

GE3208: DEMOCRACY AT THE MOVIES

Effective Term

Semester A 2025/26

Part I Course Overview

Course Title

Democracy at the Movies

Subject Code

GE - Gateway Education

Course Number

3208

Academic Unit

Public and International Affairs (PIA)

College/School

College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences (CH)

Course Duration

One Semester

Credit Units

3

Level

B1, B2, B3, B4 - Bachelor's Degree

GE Area (Primary)

Area 2 - Study of Societies, Social and Business Organisations

Medium of Instruction

English

Medium of Assessment

English

Prerequisites

Nil

Precursors

Nil

Equivalent Courses

PIA2200 Introduction to International Studies through Film

Exclusive Courses

Nil

Part II Course Details

Abstract

Democracy may be one of the most widely endorsed political ideas of our time. Yet it is also a vexed concept that has generated many a heated debate. This course introduces some fundamental notions and problems of democracy from a social science perspective. It does so through the use of a non-traditional pedagogical tool: movies. Motion pictures have long been used to advocate social policies, set political agendas, or win propaganda battles. They often both challenge and uphold traditional institutions and values. Over one semester, a set of internationally acclaimed, award-winning films will be screened in class and used as a tool for surveying and improving our understanding of a wide range of topical issues and concepts from the democracy literature. They include elections, voting rights, the role of a free press, dissent and repression, the rule of law, lobbying and corruption, among others. In addition to different strategies to formulate arguments and write about political movies, students will also be exposed to key social science readings on the concepts raised by each film screened in class. While recognizing the impact of the US movie industry, the course will move beyond Hollywood and critically survey Asian and European films.

The aim of the course is to equip students with instruments and skills to discuss ideas about, against, or in favour of the idea of democracy in their everyday lives, and beyond. Upon completion of the course, students will have developed the ability to actively exercise critical and conceptual thinking while, hopefully, enjoying a product of the entertainment industry.

Course Intended Learning Outcomes (CILOs)

CILOs		Weighting (if DEC-A1 DEC-A2 DEC-A3 app.)			
1	Identify, examine, and develop knowledge on some of the key concepts and features of democracy and (non)democratic forms of government and society		x	x	x
2	Apply multi-disciplinary critical thinking skills to construct political and philosophical arguments against, or in favour of, the idea of democracy		x	x	x
3	Critically evaluate movies, documentaries and other types digital videos with reference to their contents, political assumptions and accuracy, as well as ethics and biases		x	x	x
4	Demonstrate the capacity for self-initiated learning in developing tools and resources that can contribute to civic engagement and open, democratic debate in everyday life.		x	x	x

A1: Attitude

Develop an attitude of discovery/innovation/creativity, as demonstrated by students possessing a strong sense of curiosity, asking questions actively, challenging assumptions or engaging in inquiry together with teachers.

A2: Ability

Develop the ability/skill needed to discover/innovate/create, as demonstrated by students possessing critical thinking skills to assess ideas, acquiring research skills, synthesizing knowledge across disciplines or applying academic knowledge to real-life problems.

A3: Accomplishments

Demonstrate accomplishment of discovery/innovation/creativity through producing /constructing creative works/new artefacts, effective solutions to real-life problems or new processes.

Learning and Teaching Activities (LTAs)

LTAs		Brief Description	CILO No.	Hours/week (if applicable)
1	Lectures	To introduce key theories, paradigms and arguments on the concept of democracy and discuss major ongoing conceptual debates in the democracy literature	1, 2, 3, 4	
2	Film screening; use of digital video clips	A non-traditional pedagogical tool to help illuminate topical issues, provide graphic illustration of democratic politics at work (or not), and stimulate critical reflection	1, 2, 3, 4	
3	Readings	Scholarly books and articles help students develop an in-depth understanding of the concepts and topics discussed	1, 2, 3	
4	Class debate and discussions	To provide opportunities for students to clarify, assess and debate key arguments and concepts through civil interaction with others, while listening to, and appreciating, alternative views	1, 2, 3, 4	
5	Quizzes	Students sit for online quizzes to demonstrate command and critical understanding of the course material, including movies and associated required readings	1, 2, 3	
6	Individual papers (film critique, book review)	Short essays require students to concentrate on the systematic presentation of conceptually grounded arguments and ideas, while developing an independent and critical appreciation of a selected material (movie, book)	1, 2, 3, 4	

