

# COMM432: Political Communication

## Spring 2015

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### Course description

Political communication is the study of how communication between members of the public, the media, advocacy groups, and politicians shapes democratic societies. In this class, we will examine the communication efforts of each of these actors, paying special attention to how citizens come to understand politics through their interpersonal and mass communication experiences. This class tackles a number of questions. What are the functions and effects of the mass media in a democratic society, and how do media constraints affect their ability to carry out these functions? How do individuals come to understand their relationship to the political process? How do politicians, advocacy groups, and citizens engage in strategic or persuasive communication to achieve their goals? While this class covers political campaigns, we are primarily focused on the everyday interactions between citizens, the media, and political advocates in U.S. society and their implications for cultural, social, and policy issues.

### Required Texts:

Perloff, Richard M. (2014). *The Dynamics of Political Communication: Media and Politics in a Digital Age*. Routledge.

All readings from the textbook are designated in the course schedule as *Perloff*, with the appropriate chapter and/or page number.

Additional course readings will be posted to the Blackboard website. They are designated in the course schedule by the author(s) name and the chapter that you are assigned, and include (BB) to indicate they will be available on Blackboard at least one week before the assigned reading is due.

### Blackboard use:

Visit MyMason page at <http://myMason.gmu.edu>. Log in using your Mason ID and password. After that, click on the "Courses" tab on the upper right corner of the page. COMM432 should show up on the course list. Please visit Blackboard on a regular basis. The supplemental readings will be posted one week before their due date. Your assignments and grades will also be available through Blackboard. Unless you are told otherwise in class, all assignments will be due to Blackboard, not via hard copy.

<b>Grade Distribution Overview</b>	<b>Points</b>
<i>Exams</i>	
Midterm #1	100
Midterm #2	100
Final Exam	150
Syllabus Quiz	20
Pop Quizzes (3)	30
<i>Individual Assignments</i>	
Tracing a Story Proposal	50
Tracing a Story Paper	100
<i>Group Project</i>	
Persuading an Audience Proposal	50
Persuading an Audience Campaign Plan	100
Persuading an Audience Presentation	50
<i>Participation</i>	
Course Participation	100
<b>Total Points in Class</b>	<b>850</b>

## Grade Breakdown

### 1. *Exams (350 points total)*

The two midterms will cover content from Weeks 1-5 and Weeks 6-10 of the course, respectively. The exams will be a mix of multiple-choice, short answer or identifications, and essay questions. The final exam for the course will include cumulative material, largely in the open-ended portion of the exam. You will need to bring Scantron #882 or #8000 for each exam (Scantron forms may be found at the GMU bookstore at the checkout stand).

### 2. *Quizzes (50 points total)*

While we will briefly cover the syllabus on the first day of class, students are expected to read the syllabus and be familiar with its components outside of class. Before Week #2 of the course (January 27, 2015), students will be required to complete an online syllabus quiz available through Blackboard. This syllabus quiz will be open-syllabus, but will have a time limit of 15 minutes. This quiz is designed to ensure students are familiar with the course expectations and policies.

In addition, there will be three pop quizzes throughout the semester, each worth 10 points. These pop quizzes will occur at the beginning of the class period and will be based largely on the readings due for that day. No make-up will be offered for the pop quiz except in circumstances of an excused absence.

### 3. *Assignments (150 points total)*

In addition to the exams, the other major component of your course grade are a number of

individual and group assignments that are designed to apply the class concepts to understanding the contemporary political environment.

*Tracing a Political Story Proposal (50 points)*

For this assignment, you will consider a political story of your choice, and report on how the various actors communicated with each other and to the public about that political story. The story you choose should be relatively recent – within the last few months (e.g., this semester) – and must be approved by me in a proposal submitted to Blackboard on **February 3, 2015**. This proposal should be no more than one page, double-spaced, in which you should describe the story you have chosen, identify at least 3 actors from politics and the mass media that you think are important to understanding the story.

*Tracing a Political Story (100 points)*

For the paper, you should begin by explaining the political event you have chosen. In a paragraph, sum up the details as objectively as possible. Next, highlight each of the political actors who played a major part in or offered an opinion on this event or story. Explain why they were involved, whether it was by choice or by necessity, and how they responded to the situation via some form of communication. Did they release a statement, utilize the press, post to a website, or twitter account, etc.? And how did the reactions or statements from each political actor vary? What motivations and constraints that we've talked about in class do you see playing a role in this particular situation? Use evidence from lecture and readings as appropriate.

These papers will be graded primarily on the strength of your argument and the use of evidence from both the media content and from the course materials (either lecture or textbook) to analyze the media content.

