

SYLLABUS: American Political Culture/PSC 216/Fall Quarter 2016
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This course aims to explore some crucial themes in American political culture, in particular, the shaping of democratic consciousness, divergent interpretations of social membership and how various institutional processes favor (or work to the disadvantage of) particular groups within society, and the tensions between democratic-mindedness and the complicated workings of complex governmental and corporate structures. We will also spend a considerable portion of our class time screening/discussing a series of films that deal with political topics. What we will observe via these films is that, over time, cinematic interpretations of American politics have shifted substantially, and in ways that reflect real shifts in popular understandings of politics.

This course is not meant to function as an overview of American political culture. Rather, the central aim of this course is to offer provocative views of how American politics works and to equip students with the tools to more systematically interpret broad questions pertaining to core American political values, disputes in reference to the meaning and application of these values, and how these values may have subtly (or not so subtly) shifted over time.

Our books, on sale at the bookstore.

- (1) Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*
- (2) Daniel J. Sharfstein, *The Invisible Line: A Secret History of Race in America*
- (3) Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (revised edition)

Grading for this course will be based on four items, each worth 25% of students' grades: either two papers (one on one of the books, one on one of the films), the final (in-class) exam, plus classroom participation or three papers (two on the books, one on a film), plus classroom participation. The first "book" paper assignment (the Wood paper) is discussed following the week-by-week class schedule. Following the first paper assignment, you will also see guidelines for writing the "film paper" that each of you will write. Subsequent book paper assignments and the final exam (comprehensive, covering the entire quarter) will be consistent with these first two assignments. A crucial ground rule: by our fifth class meeting (that is, Oct. 11), each of you will have turned in either your Wood paper or a film paper (*All the King's Men* or *The Last Hurrah*). A second ground rule: papers on these films will be due on Oct. 4. The third ground rule: as of Oct. 11 none of you will have turned in more than one paper.

The meaning of classroom participation: regular attendance plus regular contributions to the discussions of books/films. Class nonattenders will receive an F for participation, which means that their overall grade for the class will very likely not be better than C. Attenders who do not participate can expect a C for participation, which makes earning more than a B for the course unlikely. What, then, is good participation: factually knowledgeable commentary, interpretive comments that make sense given the material covered, the ability to respond in an informed way to instructor questions. Less useful participation: off-the-wall commentary that simply takes up time, rapid-fire questioning of the instructor that may not add to general class understanding of the topics at hand. **What you can assume:** the instructor will take a generous attitude toward the vast bulk of student commentary.

Course Schedule

Sept. 13: Introductions/"All the King's Men"

Sept. 20: Daniel Mendelsohn, "September 11 at the Movies" (at D2L); Wood, Intro., chpts. 1-12

Sept. 27: "The Last Hurrah"

Oct. 4: **ATKM or TLH paper due**/Wood, chpts. 13-19

Oct. 11: **Wood paper due**/"The Best Man"

Oct. 18: **TBM paper due**/Sharfstein, entire

Oct. 25: **Sharfstein paper due**/"The Candidate"

Nov. 1: **TC paper due**/Kazin, Intro., chpts. 1-6

Nov. 8: "Bob Roberts"

Nov. 15: **BR paper due**/Kazin, chpts. 7-11, Conclusion

Nov. 22: **Kazin paper due** or **Final Exam (Final Exam class begins at 5:30 PM)**

Assignments

(1) The Wood paper: In *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, Gordon Wood draws a distinction between two concepts—"republicanism" and "democracy"—that are frequently treated as synonyms in reference to American politics (and by the way—there is very very little connection between Wood's interpretation and the contemporary Republican and Democratic parties...so "don't go there!"). Discuss in some detail—that is, by way of concrete examples—what Wood means by republicanism and democracy, and, explain Wood's ambivalent perspective on the ascendance of "democracy" as the dominant American political value in the early 19th century. **(General paper rules: hard copy only, five page maximum, one-inch margins, 12-font, double-spacing, page-in-text citations only--no need for footnotes, three direct quotations maximum...none longer than three lines.)**

(2) The film paper (you pick which one/**with the exception of "All the King's Men" these are always due the class meeting following the evening devoted to the particular film**): Discuss the film's basic argument about American politics—"this is a country in which democratic institutions really do work," "this is a country in which democratic institutions are a sham...masking underlying social disparities," "professional politicians inevitably are corrupted by the processes of raising funds, appealing to voters, making deals with other politicians, etc.," "the good politician is a figure who understands how to strike compromises among competing values and interests," ETC. that is offered in this film. How are this argument, and related secondary points, made in the film? To what degree is the argument presented by this film reflective of public events associated with the era during which the film was made? Does this film continue to have relevance in understanding important American political values?

9-12-16