

**DePaul University**

---

**From the SelectedWorks of Jacob Stump**

---

2013

Exploring Politics and government with Popular Culture: Justifications, Methods, Potentials, and Challenges in Introductory Political Science Courses

Jacob L Stump, *DePaul University*



SELECTEDWORKS™

Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/jacob-stump/1/>

# Exploring Politics and Government With Popular Culture: Justifications, Methods, Potentials, and Challenges in Introductory Political Science Courses

JACOB L. STUMP

Shepherd University

*For an introductory-level course (Politics and Government) mostly composed of nonpolitical science majors, I use a combination of nontraditional texts, including novels and films, along with primary documents. This article briefly justifies the value of nontraditional texts for exploring politics and government. It then sketches out the nontraditional texts used in the course and how they relate to politics and government. I also describe some methods I use in combining nontraditional texts with primary documents to highlight and explore important concepts and present-day political problems relevant for an introductory-level politics and government class. I close with a brief discussion of two problems I have encountered in employing such an approach.*

**Keywords** fiction, film, general curriculum, pedagogy, Politics and Government, popular culture

[Supplementary materials are available for this article. Go to the publisher's online edition of the *Journal of Political Science Education* for the following free supplemental resource(s): Tables 1 and 2, containing examples of relevant nontraditional texts and the political issues associated with them.]

## Introduction

Political scientists across different subfields have increasingly started using popular fiction as a focus of analysis and as a teaching-learning device (e.g., Drezner 2010; Giglio 2010; Haas and Christensen 2005; Lipschutz 2001, 2010; Neumann and Nexon 2006; Paik 2010; Weldes 2003).<sup>1</sup> The presence of the “Politics, Literature, and Film” section of the American Political Science Association (n.d.) is indicative of the increasing salience and significance of the relationship between fiction and politics for political scientists. Hundreds of academic articles and edited volumes have focused on popular films and television dramas like the *Aliens* series, *The Simpsons*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Harry Potter*, *Star Trek*, and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy to name but a few examples (Lametti et al. 2012; Saideman 2012; Shone 2012).

I would like to give special thanks to the anonymous reviewers and to members of my department who read and commented on an early version of the paper, including Stephanie Slocum-Schaffer, Max Guirguis, and Joseph Robbins. Shiera Malik also gave me a number of helpful comments on the final draft.

Address correspondence to Jacob L. Stump, Department of Political Science, Shepherd University, P.O. Box 5000, Shepherdstown, WV 25443. E-mail: jstump@shepherd.edu

A quick *Google* search shows that “Politics and Film,” “Film and Politics,” and “Politics and Cinema” related syllabi are commonplace in political science departments (and other disciplines) across the United States. The particulars of these types of courses range widely. *The Wire*, a Home Box Office series about police, drug dealers, petty thieves, families, teachers, and students in Baltimore, Maryland, has been the primary subject of courses at Harvard, Duke, University of California at Berkeley, and the University of Maryland (Bennett 2010). Professor Joseph Corso at East Tennessee State University, for instance, uses fictional movies and poetry to explore notions of classical democracy and the relationship between political participation and the development of the virtuous self, while Professor Patrick T. Jackson at American University offers a course entitled “Social Science Fiction” that uses a number of novels and movies to explore the complexities of sociopolitical relations that develop between “us” and “them.” In general, the relationship between politics and popular culture has become an increasingly important topic of study, discussion, theorization, and a vehicle for classroom instruction.

With all of this scholarly activity, however, few have addressed an important set of questions: What is the relationship between politics and popular culture? What is the value of using popular culture to explore and communicate concepts, processes, and events relevant to an introductory political science class? How can fiction successfully be used to explore politics? And, what are some of the potentials and problems associated with nontraditional texts in the classroom? These questions are addressed in the following five subsections that (1) sketch out the various approaches to the study of politics and popular culture and then situate this article among those approaches, (2) justify the value of using fiction (novels and film) as a pedagogical device to explore and communicate political concepts and events, (3) describe some fictional texts (novels and films) that could be used as a tool to explore political topics, (4) sketch out specific techniques for using fiction to explore politics and government, (5) and discuss some of the problems associated with fiction in the political science classroom.

### **Approaches to Politics and Popular Culture**

All of the academic activity focusing on the relationship between politics and popular culture has yielded a number of ways for political scientists to approach the problem. In their influential book, *Harry Potter and International Relations* (2006), Iver Neumann and Daniel Nexon compose a useful typology that helps map out the different ways to study and explore politics and popular culture. They outline four basic approaches: (1) popular culture and politics; (2) popular culture as mirror; (3) popular culture as data; (4) popular culture as constitutive. Below, I briefly discuss each approach and what they entail, situate the primary approach this article is organized around (i.e., popular culture as mirror) and outline additional benefits (e.g., communicating concepts to students, hooking the interests of non-majors, encouraging more student participation, etc.) related to the treatment of popular culture as a mirror in the political science classroom.

