

## **POLS B323: Consent of the Governed: Mass Opinion and Public Discourse**

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**Class Meetings:** Mondays 1:10-4pm, Taylor Hall C

**Office Hours:** Mondays 12-1pm, Dalton Hall 100D (or Zoom meeting by appointment)

### **Course Description**

This seminar explores how governments maintain widespread consent to their rule, or, as David Hume described it, "the easiness with which the many are governed by the few." We will study the politics of mass opinion and perception; political language, propaganda, and dissent; and the formation of political identities, with an emphasis on democratic politics and the US in particular. The course includes a mix of empirical social science, theory, and fiction. The readings and activities are meant to provide students a broad and theoretically grounded understanding of political behavior and public opinion. We will be analyzing contemporary political issues and discourse through the lens of philosophical debates on the nature of mass opinion, coercion, and consent.

The objective is to deepen our understanding of mass politics, both the processes by which people's thought and action can be governed and the ways people resist power. Through reading, writing, and discussing, students will develop frameworks for thinking about these topics and create their own research designs or literature reviews.

### **Class Structure**

We will have weekly seminars driven by student discussion. As a 300-level seminar, the course is meant to be participatory, organized less by explanatory lectures than by the collective understanding that emerges from students' engagement with the readings and with each other. Students will each lead one discussion at some point in the semester by preparing and circulating a list of discussion questions and connections to previous themes. I will structure and supplement student participation where I think it will be useful with guiding questions, important background information, etc. Every group of students is unique, so the exact structure will be flexible depending on what students want to get out of this experience. *Please note that this syllabus may be subject to change during the semester as I see fit.*

I also encourage everyone to make use of my office hours before class! This is time I have allocated specifically to talking with students one-on-one about the course, resources for learning more about politics or political science, your education in general and future plans, or whatever else you'd like.

### **Expectations and Class Policies**

Discussions: Participation is expected and will be evaluated as part of the final grade. We will discuss contentious political issues in class; these discussions must be civil and respectful. You are welcome to disagree with a point made by myself or a fellow student, and all are encouraged to thoughtfully critique and debate the arguments presented in class. But you must do so without condescension or personal attacks toward your classmates.

Readings: I expect all students to have done the readings before each class session and come ready to ask questions and discuss the material.

Attendance policy: Attendance in class is expected and will count toward the final grade. Of course, I understand that extenuating circumstances come up. You may miss one class session without needing to notify me in advance. After that, please be in touch so that your grade is not affected.

Late assignments: If you are unable to submit an assignment by the deadline, you should email me before the deadline with an explanation. I will consider granting extensions on a case-by-case basis. Otherwise, there will be a late penalty of one letter grade per calendar day.

### **Course Materials and Resources**

Most readings will be made available as a PDF and posted to the course site on Moodle. The following books are available for purchase at the campus bookstore:

Edelman, Murray: *Constructing the Political Spectacle*

Gaventa, John: *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*

Bradbury, Ray: *Fahrenheit 451*

Orwell, George: *1984*

There is no urgency in acquiring these books until the weeks they are assigned. You may also purchase other editions elsewhere.

In addition, I strongly encourage all students to take advantage of the resources provided at this institution. I believe that undertaking this course of study will be most fruitful when done in conjunction with attention to contemporary political discourse and news. The libraries offer an excellent collection of both hard-copy and digital editions of newsmagazines and daily newspapers, including the most prestigious establishment press as well as some high-quality alternative publications. See [this link](#) or visit the Canaday Library to explore.

Finally, consider making use of the writing center for help improving your written assignments in this course (more information available [here](#)).

### **Assignments and Grading**

Attendance and participation (20%)

Overall contribution (10%) — I will evaluate your overall contribution and effort in class discussions, not the quantity or duration of your participation.