This paper should be 4 pages, double-spaced, 1 inch margins, 12-point font. Be sure to include citations for any information from the political authors you discuss and any reference to lecture or class reading as appropriate. This paper is due to Blackboard by **April 7, 2015**.

4. *Group Project (200 points total)*

For your final project, you will work as a group (3-4 people per group) to develop a campaign to inform, persuade, or motivate an audience on a current political issue. The goal of this project is to create a pitch that you could make to a client who is interested in advancing their cause on an issue. Below you will see a brief description of the components of the project; you will receive more information each component later in the semester.

This project involves three steps:

*Proposal (50 points)*

As a group, you will define the political issue you are interested in, the group you are representing and their stance on the issue, the audience you are targeting, and the outcome that hope to achieve as part of your campaign. You should justify your decisions: why is the issue you selected important to the group's goals? Why is the audience you are targeting relevant or important for this issue? Why is the goal that you are pursuing valuable? The group proposal should be 2 pages, double-spaced and is due **February 26, 2015**.

*Group Campaign Plan (100 points)*

For your final project, your group will outline the campaign that you are proposing. You may consider this as a type of “pitch” memo to a client: You will describe the proposed campaign, why it should be effective, and how it will be achieved. You will also produce at least one concrete example of a campaign message that you would be promoting, describing how it reflects your overall campaign strategy. The campaign plan should be roughly 8 pages, double-spaced and is due **April 28, 2015**.

*Group Presentation (50 points)*

Finally, you will present your campaign plan to the class during the final week of class (**April 28, 2015**). Your presentation will last roughly 10-12 minutes, and should include a question and answer session. Each group member will be expected to take part in the presentation.

5. *Course Participation (100 points total)*

This course is an upper-level seminar-style course. Therefore, each class period will contain a mixture of lecture material, in which I will cover key theories and concepts for the course, and discussion amongst the class about the application and implications of those materials for our understanding of political communication in democratic societies.

These course discussions are an essential component of the learning experience, and I enjoy the opportunity to learn a diverse set of perspectives on the topics covered in the course. Each student is expected to come prepared to every class period having completed the readings and ready to question and discuss their implications. You should carefully read the course materials with a critical eye, and come to class with questions and comments. You are also expected to keep up with current events to participate in the course. I strongly encourage you to read a major national newspaper, such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, or *The Washington Post* (among others), for this course.

Your participation is judged on the *quality*, not the quantity, of your participation in the class. As part of your participation, you should actively listen to other people in the class, and respond to their questions and concerns. There are often no “right” answers in these discussions; instead, there are different ways to think about how theories of political communication help us interact with current events in the world.

This class depends on the active engagement of all of its members to be successful and fun. I look forward to discussing political communication with each of you.

In addition, your participation in the group project is also essential. To ensure each group member’s participation, at the end of the semester groups will evaluate each of their peers for their contribution to the group, both in discussion and for the final paper. These evaluations will be kept confidential but will form a large basis of the final participation grade for the course. However, I will also be doing an independent evaluation of each person’s participation in the class that may differ from the group’s evaluations.

**Course Schedule (subject to revision)****Unit 1: The media as political actors****Unit 2: The political elite and the campaign****Unit 3: The public and politics**

	<b>Date</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Readings</b>
Week 1	T 1/20/15	What is political communication?	Perloff, Chap 1
	R 1/22/15	What is political communication?	Perloff, Chap 2
Week 2	T 1/27/15	Role of the press	Perloff, Chap 10 <b>DUE: Online syllabus quiz</b>
	R 1/29/15	Media bias	Perloff, Chap 9
Week 3	T 2/3/15	Media choice	Arcenaux & Johnson (BB), Chap 1 <b>DUE: Tracing a story proposal</b>
	R 2/5/15	Media effects 1: Learning	Perloff, Chap 4
Week 4	T 2/10/15	Media effects 2: Agenda-setting	Perloff, Chap 6-7
	R 2/12/15	Media effects 3: Framing	Perloff, Chap 8
Week 5	T 2/17/15	<b>MIDTERM #1</b>	
	R 2/19/15	Political institutions	Domke et al (BB), Chap 20 Sellers (BB), Chap 21
Week 6	T 2/24/15	Outside institutions	Tuman (BB), Chap 2
	R 2/26/15	Journalists	Graber 2010 (BB), Chap 6 <b>DUE: Persuading an Audience Proposal</b>
Week 7	T 3/3/15	Main players in campaigns	Perloff, Chap 12
	R 3/5/15	Campaigns and persuasion	Perloff, Chap 14
Week 8	T 3/10/15	<b>SPRING BREAK!!</b>	
	R 3/12/15		
Week 9	T 3/17/15	Free media	Tuman (BB), (219-232) Sabato (BB), Chap 18
	R 3/19/15	Political advertising	Perloff, Chap 15