The first approach that Neumann and Nexon discuss is popular culture and politics (2006, 11). In this approach, popular culture is treated as either a cause of certain political outcomes or as an effect of particular causal factors. For instance, Patricia M. Goff (2006) treats the global popularity of Harry Potter as, at least in part, an outcome of media conglomerates that have a worldwide reach. Conversely,

Maia A. Gemmill and Daniel Nexon (2006) argue that Harry Potter was causally significant. The increasing popularity of Harry Potter books and movies and the themes of witchcraft found in those popular texts generated a religious backlash among outspoken conservative Christian commentators and public leaders. The popular cultural text, in other words, is treated as an independently existing cause or effect variable.

The second approach that Neumann and Nexon describe is a rather common pedagogical practice and is referred to as popular culture as mirror (2006, 11–13). This is when fiction is used as a teaching or “analogical tool” (Neumann and Nexon 2006, 12) to communicate and “illuminate various concepts and processes from IR” (11) and other subfields of the discipline of political science. More specifically, as Neumann and Nexon indicate, using popular fiction in this way “can force us to reflect on our theoretical and pedagogical assumptions” and can challenge “ingrained suppositions about a certain phenomenon and our vested interests in ongoing debates to gain a different perspective upon our social world” (2006, 12). Using fiction in this way can, furthermore, give interpretations of historical events and concepts “plausibility” (Neumann and Nexon 2006, 12). An example of this way of using popular fiction as a mirror is illustrated by Jennifer Sterling-Folker and Brian Folker (2006). They argue that important concepts of political realism, especially as they relate to international political cooperation and conflict between institutions and states, are mirrored by relations between magicals and muggles in Harry Potter. As I discuss below, here I explore popular culture as mirror as the primary approach. One example I expand on relates to anarchy and the difficulties associated with cooperation under such conditions and how *The Road* mirrors this political dynamic.

The third approach that Neumann and Nexon describe is popular culture as data (2006, 13–14). On this view, popular cultural texts “are seen as storage places for meaning in a particular society” and so they “reflect general cultural themes and assumptions” (Neumann and Nexon 2006, 13). In contrast to the high politics and data of elite policymakers, Weldes (2006) describes this as the “low politics” of popular culture. Popular culture as data enables scholars to study the politics of identity construction and policies associated with those identities. Among other documents, for example, Hopf (2002) studied novels and media to explain Soviet and Russian identity and foreign policy behavior between 1955 and 1999. In *Imagining America at War*, Cynthia Weber (2006) used 10 films released and rereleased after September 11, 2001 as data. Through these films, she explored the construction of American national identity in the context of the War on Terror. Similarly, Towns and Rumelili (2006) closely examine the relationship between Harry Potter films and books by different audiences around the world. They argue that the various receptions of the popular cultural artifact reflect important aspects of national identity.

Finally, the fourth approach that Neumann and Nexon outline is popular culture as constitutive (2006, 14–20). They explore how popular culture “actively shapes” politics and policies by constituting particular norms, identities, values, and policies (Neumann and Nexon 2006, 15). Through this view, the popular television show *Dallas* is no different than a speech by Ronald Reagan (Neumann and Nexon 2006, 17). In particular, they argue that popular culture actively shapes world politics in four specific ways: determining effects, informing effects, enabling effects, and naturalizing effects (Neumann and Nexon 2006, 17–20). Perhaps the most significant and frequently investigated way that popular culture shapes politics is through naturalization. For example, in terms of Harry Potter, Neumann (2006, 20) argues that the

“spatial geography” of the fictional world naturalizes a view of political life in which “savagery and barbarity emanate from the north and the east.” Similarly, Shapiro (1992, 1) writes that “with the exception of some resistant forms, music, theater, TV weather forecasts, and even cereal box scripts tends to endorse prevailing power structures by helping to reproduce the beliefs and allegiances necessary for their uncontested functioning.

Approaches 1 and 2 focus respectively on popular culture as either a variable or a pedagogically useful tool; however, critically speaking, these two approaches take cultural fiction in an unproblematic way. That is to say, Approaches 1 and 2 assume that “world politics exists *apart from* the practices of popular culture” and that, basically, the fictional representations in popular culture and the “real world” analyzed by scholars are distinct (Weldes 2003, 12, emphasis in original). For instance, to the extent that Harry Potter illustratively mirrors various realist concepts related to cooperation and conflict between institutions and states, the popular culture as a mirror approach nevertheless assumes that the institutions and states simply *are* central aspects of world politics and that Harry Potter simply illustrates how those features of world politics work. As Weldes has critically noted about such unproblematic assumptions regarding the relationship between politics and popular culture, “this is at best a partial understanding” because, as she asserts, fiction is not simply a window onto or a reflection of “an already existing world” (Weldes 2003, 12). Conversely, Approaches 3 and 4 work from an alternative set of assumptions about the world and the relationship between politics and popular fiction. Instead of assuming that fictional and factual representations are distinct, they assume just the opposite: Popular fiction and factual representations are deeply and complexly intertwined. For instance, Approaches 3 and 4 may examine how certain popular fiction may affirm or challenge particular ways of imagining American national identity that are promulgated by elites in the post-9/11 context. In general, though, these four approaches work from different assumptions about the world and the relationship between politics and fiction. Most importantly, perhaps, none of the four approaches captures all of the complexity of the politics and fiction dynamic; they are necessarily limited, yet each presents a particular way of exploring political processes in the classroom.