Discussion leading (10%) — Each student will lead one discussion during the semester. You are not expected to carry the entire class session. No later than midnight on Sunday, circulate a list of discussion questions that will help to structure the class. These should be open-ended questions to spark reflection and discussion, rather than exam-style questions to test knowledge of the material.

#### Analysis papers (30%)

Two papers (roughly three double-spaced pages or 750-1,000 words) based on a given week's readings will each count for 15% of the overall course grade.

Begin by succinctly describing the main idea or themes from the reading(s). The bulk of the paper should then focus on your response, extending or interrogating ideas from the text, drawing out points of agreement or tension with other readings, making connections to contemporary politics, and/or explaining your points of confusion.

#### Research project (50%)

You may choose between two tracks for a semester-long project. With a political issue of your choice (e.g., foreign policy, immigration, inequality and the welfare state, gender and sexuality, etc. etc.) you can write either an original research design or a critical review essay. Both will amount to ~10-15 (double-spaced) page papers on how the issue is represented to and understood by the mass public. The final papers for either option should use the course readings and frameworks discussed in class a starting point before diving into the issue-specific research you will explore on your own.

Options:

- (1) The research design option gives you the opportunity to develop a plan for conducting original research. The paper should include: context for the political issue at hand; an open-ended research question your design will explore; a literature review that includes both some of the material discussed in class and other research specific to your topic; a theory or argument describing your contention/expectations; and a detailed plan for how you would conduct an empirical study to answer your question.
- (2) The critical review essay roughly follows the format of a scholarly review article. Rather than proposing original research, you will describe and critique the existing literature on the subject. The paper should include: context for the political issue at hand; a research question to motivate your exploration of the literature; an overview of how scholars have studied public opinion and discourse on the issue, including major debates in the literature; connections to material from class; and your assessment and critique of this body of work, describing what it reveals, any weaknesses or oversights you see, implications for contemporary politics or political theory, etc.

Proposal (5%) — Provide some background information for the political issue you've chosen, describe the research question and the project you'll undertake (roughly two double spaced pages or 500-750 words). Feel free to consult with me to help develop your ideas or get guidance on where to

begin. I may ask for revisions depending on the feasibility/appropriateness of the initial proposal.  
**Due Sunday, Feb. 8 at 11:59pm.**

Annotated bibliography (15%) — For 5-10 articles, books, or book chapters not discussed in class that relate to your research question, provide the full citation and a couple paragraphs describing what the piece is about, how it contributes to an understanding of your topic, how it relates to other work you've read. This is meant to provide some of the raw material that will go into the final essay.  
**Due Sunday, March 22 at 11:59pm**

Essay (30%) — Along with the components above, the rest of the essay will be completed throughout the semester in stages:

**First half due April 19 at 11:59pm**

**Final draft due TBD (final exam period).**

Calculation of final grades:

A+ ≥97%	A 93-96%	A- 90-92%
B+ 87-89%	B 83-86%	B- 80-82%
C+ 77-79%	C 73-76%	C- 70-72%
D+ 67-69%	D 63-66%	D- 60-62%
F ≤60%		

**Accommodations for Disabilities**

“Students needing academic accommodations for a disability must first register with Access Services. Students can email [accessservices@brynmawr.edu](mailto:accessservices@brynmawr.edu) to make an appointment with the Access Services office to begin this confidential process. Once registered, students should schedule an appointment with me, the instructor, as early in the semester as possible to share the verification form and make appropriate arrangements. Please note that accommodations for disabilities are not retroactive and require advance notice to implement. Any student who has a disability-related need to tape record this class must first speak with the Access Services office and to me, the instructor. More information can be obtained at the Access Services website.”

**Honor Code**

“Plagiarism consists of work taken partially or entirely from an uncited source (online or AI content, a peer, a published article, etc.) and assumed as your own. If I have reasons to suspect plagiarizing, I will ask that you report yourself to the Bryn Mawr Honor Board. See the Bryn Mawr Honor Code and Honor Board Hearing Process in the Student Handbook for more information.”