Week 10	T 3/24/15	Political events: Debates and nominations	Perloff, Chap 16 and pp. 310-315
	R 3/26/15	<b>MIDTERM #2</b>	
Week 11	T 3/31/15	Talking about politics	Gastil (BB), Chap 1
	R 4/2/15	Influencing the media	Althaus (BB), Chap 8
Week 12	T 4/7/15	Influencing politicians	Glynn et al. (BB), Chap 9
	R 4/9/15	Youth engagement in news and politics	<b>DUE:</b> Tracing a political story Bennett, 2008
Week 13	T 4/14/15	Protest movements – <b>Guest lecture:</b> Anne Bennett	Earl et al., 2010
	R 4/16/15	New media 1: Online news & citizen journalism	Bode et al., 2013
Week 14	T 4/21/15	New media 2: Social media	Gainous & Wagner (BB), Chapter 1
	R 4/23/15	New media 3: Getting Outraged	Slate 2014: Year of Outrage
Week 15	T 4/28/15	Final presentations	<b>DUE:</b> Group campaign plan
	R 4/30/15	Semester review	
FINAL	T 5/12/15 1:30-4:15	<b>FINAL EXAM</b>	

## General Notes:

### *Possible Changes to the Syllabus*

This course schedule is meant to provide you with a sense of the topics that will be covered in the class. Depending on time constraints, on feedback from the students, and on the availability of potential guest lecturers, I may have to adjust the lecture topics, readings, and assignment due dates in the syllabus. You will receive advance notice of any changes to the course plan as soon as possible.

### *Participation and Attendance*

Good attendance in class is a pre-requisite towards receiving a good participation score. In general, each person will be allowed two “free” unexcused absences from class with no penalty, although these absences can only be taken on regular lecture days (e.g, not during exam periods). These free absences should not be taken lightly – they are designed to account for unexpected illness, family and work obligations, etc. Consistent late arrival to class or long absences during the lecture will also count against your participation grade.

If you miss a class, you are responsible for finding out what went on in your absence and getting pertinent assignments, materials, notes, etc. I am happy to answer any specific questions you have about lecture notes, the textbooks, or assignments, but I will not be reviewing the entire lecture.

You are expected and encouraged to participate in class discussions **actively**. Asking questions, making observations, or introducing issues for debate are all great ways to start.

### *Classroom Atmosphere*

This class is designed to promote an engaging and informative environment. Part of that is respectful behavior on the part of all the members of the class. Please avoid engaging in any activities that are distracting or disrespectful to your peers or to the instructor. This includes arriving late to class, packing up early, texting or answering the phone during class, talking noisily with peers, or using your laptop for non-classroom related activities (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, etc.).

As part of the class, you are encouraged to engage with your peers and with me. However, this must be done in a respectful and civil manner. Anyone engaging others in a disrespectful tone (including name-calling, derogation of others’ opinions, etc.) will be asked to leave the classroom and will lose points from their participation grade.

### *Readings*

It is important to keep up with the readings in this course. The lectures are designed to supplement, not to replace, the readings. Readings are to be completed before the date listed in the Course Schedule. You should be familiar with the key issues, terms, and methodologies discussed in the readings, and please do not hesitate to ask if you find a concept or argument in the readings unclear.

In addition to the readings on the syllabus, I often assign short supplemental materials. These readings generally will be taken from current mass media content (e.g., news articles, entertainment

clips) and will be designed to demonstrate course concepts and spur discussion during Thursday's class. These supplemental readings are also mandatory for all students.

### Communication about Grades

If you have questions or concerns with a grade given in the course, you should contact me.

If you have a question about how an assignment is graded, you are welcome to stop by office hours or make an appointment to talk with me during the next week. These questions may not be sent via email, nor will I answer questions about an assignment or exam immediately following the class period.

To appeal your grade, you must: (1) wait 24 hours to contact me (e.g., I will not be answering questions about grades immediately after an assignment or exam has been returned) and (2) **email** me the specific reason you would like to question or appeal your grade. In this email, you should include an argument for why you believe your work should be reviewed. It is not sufficient to say "I think my paper is better than this grade indicates" – instead, you must point to specific examples that you think should be reviewed and provide evidence to support your claims that the grade is too low.

To appeal your grade, must contact me **within one week** of receiving your grade. I will not review grades re-submitted after this time period has elapsed.