Next, I focus on the potential value of using popular cultural texts as a mirror to illustrate, to communicate, and to elucidate important concepts in the study of politics. I then discuss three pedagogical methods designed to bring popular culture into the classroom. The last section reflects on issues that I have encountered while using popular culture in the classroom.

### **The Value of Popular Culture as a Mirror of Political Concepts and Events**

If popular culture can mirror important concepts in the political science classroom, then fiction can provide a more diverse set of examples, analogies (Van Belle and Mash 2010, 9), metaphors, depictions of life, and events that can be used by the teacher and the students in the classroom to make a point or draw a comparison. In other words, one of the hallmarks of science fiction is that it can weave together “an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (Suvin 1979, 9; quoted in Weldes 2003, 1). Thus, by going beyond factual history, fiction is valuable because it provides more resources for thinking, talking, and writing about politics and government. This becomes clear in class discussion when students regularly refer to the fictional readings and draw parallels with historical

events or ask questions about the possibility of some fictional event becoming future fact. For example, during the Spring 2012 semester, as we studied libertarian politics, the class read *The Probability Broach* and watched YouTube videos of Ron Paul's comments regarding his various policy stances. Several students in two separate sections of politics and government initiated a critical line of questions related to the libertarian emphasis on limited government. "Limited government looks so seamless and perfect in the book," one student said, but what about a "natural disaster" or a manmade disaster such as the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico (Stump 2012). Used well, I argue, these fictional resources can enhance the exploration of politics and government beyond the limits of traditional texts by bringing in examples and frameworks outside the student's empirical environment that parallel everyday events.

A second reason that fiction is valuable in the political science classroom is that fiction provides a way for students to "get a taste" of political situations that most would otherwise not have the ability or the desire to experience (Van Belle and Mash 2010, 9). It is nearly impossible for an American to travel to a totalitarian country such as North Korea, for instance, but, by combining a documentary about North Korea with news articles and a novel like *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *It Can't Happen Here*, *We*, or *V for Vendetta*, a teacher can help students grasp the significance of life inside of a totalitarian political system. To be clear, this is not to claim that a book like *V for Vendetta* accurately reflects life in North Korea or any other totalitarian and/or authoritarian state. Rather, for pedagogical purposes, the stories persuasively communicate the general concept of totalitarianism and dramatically depict policies and ways of life one might encounter under such conditions. *Nineteen Eighty Four*, for instance, can speak to aspects of totalitarian politics such as state control over the means of mass communication, the impact of information control on citizens' beliefs and conduct, and the role of intensive surveillance and pervasive fear in limiting political dissent.

The third reason that Van Belle and Mash give for their use of fiction as a classroom tool for exploring politics is that it provides magnified or exaggerated examples that illustrate important political issues and concepts (2010, 9–10). In *The Iron Heel*, for instance, the class conflict becomes dramatically explosive across the United States and Europe. The story centers on key characters (Avis and Ernest) that exemplify the larger class conflict in their personal relations—she is a repentant capitalist and he a revolutionary socialist, and they get married. In line with Van Belle and Mash, these "exaggerated contexts and personalities serve as magnifying glasses to highlight the forces that limit the characters' choices or motivate their actions" (2010, 10) in a context of class struggle and extreme economic and political inequality—or most any topic of interest to an introductory politics and government course. In most recent semesters because of political events in Wisconsin, Ohio, and Indiana involving class politics, unionization, public dissent, and recall elections, concepts such as class and class conflict inspired a great deal of give and take among students in my classes. I observed group debates over whether workers should have the right to join unions, for instance, become more intense and rigorous during the Fall 2011 and Spring 2012 semesters than in previous semesters. Similarly, after watching a documentary on the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire and hearing a short lecture on the history of labor struggle in the United States, especially during the Gilded Age and the early 1900s, several students directly cited *The Iron Heel* in formulating questions and comments about the possibility of violent class conflict in the United States and the comparatively little class-talk in American politics today.

A fourth reason for using fiction in the class room is that it can be a useful tool for supporting or even starting an active-learning strategy (Van Belle and Mash 2010, 10–11). Active learning requires the creation of a “critical learning environment,” where “people learn by confronting intriguing, beautiful, or important problems, authentic tasks that will challenge them to grapple with ideas, rethink assumptions, and examine their mental models of reality” (Bain 2004, 18). One of the key methods used in a critical-learning environment is discussion (McKeachie and Svinicki 2006, 35). Getting students to read the required materials so that they are prepared to speak in class, however, can sometimes be a practical problem that teachers must work to solve. Internet discussion forums (Trudeau 2005), in-class voting activities (Damron and Mott 2005), debates (Omelicheva 2007; Oros 2007), and simulations (Frederking 2005) offer possible solutions. I have found that fiction is useful in facilitating increased student-teacher interaction: More students seem to read the required material and, based on my observations and notes of their performance in class, are prepared to speak.<sup>2</sup> Combined with factual information, the fictional material is easily used to provoke class, small-group, and online discussion and to debate about politically relevant topics and concepts, such as the relevance of class, the possibility of cooperation in anarchical conditions, different understandings of justice, or the obligations of citizenship to obey or resist the government.<sup>3</sup>