“Artificial intelligence”: I believe that the use of AI, in this course at least, is detrimental to your educational development, and I advise against using such tools. Contributions from AI sources must be properly quoted and cited every time they are used, just like any other source. Failure to properly quote, cite, and document your use of sources including AI would constitute an academic integrity violation, in accordance with the College’s Honor Code.

**Course Schedule:**

Date	Topic	Readings
Jan. 26	Introductions  Principles of government: force and consent	Hume: “Of the First Principles of Government”  Rousseau: Book 1 of <i>The Social Contract</i>  Lasswell: “The Theory of Political Propaganda”
Feb. 2	Origins of “engineering consent”	Lippmann: “The News Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads”; “Yes or No”; “Leaders and the Rank and File”; and “News, Truth, and a Conclusion” (all from <i>Public Opinion</i> )  Bernays: “The Engineering of Consent”  Bennett: “Engineering Consent: The Persistence of a Problematic Communication Regime”
Feb. 9	The media and (some of) their critics	Carey: <i>Taking the Risk out of Democracy</i> (Foreword, chapters 1-2)  Herman and Chomsky: <i>Manufacturing Consent</i> (preface and chapter 1)  Hallin: “The US News Media: A Critical Theory Perspective”

**Feb. 16**

Mass opinion: “What’s the Matter with Kansas?”

(or, what’s the matter with MAGA?)

Schattschneider: “The Displacement of Conflicts” from *The Semisovereign People*

Carey: “The First Americanization Movement” from *Taking the Risk out of Democracy*

Frank: *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* (Introduction, Chapter 1, and Chapter 3)

Walsh: “Putting Inequality in Its Place: Rural Consciousness and the Power of Perspective”

Koenig and Mendelberg: “The Symbolic Politics of Status in the MAGA Movement”

**Feb. 23**

The long shadows of “false consciousness” and “hegemony”

Marx and Engels: *The German Ideology* (pp. 148-175 in Tucker’s *Marx-Engels Reader*)

Gramsci: *Prison Notebooks* (pp. 5-14)

Althusser: “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”

Tolstoy: “On Anarchy”

**March 2**

Hegemony: critiques and revisions

Martel: *The Misinterpellated Subject* (introduction)

Wingrove: “Interpellating Sex”

Hall: “The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees”

Hall: “Encoding/Decoding”

*Spring break*

March 16	Political power and popular resistance	Scott: <i>Domination and the Arts of Resistance</i> (chapter 4)  Gaventa: <i>Power and Powerlessness</i> (chapters 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 10) and  [Optional] Gaventa: “Power and Powerlessness Revisited”
March 23	Foucault, discipline, and coercion	“The Subject and Power”  “Panopticism” from <i>Discipline and Punish</i>  Weaver et al.: “Too Much Knowledge, Too Little Power”  [Optional] Soss and Weaver: “Police are Our Government”
March 30	Orwell, political language, and censorship	“The Freedom of the Press”  “Politics and the English Language”  Arendt: <i>Eichmann in Jerusalem</i> (selections)  Chomsky: “The Bounds of the Expressible” from <i>Necessary Illusions</i>
April 6	Orwell, part 2	<i>1984</i>
April 13	Technology, politics and society as spectacle (part 1)	Bradbury: <i>Fahrenheit 451</i>
April 20	Public opinion as a contested concept	Converse: “Changing Conceptions of Public Opinion in the Political Process”  Bourdieu: “Public Opinion Does Not Exist”  Ginsberg: <i>The Captive Public</i> (selections)

April 27	Technology, politics and society as spectacle (part 2)	Debord: <i>Society of the Spectacle</i> (chapter 1)
	Conclusions	Hindman: <i>The Myth of Digital Democracy</i> (chapter 1)

*Exam period ends May 15 at 12:30pm (May 9 at 5pm for seniors)*

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