Assessment Tasks / Activities (ATs)

	ATs	CILO No.	Weighting (%)	Remarks ("- " for nil entry)	Allow Use of GenAI?
1	Quizzes (related to both movies and readings, 5% per quiz) and weekly participation	1, 2, 3, 4	40	Quizzes run after each movie screened	No
2	Book review (1,000 words)	1, 2, 4	30	For Week 8	No
3	Film critique (1,500 words)	1, 2, 3, 4	30	For Week 14	No

Continuous Assessment (%)

100

Examination (%)

0

Assessment Rubrics (AR)**Assessment Task**

1. Quizzes and participation

Criterion

Demonstration of knowledge gained from readings, lectures and movie screening; evidence of independent conceptual and critical thinking; quality of intervention and contribution to class discussions, evidence of independent and critical thinking

Excellent (A+, A, A-)

Excellent demonstration of knowledge gained; strong evidence of independent conceptual and critical thinking; continuous contributions to classroom discussions and interventions that show a high level of analysis

Good (B+, B, B-)

Good demonstration of knowledge gained; good evidence of independent critical and conceptual thinking; frequent contributions to classroom discussions and interventions with good analysis level

Fair (C+, C, C-)

Fair demonstration of knowledge gained; some evidence of independent critical and conceptual thinking; infrequent contributions to classroom discussions but which reveal fine attempts at analysis

Marginal (D)

Limited demonstration of knowledge gained; marginal evidence of independent critical and conceptual thinking; few contributions to classroom discussions and contributions that show little analytical insight or interest in class; poor attendance

Failure (F)

Poor demonstration of knowledge gained; no evidence of independent critical and conceptual thinking; substantial evidence of cheating; No contribution to classroom discussions, repeated absence, and/or negative attitudes

Assessment Task

2. Book review

Criterion

Organization and quality of critical response developed to an argument, and demonstration of knowledge gained from reading a book

Excellent (A+, A, A-)

Sophisticated, clearly structured response; insightful conclusion drawn from the book; strong evidence of excellent critical thinking about an argument made by others; high quality language with few grammatical mistakes

Good (B+, B, B-)

Good, structured response; original conclusions drawn from the book; evidence of fine critical thinking about an argument made by others; good quality language with some grammatical mistakes

Fair (C+, C, C-)

Limited response; some efforts at drawing conclusions from the book; limited evidence of critical thinking about an argument made by others; a few misunderstandings, low quality language with abundance of grammatical mistakes

Marginal (D)

Poorly stated response; limited understanding of the argument made in the book; no evidence of critical thinking; text difficult to comprehend due to many language issues, typos, spelling errors and grammatical mistakes and some evidence of plagiarism

Failure (F)

Little or no efforts demonstrated in the understanding, or even reading, of the book, poor writing standard and substantial evidence of plagiarised text

Assessment Task

3. Film critique

Criterion

Quality and structure of film-based arguments and clarity of position taken; evidence of independent and critical thinking

Excellent (A+, A, A-)

Outstanding analytical arguments; excellent use of movie content and theories; well-argued position with a clear structure, and high-quality language with few grammatical mistakes

Good (B+, B, B-)

Good analytical arguments; good use of movie content and theories; seasoned position with a fine structure, and good quality language with some grammatical mistakes

Fair (C+, C, C-)

Descriptive arguments; limited use of movie content and theories; logical position but problematic structure, lower quality language with grammatical mistakes, not hindering comprehension

Marginal (D)

Poor argument; marginal use of movie content and theories; lack of identifiable position and structure, low-quality language with many grammatical mistakes and some evidence of plagiarised text

Failure (F)

No argument, or use of movie content and theories, a text with no structure and riddle with grammatical mistakes, and substantial evidence of plagiarised text

Part III Other Information

Keyword Syllabus

Democracy; Authoritarianism; Politics; Society; Government; Political Institutions; Election; Representation; Political Franchise; Media; Free Press; Freedom of Expression; Rule of Law; Civic Duty; Discrimination; Corruption; Lobbying; Interest-Groups; Movie; Entertainment Industry; Political Film; Propaganda; Dissent; Repression; Liberalism; Human Rights; Protests; Collective Action; Social Movements; Political Values.