A fifth reason for using fiction in the classroom is offered by Drezner (2010), who recently published *Zombie Theory of International Relations*. For him, an important reason is that the topic of zombies proved to be a useful way to introduce students to, and teach them about, complex processes and concepts and theoretical positions. I argue that the same holds for fictional texts. Thus, a fictional text with an interesting storyline, more complex characters, and relatable situations—about zombies, libertarians, elves, socialists, vampires, or totalitarians—can serve as a platform for introducing students to more complex concepts.<sup>4</sup> To be sure, one possible teaching strategy is to require students to read Karl Marx on the theory of surplus value and V. I. Lenin’s theory of capitalist imperialism, or I could find a textbook that offered a discussion of these topics. Or, I could use Jack London’s tale of class struggle in the United States, which features Ernest, the main protagonist, socialist revolutionary, and intellectual. In the course of the story, Ernest describes these theories to audiences during public debates against members and supporters of the capitalist class. His renditions of the theories of surplus value, inequality, and imperialism are delivered in a more compact, interesting, and comprehensible form because they appear in a dramatic storyline involving characters and situations that are relatable. Moreover, the reader is introduced to these theories in the context of the political and economic struggles in which they emerged during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, rather than in the dry, formulaic terms often presented in traditional textbooks.<sup>5</sup> In short, compared to or in combination with textbooks, fiction can be a useful, more palatable, way to explore complex theories, concepts, and issues with introductory-level students.

A sixth reason for the use of fiction when exploring politics and government centers on the notion of the “believing game.” Peter Elbow argued that standard social scientific writing approaches a concept or issue from the outside as a doubting, critical observer. In contrast, fiction enables a reader to *enter into* a concept or event, to look at ideas and issues differently, and to grapple with issues and concepts on their own terms from within a storyline.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the text becomes a useful tool to explore a concept or event from the perspective of a character or set of characters in a storyline

who present a “living” example. My basic claim is that together, the multiple perspectives, examples, and comparisons offered by nonfiction, fiction, and primary sources provide a richer, intricately layered set of possibilities for the teacher and the student.

The seventh reason is that fiction can function like a hook. In introductory-level general education courses the proposition of reading novels, watching movies, and talking and writing about important political themes can be deceptively enticing when compared to traditional textbooks and lecture. Thus, nontraditional texts can help generate greater student interest and participation, which is especially important in an introductory politics and government course where most students are neither political science majors nor minors and, in many instances, have very little interest in political science, politics, or government. Indeed, in some instances, students voice a sense of resentment about required general education courses. Lacking interest in the subject area combined with the general requirements can be a recipe for poor student performance. Overcoming this classroom dynamic is a challenge that teachers face and respond to in different ways. Used well, fiction adds one more possible response to the teacher’s tool kit. For instance, on several occasions, I have had Art, English, Education, and Chemistry majors in the Politics and Government course who had very little interest in political science. Several students’ comments after class or at the end of the semester indicated that reading fiction instead of a traditional textbook was significant in terms of hooking their attention. More systematically, my end of the semester survey shows that 94% of students in my Politics and Government class are nonmajors and 74% say they would recommend my class to their peers.<sup>7</sup>

In short, these seven reasons and the data I have culled illustrate the value of popular culture in the political science classroom. As a mirror of factual political dynamics, fictional texts and movies can help communicate and explore important concepts, theories, and historical events, as well as hook the attention of both majors and nonmajors and get them to read and participate in class discussion.

### **Sample Texts and Their Justification**

Instead of a textbook, the reading material for my Politics and Government course consists of the following: newspaper and news magazine articles and editorials; YouTube videos of political speeches like Congressmen John McCain, Bernie Sanders, Ron Paul, and others; policy documents such as NSC (the National Security Council) 68; doctrines such as Benito Mussolini’s “Doctrine of Fascism”; excerpts from the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States of America; and American political party platforms (Republican, Democrat, Libertarian, Socialist) that are available on the Internet. In addition, and more important here, the class is organized around fictional texts and films that I regularly change. To be clear, the number and variety of possible fictional texts that could be used to communicate and illustrate important political science concepts is basically open ended. I chose texts that reflect the topical outline of the course—which explores the absence of government, various kinds of government, and a few key issues related to world politics—and the quality of the fictional illustrations to communicate and illustrate certain key concepts and events. Recently, I have used these texts and films listed in Table 1.

*The Road* by Cormac McCarthy is a Pulitzer Prize winning book that depicts life for a father and son trying to survive in postapocalypse America when plant and animal life is very scarce and bands of cannibals are stalking the land. I use the text



to illustrate life in a condition of anarchy, where there is no higher authority to claim a monopoly on the legitimate use of force to secure some sort of governmental order. There are only small bands of people working to maintain immediate survival needs and to secure their individual and/or small group's short-term future. The text contains excellent examples of life in anarchy: mutual aid, rational action, security dilemmas, open struggle for survival, self-help, lack of authority, no public services, etc.

*The Iron Heel* is Jack London's important contribution to critical American political fiction. Written in 1906, the book depicts the difficulties of life for the working class living amidst a capitalist oligarchy that controls the apparatus of government. The story flows from the perspective of the repentant-capitalist wife of a socialist intellectual and revolutionary. The text draws the reader's attention to class issues and living conditions, outlines their distinct interests and antagonisms and offers excellent examples of socialist arguments for economic equality, explanations for widespread economic inequality, surplus goods, economic downturns, and imperial expansion.

