

**Politics According to Film and Television**  
American Studies  
Lower-level undergraduate course

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“Everything is changing”, once mused Will Rogers, “People are taking their comedians seriously and the politicians as a joke”! Rogers had a point: in 1920s America, politics and entertainment were becoming more and more enmeshed. This course examines depictions of politics and politicians in film and television. Our goal is twofold: to analyze the relationship between off-screen politics and its on-screen representations, and to explore the ways popular film and television have depicted the political process. In addition to coming to a better understanding of the American political system and culture, we will consider different theoretical perspectives addressing the relationship between politics and films.

The course is divided into four modules:

- 1) Birth of a democracy—explores the basic principles of American democracy;
- 2) Internal affairs—examines the three branches of government (executive, legislative and judicial) and the media;
- 3) Foreign policy—looks at war abroad and at home;
- 4) Political attitudes—surveys contemporary popular attitudes towards politics and politicians in television.

**Evaluations:**

1. Attendance and class participation: 10%
  2. Exploratory writing (10% each): 30%
  3. Mid-term paper (4 pages): 20%
  4. Final response paper (8 pages): 40%
1. **Attendance** to all classes is mandatory, even if you have already seen the film.
  2. Three short “**exploratory writing**” exercises will be required to practice different ways of writing about film and prepare you for longer writing assignments: a) a formal descriptive account, b) a film review and c) a reaction paper. All three will pertain to in-class screenings.
  3. Your **Mid-term** is a short paper that will assess your understanding of concepts seen in class and in your readings.

**Example of a possible question for the mid-term:** Using either “The Short List” (S1E9) or the “Ways and Means” (S3E4) episode of *The West Wing* (both seen in class) describe inter-branch relations.

4. Your **final assignment** is an 8-page paper. You will be asked to answer a question pertaining to the mandatory reading material and films screened in class. In your answer, you have to use concepts seen in class and in your readings, as well as filmic examples of films screened in or outside of class.

**Example of a possible final question:**

Throughout the semester, we have seen several portrayals of American presidents—both fictitious and factual—in fiction and non-fiction films. Sometimes documentary films appeared tendentious or biased, and sometimes fiction films seemed to approach reality best. Based on your knowledge of the American political system and American society, which film presented the most authentic (truthful) portrayal of American presidency. You must justify your answer with precise examples from the film, and you *may* use other films to establish a comparison.

Guidelines for each assignment will be distributed in class.

**Readings:**

- 📖 Giglio, Ernest. *Here's Looking at You: Hollywood, Film, and Politics*. New York: Peter Lang, 2010. (Referred to as *Hollywood, Film, and Politics*)
- 📖 All other readings are in coursepack.

**CALENDAR**

**Week 1: Introduction—Thinking Film and Politics**

- 📖 Elizabeth Haas, Terry Christensen, and Peter J. Hass. *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films*. New York: Routledge, 2005. Chapter 1 “Studying Political Films”, pp. 3-18.
- 🎧 *The West Wing*, S7E7 “The Debate” (TV, November 6, 2005)

**MODULE I Birth of a Democracy**

**Week 2: The Little Man**

- 📖 Mark Sachleben and Kevan Yenerall. *Seeing the Bigger Picture: Understanding Politics Through Film & Television*. New York: Peter Lang, 2008, pp. 13-37.
- 🎧 *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (Frank Capra, 1939, 129 min)

Optional:

- 📖 Brian Neve. *Film and Politics in America: A Social Tradition*. London: Routledge, 1992. Chapter 2 “Populism, Romanticism and Frank Capra”, pp. 28-55.
- 📖 Ian Scott. *American Politics in Hollywood Film*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2011. Chapter 2 “Political Films in the Classic Studio Era”, pp. 34-79.
- 🎧 *Meet John Doe* (Frank Capra, 1941, 122 min)

### **Week 3: Strong Leaders?**

- 📖 Mark Sachleben and Kevan Yenerall. *Seeing the Bigger Picture: Understanding Politics Through Film & Television*. New York: Peter Lang, 2008, pp. 37-51.

🎬 *Gabriel Over the White House* (Gregory La Cava, 1933, 86 min)

Optional:

- 📖 Peter Roffman and James Purdy. *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair and Politics from the Depression to the Fifties*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1981. Part III “Fascism and War”, pp. 165-226.

🎬 *The Great Dictator* (Charlie Chaplin, 1940, 125 min)

### **Week 4: Power to the People**

- 📖 *Hollywood, Film, and Politics*, Chapter 1 “Film and Politics: The Hollywood-Washington Connection”, pp. 1-20.

🎬 *Selma* (Ava DuVernay, 2014, 128 min)

Optional:

🎬 *Salt of the Earth* (Herbert J. Biberman, 1954, 94 min)

## **MODULE II Internal Affairs**

### **Week 5: The Executive Branch—Political Campaigns in Documentary**

- 📖 *Hollywood, Film, and Politics*. Chapter 3 “Nonfiction Film: Investigating the Real”, pp. 37-68.

🎬 *The War Room* (Chris Hegedus and D.A. Pennebaker, 1993, 96 min)

Optional:

- 📖 Matthew D. McCubbins. *Under the Watchful Eye: Mapping Presidential Campaigns in the Television Era*, San Diego: CQ Press. Chapter 1 “Party Decline and Presidential Campaigns in the Television Age”, pp. 9-58.

🎬 *Our Brand is Crisis* (Rachel Boynton, 2005, 87 min)

🎬 *Primary Colors* (Mike Nichols, 1998, 143 min)

### **Week 6: The Executive Branch—Political Campaigns in Fiction**

- 📖 Keith Booker. *From Box Office to Ballot Box: The American Political Film*. New York: Praeger, 2007. Chapter 1 “Meet the Candidate: The Political Campaign Film”, pp. 3-34.

