

# POLS 3045: Humor and American Politics

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*Meeting Time(s):* MWF, 9-9.50AM      *WWW:* http://pols.jodyb.net  
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## INTRODUCTION

In this course we will examine the role of humor in American politics. The course provides an overview of the history and various forms of political humor, what types of messages are typically contained in political humor, and the mechanisms involved in how political humor shapes opinion. Our examination will include humor in various media, but because of the dominance of the medium in American society, there will be a focus on televised political humor. We will be paying special attention to political humor as it is targeted at political leaders, especially presidents and presidential candidates.

More generally, the course will give you with an understanding of the social science discipline of political science. You will learn the content some aspect of the discipline, how political scientists do research, and the relevance of that research to general knowledge.

After taking the course, you should have developed the skills to:

- Appreciate the unique role humor has played as political commentary throughout history;
- Discuss the increased prevalence of political humor in the past decade;
- "Decode" humorous political messages;
- Understand how, and in what ways, humor affects public opinion.

## TEXTBOOK & READING

The following book has been assigned for this course and is available at one of the local bookstores:

- Baumgartner, Jody C, and Jonathan S. Morris, eds. 2007. *Laughing Matters: Humor and American Politics in the Media Age*. New York: Routledge.

There are also several readings posted online, at <<http://pols.jodyb.net/>>. The *username* to access these readings is 'pols', and the *password* is 'pols'. Other course information, materials, and readings are also posted at this site.

## WRITTEN READING ASSIGNMENT

There is a short written assignment for the week's reading due on the first day of class (at the start of class) for each of the first 12 weeks of the semester. Collectively, these are worth 20% of your grade. The assignments are posted online on the class website.

## EVALUATION

Grades in this class will be calculated according to the following formula:

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<i>Grade Component</i>	<i>Percentage of Grade</i>
Participation & Syllabus Quiz (Fri., Jan. 15)	10%
Reading Assignments	20%
Mid-Term Exam (Mon., Feb. 22)	20%
Paper (due Fri., April 9)	25%
Final Exam (Fri., April 30, 8-10.30AM)	25%

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## EXAMINATIONS

Exams will be short answer and essay format. All exams must be taken at the scheduled time unless you provide a medical excuse BEFOREHAND. Failure to do so will result in a "0" for that particular exam. Students coming late to class on the day of the exam will not be allowed to take the exam. This will result in a "0" for that particular exam.

I do not give make-up exams.

## PARTICIPATION

Preparation and participation are required in this course. Preparation includes, at minimum, a careful reading of course materials prior to class. Regular class attendance will also be helpful for your participation grade. Finally, your participation grade will also include evaluations from several short assignments given throughout the semester.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE COURSE

The following will help orient you to what we will be doing throughout the course. It includes readings for each week, as well as important dates.

- "Laughing Matters" chapters are abbreviated as "LM"
- Readings from the course website are abbreviated as "WEB"

Week 1 (Jan. 11-15): Introduction, & The History of Political Humor

Read: LM, "Introduction"

Read: WEB, Jonathan Swift, "A Modest Proposal"

Read: WEB, Olson, "Political Humor, Deference, and the American Revolution"

### SYLLABUS QUIZ DUE, FRIDAY, JANUARY 15, AT THE START OF CLASS

Week 2 (Jan. 20 & 22): Introduction, & The History of Political Humor

Read: LM, Chapter 19, "Conclusion"

Read: WEB, Stein, "The Politics of Humor"

Read: WEB, Rose, "When Politics is a Laughing Matter"

Week 3 (Jan. 25-29): Political Cartoons

Read: LM, Chapter 4, "Political Cartoons"

Read: WEB, "Political Cartoons of Thomas Nast"

Week 4 (Feb. 1-5): Political Humor on The Internet

Read: WEB, Baumgartner, "Editorial Cartoons 2.0"

Read: LM, Chapter 7, "Air Amusement Vs. Web Wit"

Read: LM, Chapter 8, "American Youth and the Effects of Online Political Humor"

Week 5 (Feb. 8-12): Movies & Television Sitcoms

Read: LM, Chapter 6, "Vote for Pedro"

Week 6 (Feb. 15-19): Movies & Television Sitcoms

Read: LM, Chapter 11, "A Culture War in TV Land?"