*It Can't Happen Here* is Sinclair Lewis' Pulitzer Prize winning novel about the rise of a totalitarian dictatorship in America. The storyline depicts an increasingly nationalistic and patriotic climate of 1930s America, where any criticism of the regime in the news media, in popular entertainment, or from university faculty is politically consequential. It shows how liberalism and the celebration of the individual are dissolved into militaristic and religious displays of collective unity, where purity, discipline, and a cult of personality become important components of political discourse and policy action. It shows how these processes are interwoven with the ordinariness of everyday life in America.

*The Probability Broach: A Graphic Novel* colorfully illustrates life in a libertarian political arrangement. The story follows Win Bear, a police investigator in Denver, Colorado, who is transported to a parallel universe as he follows the clues of an ongoing case. The text dramatically fictionalizes history and indicates what might have occurred if the *Federalist Papers* had failed to persuade the reading audience and the Anti-Federalists had won the debate over the ratification of the U.S. Constitution in the late eighteenth century. It depicts life in a confederation governed by a wide-range of special interest groups who proportionally elect representatives that actively govern by consensus only every few decades. The text usefully juxtaposes the libertarian celebration of the axiom of nonaggression, individual rights, and private enterprise against the collective action needed for security from the threat of federalist agencies working to overthrow the libertarian confederacy.

*Why Not Me: The Inside Story of the Making and Unmaking of the Franken Presidency* is a top-notch political satire written by comedian and U.S. Senator Al Franken. It follows his unlikely, bungling, unethical, and sometimes illegally-run campaign for the U.S. Presidency, which he wins with a platform focused on ending ATM fees, followed by his resignation. The fictional book critically depicts the role of special interest groups in trying to influence candidates on particular issues, shows how the news media is engaged in a mutually manipulative relationship with the audience and the candidates and demonstrates how strategy, contingency, incompetence, and poor judgment interplay on the campaign trail and in the top American political office.

*Platoon* is Oliver Stone's award-winning film that is based on his personal experience in the U.S. war in Vietnam. It follows the daily routines of a platoon of infantry soldiers conducting combat patrols, ambushes, and search-and-destroy missions. Effectively, it captures the complex mix of emotions and contingencies (intense

banality, fear, hatred, love, violence, death, and so on) that mark the soldier's perspective of war-making, which usefully contrasts with discussions of the high politics of strategic national interests and U.S. foreign policy decision making. It depicts some of the important issues and concepts related to the U.S. war in Vietnam, in particular, and war, in general, including race, class, national identity, atrocity, ambiguous moral boundaries, cultural ignorance of foreign people's ways of life, the daily grind of life in a combat zone, and so on.

*Rabbit Proof Fence* follows the travels of three aboriginal sisters caught up in the racist policies of the colonial, Australian government. Carrying out policies aimed at maintaining clearly defined racial boundaries between "black" and "white" members of the population, the Australian Chief Protector of the Aborigines removes three racially mixed ("half caste") girls from their aboriginal mother in "the bush." Removing children from their families follows a long standing (often settler-government) policy of socializing indigenous peoples as white Christians and training them for service sector jobs such as domestic servitude. The girls escape from the training school and head toward their home; for 1200 miles, they elude an Aboriginal tracker and the colonial authorities as they walk along the vermin proof fence constructed by the Australian government during the early twentieth century. The story illustrates concepts and issues including the race-based justifications of colonialism, the impact of colonialism on indigenous ways of life, race and inequality, the politics of education, religion, civilization, and resistance to colonial government.

*Bulworth* is a comical film about the various issues and moneyed forces that surround and influence a U.S. Senator during a campaign. It depicts life for a down-in-the-opinion polls and corrupt Democratic incumbent who is supposed to represent very disparate constituencies (from Beverley Hills to South Central); however, Senator Bulworth actually has built his career on the financial support of the wealthy individuals and industries that pay for his campaign efforts. In the midst of a psychological, social, and political break with his past self, the film follows Bulworth as he turns away from the moneyed constituencies (e.g., the insurance industry) and embraces the alternative dress (shorts, sneakers, unzipped sweat jacket, toboggan hat, and sunglasses) and way of talking (rapping, using swearwords, and ethnic colloquialisms) that is reflective of an upper middle-class white man's interpretation of his poorer, ethnic, inner-city constituencies. Going against the grain, Bulworth easily wins the election; ironically, however, he is assassinated. In an attention-grabbing way, the film comments on a number of issues including race, class, and inequality in America, education, political rhetoric of the "family" and "values," campaign finance, the media, African Americans as a captured voting bloc, and the quality of American democracy.

In short, with a little creativity, one can draw out the political dimensions of any fictional text, can connect them to concrete examples and can use them to highlight and communicate important concepts and issues relevant to politics and government courses. Some additional examples of fictional books and films are included in Table 2.