After I receive your email appealing your grade and the marked-up version of your assignment, I will review your assignment and will consider providing a new grade.

### Contacting Me and Office Hours

Email is the best way to get in touch with me. While you are welcome to call the communication office (the number is provided at the beginning of the syllabus), it may be difficult to reach me via phone. You are also welcome to stop by during my office hours, although I encourage you to set up an appointment to ensure that I will have time to meet with you. Office hours are based on a first-come, first-served basis, and some weeks during the semester I will be booked the entire time.

If you cannot make my regular office hours, please email me to set up an appointment. In your email, please provide the dates you are available to meet, how long you believe the appointment will take, and the topic you wish to cover. I will reply to your email with times that work for me, and you should confirm a final time before the meeting is scheduled. You should allow at least 24 hours notice before setting up an appointment.

When you email me, please make sure that you identify yourself clearly using both your **full name** and the **course number**. I will only answer **specific** questions about assignments, lectures, or papers via email. If you have more detailed questions about critical concepts or wish to discuss your paper or assignments, you should schedule an appointment to meet with me or come to my office hours. I also will not answer questions if the answer is available in content posted online (e.g., due dates, syllabus readings, etc.)



While I will do my best to promptly reply to any emails received, please allow at least 24 hours for a response. I will let you know in advance if I will be unavailable via email for an extended period of time.

Please be aware that I only have your GMU email address. All my emails will be sent to your GMU account. It is your responsibility to check your email on regular basis and make sure it is working!

### Makeup Exams

Only in extreme circumstances (e.g., verified illness, death in the family) can exams be “made up” without prior arrangements.

### Late Assignments

Assignments turned in late will be penalized by deducting 10% from the total points for each day it is late. **Assignments will no longer be accepted one week past the due date.**

### Early Read of Assignments

As a class policy, I do not read a student’s assignment until he or she formally submits it for grading. I would be happy to address any specific concerns or questions regarding the assignment prior to the submission during office hours.

### Email Use

Email is a great way to stay in touch even after school hours. I encourage you to use email to communicate with me.

### Honor Code

George Mason University students are expected to adhere to the Honor Code; please familiarize yourself with the Honor Code if you have not already done so. All papers, projects, and exams are to be original and prepared for this class. Papers and projects for this class may be related to a task in another class, but you must get specific permission from both instructors. While hired typists and proofreaders are permitted, your exams, papers, and projects must be your own work.

Link: <http://www.gmu.edu/academics/catalog/9798/honorcod.html>

### Incompletes or Withdrawals

The situations in which an incomplete can be given are specified very clearly in the university catalogue, which indicates that such a grade may be given to a student who is passing a course but who may be unable to complete scheduled course work for a cause beyond reasonable control. Along the same lines, the policies regulating withdrawal are clearly specified in the catalogue, but they are granted ONLY for non-academic reasons.

### Reasonable Accommodation

Any student in this course who has a disability that may prevent him or her from fully demonstrating his or her abilities should contact the instructor as soon as possible so that the necessary accommodations can be made to ensure full participation and facilitate the student's educational opportunities. A Disability Support Services office is available on campus to assist students with special needs. If you have a disability or suspect you might have a disability, contact this office at 703-993-2474. If you have a disability that will require assistance, let your instructor know within the first two weeks of this course.

*The GMU Writing Center*

The Writing Center provides free tutorial sessions for all students needing help with any writing project from freshman essays to scholarly publications. It is best to make an appointment to ensure seeing a Writing Center consultant at a specific time; however, walk-ins will be accepted if there are openings. The GMU Writing Center is located at UWC: Robinson A114. Phone: 703-993-1200. Web page: [www.gmu.edu/departments/writingcenter](http://www.gmu.edu/departments/writingcenter)

The Writing Center is a great resource for students. It offers an opportunity for students to refine their ideas before drafting an assignment and provides another set of eyes to review core components after written. I encourage students to take advantage of this resource in their written assignments for this class.

## Full References for Additional Readings

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- Arceneaux, K., & Johnson, M. (2013). *Changing Minds or Changing Channels: Partisan News in an Age of Choice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
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- Bode, L., Ederly, S., Vraga, E. K., Sayre, B., & Shah, D. V. (2013). Digital democracy: How the Internet has changed politics. In A. Valdivia & E. Scharrer (Eds.) *International Companion to Media Studies – Media Effects/Media Psychology* (Chap. 23). Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.
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- Sellers, P. J. (2011). Manipulating the message in the U.S. Congress. In Graber, D. A. (Ed.), *Media Power in Politics* (Chap. 21). Washington, DC: CQ Press.
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