coverage. We will also look at the role of debates and conventions as mediated campaign appeals—i.e., candidate attempts to influence voters via the media.
Required Readings:


Optional Readings:


Class Nineteen (April 15th): Direct Campaign Appeals: Paid Advertising and Online Appeals

Candidates are increasingly presented with new opportunities to appeal directly to voters, without media interference. In this class, we’ll look at two of the most important strategies candidates use to reach voters: paid TV advertising and online appeals. We’ll consider the history, implementation and effect of each strategy. How have candidates used these tools, and why are some ads and online appeals more effective than others?

Required Readings:


Optional Readings:


Class Twenty (April 17th): Developing a Campaign Ad
The next two classes provide an opportunity to get your hands dirty and learn about campaign advertising from conceptualization through to production. Students will work in teams of 4 or 5 to produce a 30-second campaign ad for an actual candidate or issue of your choice. Students will choose their own teams, ensuring an adequate mix of creative and technological acumen, before conceptualizing the ad and organizing it on storyboards. Your decisions about content and presentation should be informed by the literature on advertising, public opinion, and media effects. You will then shoot and edit your ad over the next few days. Your completed ad must be uploaded to YouTube before 10:00 am on April 22nd. More detailed instructions will be provided during this class.

Required Readings:
- Campaign Ad Instructions
- Research campaign ads from various sources
  - http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/ (past presidential ads)
  - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y5jjaz4zqNA (past Polt 200 ad)
  - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blqycnQmRE (past Polt 200 ad)

Class Twenty-One (April 22nd): Campaign Ad Presentations
Teams will present their ads during this class. Each team should prepare a very brief introduction (no more than 30 seconds) that provides some background and explains their primary objectives. Teams must also complete a one-page summary of their project (see handout). Viewers will evaluate the ads based on a number of criteria, including how they engage with the suggestions made by the literature on advertising, public opinion, and media effects. These evaluations will be used to assign each team a grade.

Required Readings:
- One-Page Project Summary
- Campaign Ad Evaluation Form

Class Twenty-Two (April 24th): Entertainment Talk Show Campaigns
Over the past twenty years, presidential candidates have made a habit of sitting down with the likes Oprah Winfrey, Jay Leno and Jon Stewart. To some, these interviews represent little more than a feeble attempt to appear likable while others contend that they offer something of value to voters and campaigns more generally. This class looks at how the entertainment talk show strategy developed and the impact it has had on American presidential campaigns.

Required Readings:

Optional Readings:
- Paul R. Brewer and Xiaoxia Cao. 2006. “Candidate Appearances on Soft News Shows and Public


Class Twenty-Three (April 29th): **Media and the Government**

This class focuses on the relationship between the media and government officials in Washington. It looks at the co-dependent power struggle between them and the effects that this struggle has on citizens. We will look specifically at the growing tension between the press and the Obama administration in terms of censorship and surveillance.

Required Readings:


Optional Readings:


Class Twenty-Four (May 1st): **Paper Discussions**

We will not meet as a class on this day. Instead, I will be holding extended office hours to provide you with an opportunity to discuss your research paper. Individual meetings will be held in my office (Rice 203) between 9:00 and 12:00. Each student should make an appointment and bring with them a one-page document that lists (1) the proposed title of their paper, (2) their research question, (3) a brief summary of their argument, and (4) sources likely to be referenced in the paper. See Appendix A at the end of this document for more information on the paper.

Class Twenty-Five (May 6th): **Second Exam Review**

This class will serve as a review session for the second 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 and answer questions.

Class Twenty-Six (May 8th): **Second Exam**

During this class, there will be a 75-minute, closed book exam focusing primarily on course material covered since the midterm exam. The exam will take place in our regular classroom.

---

**Final Paper is due before Wednesday, May 14th at 4:00 pm.**

Please upload to Blackboard as a single MS Word file
Appendix 1: Research Paper Guidelines

Assignment and Deadline: You are required to write an 8 to 10 page (double spaced) research paper on a class-related topic of your choice. Your paper must pose and answer a relevant research question rather than simply provide a summary description of a topic. You ought to pose a contentious question and offer a creative answer. Possible examples might include:

- Question: How does the “Spiral of Silence” affect reporters and what impact does this have on government efforts to censor the press?
  - Answer: Profit motivations weaken the “Spiral of Silence” among reporters, leaving government officials with few options other than the use of direct threats of censorship.

- Question: Do technological innovations provide citizens with the ability to replace the press as a government watchdog?
  - Answer: Despite impressive technological innovations, citizens will never have the necessary resources, access or credibility to replace the press as a government watchdog.

- Question: How has the entertainment talk show strategy reshaped the qualities necessary for a successful presidential run?
  - Answer: It has, after twenty years, opened the door for more serious candidates to succeed by running serious campaigns that shine a light on the frivolity of talk show appearances and interviews—i.e., a candidate could do very well by avoiding the talk show circuit and casting their opponent as unimaginative, overly image-conscious and superficial.

The point is that your paper MUST have an edge to it that makes it provocative and interesting. I am also open to other approaches. You might, for example, explain how an author like Neil Postman would evaluate a particular campaign ad or how someone like Lance Bennett would assess the news that comes from sources like The Daily Show. I might even consider a practical project akin to the “Reporting the News” or “Campaign Ad” projects completed during the semester. Whatever you decide, you would be well-served to discuss your ideas with me during office hours and must get my approval before you start.

Your paper is due before 4:00 pm on Wednesday, May 14th. Late papers CANNOT 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 4:01 pm on the due date is late and will not count. I strongly encourage you to submit your paper early to avoid any last minute stress and/or disappointment.

Mechanics: Your paper must be 8 to 10 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 your research 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.1 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

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).”
your argument as a lawyer does—present a logical and substantiated case in which you explain to me (i.e., the jury) why it 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. (Please note that I have a policy of not reading drafts, although I am happy to discuss your paper with you along the way.)

Grading and Feedback: I will grade your paper using track changes and return it to you via Blackboard. Your paper will be assessed using the following criteria:

An “A” paper will have most or all of the following attributes:
- Main argument is very clear, original and convincing
- 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 tell, I do not think every paper is worthy of an A. It is certainly possible to get an A, although you will have to do high-quality work. I am sure that you will agree that getting an A should actually mean something!