### Using Fictional Texts in the Classroom

Here, I describe three pedagogical methods that I have devised for using nontraditional texts in the classroom: *comparison*, *springboard*, and *embedding*. My basic argument is this: Assuming that fiction can be used to mirror factual political processes, these pedagogical methods enable the teacher to creatively weave fiction

into the classroom setting in order to more clearly and interestingly communicate and explore politically important issues and concepts and to draw in the student as an active collaborator in the learning process.<sup>8</sup>

One classroom technique is *comparison*. Here, the instructor compares fictionalized events with actual events as a means of exploring politically relevant concepts, possibilities, or judgments through class-wide and small-group discussion. For instance, *The Probability Broach* is a story that revolves around the federalists/confederalists debate in late eighteenth-century America. It presents a loosely organized, confederal, libertarian government under attack by federal agencies who aim to impose a strong central government. I use comparison in the following way. At the start of class, for the first 10 minutes or so, we talk about the reading, and I emphasize the federalist/confederalist dimension of the *Probability Broach* story. Then, as a point of comparison, I give a brief 10-minute lecture on the Federalist and Anti-federalist debates that publicly raged in America during the late eighteenth-century. I distribute a piece of paper with a few short excerpts of key essays like Madison's Federalist No. 51 and Impartial Examiner critiques that were published at the time in the *Virginia Independent Chronicle*. We read them, discuss important claims they make about federalist and confederalist governments and talk about the implications of these historical events on our contemporary lives. Some of the questions we usually address are the following: How does the federal government impact your life? What if there was no federal government? What is the proper role and limitations of the federal government in our everyday lives? I use the nontraditional texts as a point of comparison, as a way to draw in historically important political events and established practices and make them relevant to the students.

Another example of this comparative technique centers on *The Probability Broach's* depiction of a radically democratic, proportional representation electoral system that depends on near total consensus to carry out governmental policy. This fictionalized example easily sets up a comparative lecture on majoritarian, proportional, and mixed electoral systems. To illustrate, I select countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, Israel, and Denmark to show empirical examples. I usually hand out a table that simplifies the differences and similarities between the electoral systems, or I draw the table on the dry erase board in the classroom. I use 10 to 15 minutes to describe the table and to compare the different electoral systems. The fictional text allows me to start an interesting comparison of concrete examples.

George Orwell's dystopian novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, presents an opportunity to introduce totalitarian forms of government and to use the comparative technique. One topic of discussion is the Party's monopoly over and manipulation of the means of communication, including the language and the institutional mechanisms such as newspaper and radio. This easily compares with life for many people in contemporary North Korea, a prominent example of a totalitarian government where the state has achieved almost complete control over the means of mass communication. I combine a lecture on some of the general features of a totalitarian political system—for example, control over the means of mass communication, control over means of armed combat, widespread use of police violence targeting domestic political enemies, vision of the leader as God-like—with a documentary on North Korea and some news articles. The fictionalized and magnified possibilities indicated in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* thus become more concrete and communicable to the students. The basic point is that the nontraditional text simply becomes another point of comparison, a creatively reimagined alternative to existing governmental arrangements that

can help students conceptualize and imagine historical and existing governmental actors and systems.

A classroom technique related to comparison is what I call *springboard*. Whereas comparison depends primarily on my effort in producing material for the students to read, to discuss, to talk, and to write about, springboard takes a subtly different direction. It is primarily an opportunity that enables the students to produce their own material in terms of publicly articulated arguments, debates, and judgments regarding some politically relevant issue. For example, Jack London's classic, *The Iron Heel*, depicts the class struggle and eventual class war between workers and capitalists. Labor unions, especially their existence or dissolution and proper political role in America, figure prominently into the storyline. This point easily segues into a forced debate between two opposing sides over the following question: Should workers have the right to organize into labor unions? The students are given a few short excerpts by important agents in the debate, like Karl Marx, Emma Goldman, and Ronald Reagan, and 20 minutes to prepare opening statements and a clear set of reasons in support of or against worker's rights to organize. Given the politically contentious debate in the United States surrounding Wisconsin, Ohio, Florida, and Maine public employees' rights to collectively bargain, issues presented in *The Iron Heel* become even more prescient and tangible for students living in the United States. Using fictional texts as a springboard for students to debate a political issue is thus a useful way to introduce students to contemporary problems and to get them to consider the reasoning and judgments behind the different positions, as well as a way to get students involved in class.<sup>9</sup>

I use nontraditional texts to springboard into campaign finance, which is another politically salient topic of debate. In our class discussion of contemporary democracies, we read *Why Not Me*, which depicts Al Franken's campaign for U.S. President and his subsequent downfall and disgrace. Among other points, the book illustrates dramatically well the illegal and unethical possibilities of privately financed campaigns for elected office. This humorous satire of the American political system supports a contemporarily relevant debate in the United States and in some other mature democracies. What are the arguments for and against public and private systems of campaign finance? This type of question is especially useful for spring boarding into a class debate. Again, I provide groups of students with a selection of short readings that outline some of the important points of argument for and against private and public financing of elections. The students are given a set amount of time to prepare a well-reasoned opening statement, which is then followed by a quickly organized rebuttal by each side in the debate.