Read: LM, Chapter 12, "The ABCs of The Simpsons and Politics"

Week 7 (Feb. 22-26): Late Nite Television

Read: LM, Chapter 9, "Our First Cartoon President"

Read: LM, Chapter 10, "Political Punditry in Punchlines"

MID-TERM EXAM, MONDAY, FEBRUARY 22

Week 8 (March 1-5): Late Nite Television

Read: LM, Chapter 15, "Late-night Comedy Television Shows as News Sources"

Read: WEB, Young & Tisinger, "Dispelling Late Nite Myths"

MARCH 8-12: SPRING BREAK

Week 9 (March 15-19): Late Nite Television

Read: LM, Chapter 16, "It's Better than Being Informed"; Baumgartner & Morris, "Jon Stewart Comes to Class";

Week 10 (March 22-26): Late Nite Television

Read: LM, Chapter 18, "The Daily Show and Attitudes Toward the News Media"

Read: WEB, Baumgartner & Morris, "The Daily Show Effect"

Week 11 (March 29 & 31): Late Nite Television

Read: WEB, Baumgartner & Morris, "One Nation under Stephen"

Week 12 (April 5-9): Late Nite Television

Read: WEB, Cao & Brewer, "Political Comedy Shows & Public Participation in Politics"

Read: LM, Chapter 13, "Saturday Night Live and Presidential Elections"

PAPER DUE FRIDAY, APRIL 9, AT THE START OF CLASS

Week 13 (April 12-16): Presentations

Read: (None)

Week 14 (April 19-23): Presentations

Read: (None)

Week 15 (April 26): Presentations

Read: (None)

FINAL EXAM: FRIDAY, APRIL 30, FROM 8-10.30AM

POLICIES & MUTUAL EXPECTATIONS

Late Work. All late work will be assessed a substantial penalty. I also reserve the right to refuse to accept late work.

Classroom Decorum. The classroom is a learning environment. I expect all students to observe some basic rules of courtesy. Failure to follow these rules will negatively impact your participation grade.

- Arrive to class on time and do not leave before class is dismissed;
- Turn off cell phones;
- Do not check e-mail or access the Internet during class;
- Do not carry on private conversations with others in the classroom while someone else is speaking.

Attendance. There is no attendance policy in this class. While I am aware of the fact that other professors require them, I ask you NOT to bring me any type of documentation that explains your absence if for some reason you are not in class. Why? You are an adult, and what you do with your time is none of my business.

AGAIN: I ask that you please, under no circumstance, bring or present me with any type of documentation that explains why you may have missed a class.

This said, there is a participation component to your grade in this class. So, to be clear, your presence and active participation in class will have a positive effect on your grade.

Academic Integrity. I will strictly enforce the university code of academic integrity in this course. According to the East Carolina University Honor Code, violations of academic integrity include the following:

- *Cheating*. Unauthorized aid or assistance or the giving or receiving of unfair advantage on any form of academic work.
- *Plagiarism*. Copying the language, structure, ideas, and/or thoughts of another and adopting same as one's own original work.
- *Falsification*. Statement of any untruth, either spoken or written, regarding any circumstances relative to academic work.
- *Attempts*. Attempting any act that if completed would constitute an academic integrity violation as defined herein.

For more information about university policies concerning academic integrity, please visit the web at <<http://www.ecu.edu/studenthandbook/III.htm>>. If you violate the Honor Code, I will report the matter to the Academic Integrity Board for disciplinary action. The penalties for violating the university code of academic integrity range from failure in the course to expulsion from the university.

Email Communication. I do not use my university email address. Please use "[jodyb@jodyb.net](mailto:jodyb@jodyb.net)" (listed on page 1 of the syllabus). I will not respond to email sent to my university email address.

Because of federal confidentiality laws, I cannot, do not, and will not respond to any email inquiries about grades.

Finally, with respect to email, please be aware that you will find me to be much more expansive and responsive to in-person consultations than I am with email consultations.

Special Needs. East Carolina University seeks to comply fully with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Students requesting accommodations based on a covered disability must go to the Department for Disability Support Services located in Slay 138 to verify the disability before any accommodations can occur. The telephone number is 252.737.1016. East Carolina University seeks to comply fully with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Students requesting accommodations based on a covered disability must go to the Department for Disability Support Services located in Slay 138 to verify the disability before any accommodations can occur. The telephone number is 252.737.1016.