🎬 *The Candidate* (Michael Ritchie, 1972, 110 min)

Optional:

- 📖 *Hollywood, Film, and Politics*. Chapter 6 “Reel Politicians”, pp. 115-140.

🎬 *The Best Man* (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1964, 102 min)

🎬 *Election* (Alexander Payne, 1999, 103 min)

### **Week 7: Legislative Branch (Congress)**

- 📖 Keith Booker. *From Box Office to Ballot Box: The American Political Film*. New York: Praeger, 2007. Chapter 2 “Inside Politics: The Process of Government in American Political Film”, pp. 35-63.

🎬 *Advise & Consent* (Otto Preminger, 1962, 139 min)

Optional:

- 📖 David Mayhew. *Congress: The Electoral Connection*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2004.

### **Week 8: The Judicial Branch and Inter-branch relations**

- 📖 *Hollywood, Film, and Politics*. Chapter 7 “Picturing Justice: The Law and Lawyers in Hollywood Films”, pp. 141-170.
- 🎬 *The West Wing*, S1E9 “The Short List” (TV, November 24, 1999)
- 🎬 *The West Wing*, S3E4 “Ways and Means” (TV, October 24, 2001)

Optional:

- 📖 Charles Cameron. *Veto Bargaining*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. Chapter 1 “Divided Government and Interbranch Bargaining”, pp. 1-32.
- 📖 Jeffrey Segal. “Senate Confirmation of Supreme Court Justices”. *The Journal of Politics* 49:4 (November 1987), pp. 998-1015.
- 🎬 *The Ox-Bow Incident* (William Wellman, 1943, 75 min)
- 🎬 *12 Angry Men* (Sidney Lumet, 1957, 96 min)
- 🎬 *Inherit the Wind* (Stanley Kramer, 1960, 128 min)
- 🎬 *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Robert Mulligan, 1962, 129 min)

### **Week 9: Media and Interest Groups...**

#### **The Fourth and Fifth Branch of Government?**

- 📖 Matthew D. McCubbins (Ed.). *Under the Watchful Eye: Managing Presidential Campaigns in the Television Era*. San Diego: CQ Press. Larry J. Sabato, “Open Season: How the News Media Cover Presidential Campaigns in the Age of Attack Journalism”, pp. 127-152.
- 🎬 *All the King’s Men* (Robert Rossen, 1949, 110 min)

Optional:

- 📖 Kernell, Jacobson, Kousser and Vavreck. *The Logic of American Politics*, CQ Press, 2015. Chapter 13 “Interest Groups”, pp. 528-565.
- 🎬 *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941, 119 min)
- 🎬 *Thank You for Smoking* (Jason Reitman, 2005, 92 min)
- 🎬 *All the President’s Men* (Alan Pakula, 1976, 138 min)

## **MODULE III Foreign Policy**

### **Week 10: The Red Scare and the Cold War**

- 📖 Steven J. Ross. *Movies and American Society*. New York: Blackwell, 2014. Chapter 7 “Seeing Red: Cold War Hollywood”, pp. 192-219.
- 🎬 *The Manchurian Candidate* (John Frankenheimer, 1962, 126 min)

Optional:

- 📖 Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein. “Deterrence and the Cold War”. *Political Science Quarterly* 110: 2 (Summer 1995), pp. 157-181.
- 📖 Brian Neve. “HUAC, the Blacklist, and the Decline of Social Cinema”. In Peter Lev (Ed.). *Transforming the Screen, 1950-1959*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993, pp. 143-177.
- 📖 Tony Shaw. *Hollywood’s Cold War*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007.
- 🎬 *Fail-Safe* (Sidney Lumet, 1964, 112 min)
- 🎬 *On the Waterfront* (Elia Kazan, 1954, 108 min)

### **Week 11: The War on Terror**

📖 *Hollywood, Film, and Politics*. Chapter 10 “Mission Accomplished”, pp. 211-224.

🎬 *Charlie Wilson’s War* (Mike Nichols, 2007, 102 min)

Optional:

📖 W. Bryan Rommel-Ruiz. *American History Goes to the Movies*. New York: Blackwell, 2011. Chapter 8 “We Are Alive in Hell: Finding Historical Meaning and Significance in 9/11”, pp. 226-263.

🎬 *Rendition* (Gavin Hood, 2007, 122 min)

🎬 *Zero Dark Thirty* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2012, 157 min)

## **MODULE IV Political Attitudes in Film & Television**

### **Week 12: Cynicism**

📖 Elizabeth Haas, Terry Christensen, and Peter J. Hass. *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Film*. New York: Routledge, 2005. Chapter 9 “The 1970s: Cynicism, Paranoia, War, and Anticapitalism”, pp. 143-170.

🎬 *The Ides of March* (George Clooney, 2011, 101 min)

Optional:

🎬 *Veep* (TV, 2012— )

🎬 *House of Cards* (TV, 2013— )

### **Week 13: Optimism and the Endurance of the American Dream**

🎬 *The West Wing*, S2E17 “The Stackhouse Filibuster” (TV, March 14, 2001)

Optional:

📖 Staci Beavers. “*The West Wing* as a Pedagogical Tool: Using Drama to Examine American Politics and Media Perceptions of Our Political System”. In Peter Rollins and John O’Connor (Eds.). *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*. Syracuse, Syracuse UP, 2003, pp. 175-186.

🎬 *Head of State* (Chris Rock, 2003, 95 min)