Another method for using fictional texts in the classroom is *embedding*. In contrast to a textbook that presents chapters about topics or issues—for example, “The US Bureaucracy,” “Congress,” “Democracy,” “International Politics”—I am arguing that going beyond this mold in introductory-level politics and government courses is a fruitful alternative. The use of nontraditional texts allows this move. Instead of reading a chapter *about* a topic or issue out of a traditional textbook, in line with Peter Elbow, an alternative approach addresses the relevant topics, issues, or concepts from *inside* the narrative and not from outside as a distant observer. Through the text, students can “see” (i.e., read) the concepts used and demonstrated by characters living in certain social, economic, and political situations. In *The Iron Heel*, for instance, the socialist revolutionary (Ernest) takes the unconvinced capitalist (Avis) through the mills and factories of nineteenth-century America and, in detail,

describes the economic inequality and violence of the largely unregulated market and the workers' fractured collective bargaining power. Avis further investigates instances where wealthy factory owners, aiming to maximize their profits and to limit competition through monopolistic trusts, corrupted the legal and political system and took advantage of workers who were injured on the job. At one point in an argument, Ernest claims that Avis' clothes are "soaked in blood" and that she remains blissfully ignorant. This fictionalized story and the sometimes tense interactions between characters, in turn, can be combined with primary documents (e.g., news articles or documentaries about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, the use of antitrust laws against AT&T, and Nike sweatshops in Indonesia, China, and Vietnam) that illustrate extreme class differences and economic inequality in more concrete terms that relate to students' lives. The claim that one's Nikes or iPad may well be soaked in workers' blood, as Ernest claimed of Avis' dress, can get students' attention and provoke them to reflect on class relations in personal, local, national, and global terms. When it comes to introducing students to politics and government, embedding the topic, issue, or concept within the novel's storyline can be a useful technique for teaching and learning about that concept or issue.

Another topic that can be embedded in fiction is colonialism. Reading about colonialism from the perspective of a political science textbook is certainly one angle from which the topic can be approached. Combined with a fictional text such as the film, *Rabbit Proof Fence*, where the perspective of the story is from that of the colonized, the analytical frame becomes more complex, and the potential for learning expands. Fictional texts regarding colonialism and war encourage students to adopt more complex positioning than that reflected in more simplistic insider and/or outsider perspectives. Embedded in the narrative of a fictional tale, the dynamics of colonialism become more accessible for students compared to drier political, economic, sociological, and psychological analyses.

At base, the purpose of these pedagogical methods and bringing fiction into the classroom is to get students involved in their learning and thinking about the relevance of politics for their lives. In his final reflective essay for my course, a nonmajor demonstrates how this point successfully plays out with some students:

For an example of how politics and government directly and indirectly affect the lives of ordinary citizens, one must look no further than the satirical book *Why Not Me? The Inside Story of the Making and Unmaking of the Franken Presidency*. . . . The lesson to take away from this example is that politicians know, or at least have some sense of, what makes people tick, and will—by necessity—exploit that to its greatest potential. We, the people being exploited, have a responsibility to ourselves to be aware of what does in fact affect us and how, in order to know when a politician is speaking candidly in our best interests or when they are pulling our proverbial leg. This has a slew of consequences, not the least of which is the potential result of any particular election, therefore creating a new series of issues of which we must make ourselves aware.

### **Challenges With Fictional Texts in Politics and Government**

My argument is that fiction can be used in the classroom as a mirror that reflects important political concepts, theories, and events. This particular way of using

popular fiction can function as a hook for uninterested nonmajors and can encourage increased student participation. There are also a number of challenges worth considering. Below, I consider two that are specific to popular culture in the political science classroom.

One of the first problems I encountered was skepticism among the students. To be clear, a number of students were observably excited by the required fiction for the course. There are also, however, skeptics. Multiple students over the course of four cycles approached me after the first or second class session of the semester and articulated their concerns. At base, it appeared to me that their concerns centered on their expectation that the course should have a traditional textbook or anything even resembling a textbook. They were concerned: *Could* they learn without such a book? *What* could they learn without a traditional textbook?

For example, an experienced, well-read, and articulate nontraditional student said that she was “put off” by the prospect of buying and reading *The Probability Broach* because the text is a graphic novel or, in her words, a “comic book.” What could she learn from such a text? She expected a traditional textbook and initially questioned the relevance of fiction in a political science classroom, but, she told me, her teenage son had read the graphic novel before the semester started and convinced her that she would like the book. In her words, she did “like it.”

“Like,” unfortunately, is not the point of the nontraditional text in the political science classroom; it is a side benefit, for sure, but not the main point. The value of the nontraditional text, rather, is found in *how* the teacher can use the text to explore particular concepts, like libertarianism and totalitarianism, and can hook the attention of nonmajors and can increase their level of participation. *The Probability Broach* is an excellent depiction of a confederal, libertarian political system that emphasizes individual liberty almost at the total expense of collective security needs against invading forces. Indeed, when juxtaposed against a two-and-a-half-week section of lectures, readings, writings, discussions, and exercises on totalitarian political systems, the differences with libertarian political systems are usefully highlighted for the students. The nontraditional student above made this very point; in her words, the *Probability Broach* “showed a version” of a libertarian political system in practice, which we could then compare in class to the American political system or other countries’ arrangements. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Probability Broach* offer exaggerated examples of very, very different political systems, one totalitarian and one libertarian, which is valuable when trying to explore concepts and issues relevant to political science. While skepticism should be expected in regards to what or how one might teach-learn with nontraditional texts, it is easy to demonstrate the value of these texts through lectures, discussions, and exercises organized around, or at least incorporating, the story’s narrative, characters, actions, and unintended events.