PAPER

In this course you are asked to write a paper on the political humor of one book or movie. Choose one work from the following list:

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<u>BOOKS</u>	<u>MOVIES</u>
<i>America: The Book</i> (Jon Stewart and "The Daily Show" Staff)	"Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1964)
<i>Boomsday</i> (Christopher Buckley)	"The Distinguished Gentleman (1992)
<i>Deciding the Next Decider: The 2008 Presidential Race in Rhyme</i> (Calvin Trillin)	"Dave (1993)
<i>Florence of Arabia: A Novel</i> (Christopher Buckley)	"Black Sheep" (1996)
<i>Give War a Chance</i> (PJ O'Rourke)	"My Fellow Americans (1996)
<i>Guns and Butter</i> (Jeffrey Seeman)	"Dick (1999)
<i>No Way to Treat a First Lady: A Novel</i> (Christopher Buckley)	"Election" (1999)
<i>Obama's BlackBerry</i> (Kasper Hauser)	"Company Man" (2000)
<i>One Nation Under Par, From the Clubhouse... to the White House?</i> (Mark Nemcek)	"Head of State (2003)
<i>Parliament of Whores: A Lone Humorist Attempts to Explain the Entire Government</i> (PJ O'Rourke)	"Welcome to Mooseport (2004)
<i>Peace Kills: America's Fun New Imperialism</i> (PJ O'Rourke)	"Team America: World Police" (2005)
<i>Political Science</i> (Jeffrey Seeman)	"Man of the Year (2006)
<i>Republican Party Reptile</i> (PJ O'Rourke)	"Harold and Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay" (2008)
<i>Supreme Courtship</i> (Christopher Buckley)	"Swing Vote (2008)
<i>The Republican Playbook</i> (Andy Horowitz)	"Don't Touch the White Woman" (2009)
<i>The White House Mess</i> (Christopher Buckley)	
<i>The Scandal Plan: Or: How to Win the Presidency by Cheating on Your Wife</i> (Bill Folman)	
<i>The CEO of the Sofa</i> (PJ O'Rourke)	

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*NOTE: You may NOT select the movie - or book - "Thank you for Smoking"*

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If you wish to select a book or movie not on this list, you must clear it with me first. Please note that almost all of the books are works of fiction, and if you think you might want to select another book, I will ask that it too be fiction. A word-processed page identifying your topic choice for your paper is due at the start of class, Monday, Feb. 15.

You may take any approach you like in your discussion, but you might address some of the following elements or questions, since collectively, they represent the core of our approach to the study of political humor:

#### CONTENT

- ⇨ What type of humor is this? Joke? Slapstick? Black humor? Satire? Parody? Self-deprecating humor?
- ⇨ How political is it?
- ⇨ What is the truth content of the humor? How much of the message is factually correct?
- ⇨ What pre-existing image, caricature, or attitude, does the humor draw on and reinforce?
- ⇨ What is the target (or targets) of the humor? Is it, for example, an institution (e.g., the media), a person (e.g., a presidential candidate), a process (e.g., presidential elections), a partisan issue (e.g., global warming, gay marriage)?
- ⇨ Is the humor partisan or ideological? If so, which party or ideology does it target, and how sharply does it do so? Conversely, does it target both sides equally – is it party-neutral?
- ⇨ What is the message of the humor? What is the humorist trying to say? How might it relate to popular political discourse?
- ⇨ Is the humor in poor taste? In other words, would many people be offended by the humor? If so, why?

#### AUDIENCE

- ⇨ What is the primary target audience? Young people? Democrats? The broader public?

#### EFFECTS?

- ⇨ What effect, if any, does the humor have on the individuals, politicians, or society?

To be clear, I expect you to develop a theme (or a story, a narrative) in this paper. You should, in other words, leave us with a main point about the political humor of the work you select.

**IMPORTANT:** No more than two (2) pages of this paper should be devoted to telling me what the book or movie is about. In other words, summarize the work in two pages or less.

The majority of your paper is to be about the political humor of the work.

Your grade will suffer substantially if you ignore this guideline.

#### Some Important Guidelines

- You will, naturally, be expected to cite all information, ideas, statistics, etc., that you use from other sources in your paper. In this regard you may use any citation style you wish, so long as you are consistent.
- You may NOT cite Wikipedia, or any other online encyclopedia source in your paper.
- You must source at least one non-Internet source (book, or academic journal article), and, you may not use class notes or any of the assigned readings as that source.

**IMPORTANT:** You may NOT use quotations of ANY kind: Neither direct nor "indirect." Your entire paper must be written in your own words.

#### Formatting Guidelines

- Minimum of 15 FULL pages of text, NOT including title page, bibliography, etc.;
- Word processed only (no pen, pencil marks on paper);
- Double-spaced;
- 12 point font;
- One inch margins, all around;
- Page numbers;
- Stapled: No paper clips, etc.

In my evaluation of your paper, I will be taking into consideration how well the paper has been written. This means that you will benefit from proofreading your paper at least a few times before you turn it in.

Your paper is DUE at the BEGINNING of the class period on Friday, April 9.

- The paper must be turned in directly to me – No electronic copies will be accepted.
- A one-half letter grade late penalty will be assessed for each day an assignment is late, starting with the first day.
- I reserve the right to request an electronic version of your paper at any time.