Reading List

Compulsory Readings

Title	
1	Schmitter, Philippe, and Terry Lynn Karl, 1991. "What Democracy Is... and Is Not." <i>Journal of Democracy</i> 2(3): 75-88.
2	Crick, Bernard, 2002. <i>Democracy: A Very Short Introduction</i> , Oxford: Oxford University Press, 125 p.
3	Przeworski, Adam, 2018. <i>Why Bother with Elections</i> , Cambridge: Polity Press
4	Levitsky, Steven and Daniel Ziblatt, 2018. <i>How Democracies Dies</i> , New York: Broadway Books
5	Timothy Corrigan, 2012. <i>A Short Guide to Writing About Film</i> (8th ed.), Glenview IL: Pearson.

Additional Readings

Title	
1	Dahl, Robert A., 1989. <i>Democracy and its Critics</i> , New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
2	Ehrlich, Matthew C., 2004. <i>Journalism in the Movies</i> , Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
3	Norris, Pippa, 2015. <i>Why Elections Fail</i> , Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
4	Tzioumakis, Yannis and Claire Molloy (eds.), 2016. <i>The Routledge Companion to Cinema and Politics</i> , Abingdon: Routledge.
5	Haas, Elizabeth, Terry Christensen and Peter J. Haas, 2015. <i>Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films</i> (2nd ed), Abingdon: Routledge.
6	Cheeseman, Nic and Brian Klaas, 2018. <i>How to Rig an Election</i> , New Haven CT: Yale University Press
7	Teele, Dawn Langan, 2018. <i>Forging the Franchise: The Political Origins of the Women's Vote</i> , Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
8	Dwyer, R., 2014. <i>Bollywood's India: Hindi Cinema as Guide to Contemporary India</i> , London: Reaktion
9	Aytac, S. Erdem and Susan C. Stokes, 2019. <i>Why Bother? Rethinking Participation in Elections and Protests</i> , Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
10	Bodnar, John, 2003. <i>Blue-Collar Hollywood: Liberalism, Democracy, and Working People in American Film</i> , Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press
11	Fukuyama, Francis, 2014. <i>Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy</i> , London: Profile Books.
12	Femia, Joseph V. 2001. <i>Against the Masses: Varieties of Anti-Democratic Thought since the French Revolution</i> . Oxford: Oxford University Press
13	Harman, Sophie, 2019. <i>Seeing Politics: Film, Visual Method, and International Relations</i> , Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
14	Carlson, Matthew M. and Steven R. Reed, 2018. <i>Political Corruption and Scandals in Japan</i> , Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
15	Schudson, Michael, 1992. <i>Watergate in American Memory</i> . New York: Basic Books.

Annex (for GE courses only)

A. Please specify the Gateway Education Programme Intended Learning Outcomes (PILOs) that the course is aligned to and relate them to the CILOs stated in Part II, Section 2 of this form:

Please indicate which CILO(s) is/are related to this PILO, if any (can be more than one CILOs in each PILO)

PILO 1: Demonstrate the capacity for self-directed learning

2, 3, 4

PILO 2: Explain the basic methodologies and techniques of inquiry of the arts and humanities, social sciences, business, and science and technology

1, 3

PILO 3: Demonstrate critical thinking skills

2, 3, 4

PILO 4: Interpret information and numerical data

1, 3

PILO 5: Produce structured, well-organised and fluent text

3, 4

PILO 6: Demonstrate effective oral communication skills

4

PILO 8: Recognise important characteristics of their own culture(s) and at least one other culture, and their impact on global issues

1, 2, 3, 4

PILO 9: Value ethical and socially responsible actions

2, 3, 4

PILO 10: Demonstrate the attitude and/or ability to accomplish discovery and/or innovation

2, 3, 4

B. Please select an assessment task for collecting evidence of student achievement for quality assurance purposes. Please retain at least one sample of student achievement across a period of three years.

Selected Assessment Task

Film critique (1,500 words). The task requires students to develop sound, clearly posited arguments about the concepts and problems of democracy today while demonstrating a good understanding of the political assumptions, aspirations and limitations of one of the movies shown in class.