A second problem centers on the balance between entertainment and education. Because students are often surprised to be reading novels and watching movies for their Politics and Government course, they might miss the point of the nontraditional text in the classroom context. In other words, there is the risk that the entertainment value of the media will obscure the learning potential of the fictional texts. Keeping the learning potential of nontraditional texts in the foreground of the everyday class experience is an important concern for the instructor. This can be accomplished in a number of ways. I regularly indicate to the students in explicit terms why the fictional text is relevant for our class. “What is the point of this book or this paragraph or sentence” is a question I ask aloud for each new text and also

during particular class sessions when discussing some concept or issue. Surely there are other ways by which this can be accomplished. The educational and not the entertainment value of the nontraditional texts, in short, should be foregrounded in this kind of approach in order to keep the focus on exploring and learning about politics.

*Bulworth* is a good example of a very entertaining film that can be a successful tool for exploring politics and government. It is consistently rated by my students as one of the most popular films shown; during its showing, it always draws laughter, and, afterward, there is solid student participation and enthusiasm.<sup>10</sup> While entertaining and attention grabbing, I work to keep the focus on education and the value of the movie in terms of exploring politics and government. I remind the students that they should be “active watchers and not nodding watchers” before each film and that they should take notes about key issues (e.g., race, media, etc.) that are written on the whiteboard. I show the film, and, immediately following, I lead discussion by prompting students to respond to a series of questions relating to a variety of issues in American politics. In particular, I touch on the politics of race, inequality of wealth, education, and opportunity, the role and impact of the media in a democracy, political rhetoric, campaign ethics and financing, accountability, and so on. Left unattended, the film serves only to entertain; used well by the instructor, it serves as an excellent teaching-learning device that also happens to be entertaining.

## Notes

1. The goal and scope of this article is not focused on engaging or debating the various approaches used to study the relationship between politics and popular culture. My citation of these texts is simply to demonstrate that over the past decade or so an increasing number of texts have explicitly analyzed or addressed the pedagogical value of the relationship between politics and popular culture.

2. In an anonymous survey that I deliver at the end of each semester for each section of Politics and Government, I found that 68% of all students surveyed answer “more” to the question: “Compared to the assigned readings in your other classes this semester, are you more likely or less likely to read the assigned fiction for this class?”

3. In her official observation of my Tuesday-Thursday Spring 2011 Politics and Government class, the Chair of the Department of Political Science, Dr. Stephanie Slocum-Schaffer, wrote: The students “were almost universally attentive and involved throughout the class period. . . . [T]here was active participation by a nice variety of students.”

4. Robert Farley (2010a, 2010b) at the University of Kentucky’s Patterson School of Diplomacy and International Commerce, for instance, uses simulations of zombies and vampires to teach about the difficulty of operating an organization in a context of asymmetry and limited information.

5. In the student evaluations that tenure-track faculty are required to deliver by the university each semester, one student during the Spring 2012 semester concurred: “I really liked the fact that we read novels rather than a dry textbook. It helped put the material into perspective.” Two students in two separate sections of Politics and Government during the Spring 2011 semester made similar points. One wrote: “Get’s students involved and thinking. Uses books and movies to make class interesting.” The second said: “All the readings were excellent and I felt more valuable than [a] traditional textbook.”

6. I was introduced to Peter Elbow’s “The Believing Game: Methodological Believing” through Barbara Fisher’s (2011) Blog U post, “In the Teeth of the Evidence.”

7. The survey was administered across four semesters to 10 sections of Politics and Government. The population size for the survey was 350. The sample size was 283. The statistic about nonmajors was generated with the question: “What is your major?” The statistic about peer recommendation was generated with the survey question: “Would you recommend this class to a friend?”

8. As I noted above, not everyone works from the assumption that fiction mirrors factual political processes, and, furthermore, such an assumption is problematic insofar as it only partially captures the dynamic between politics and popular culture.

9. Debate is often characterized as a useful teaching method for getting students involved in class and getting them thinking about concepts (Omelicheva 2007; Oros 2007). Springboarding from some fictional scenario into a debate about some factual political issue is one way to make that more interactive classroom take shape.

10. At the end of each semester, I conduct a survey of student attitudes towards the fiction used in class. I always observe students' responses to the fiction shown in class. Both the surveys and the observations are data that I gather for research purposes.

## References

- APSA. n.d. Politics, Literature, and Film: An Organized Section of the American Political Science Association. <<http://www.apsanet.org/~politicsandlit/index.html>> (February 19, 2013).
- Bain, Ken. 2004. *What the Best College Teachers Do*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Beatty, Warren. 1998. *Bulworth*. Beverly Hills, CA: 20th Century Fox Home Video.
- Bennett, Drake. 2010. "This Will Be on the Midterm. You Feel Me?" Why So Many Colleges are Teaching the Wire." *Slate*. <[http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2010/03/this\\_will\\_be\\_on\\_the\\_midterm\\_you\\_feel\\_me.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2010/03/this_will_be_on_the_midterm_you_feel_me.html)> (June 10, 2012).
- Damron, Danny and Jonathan Mott. 2005. "Creating an Interactive Classroom: Enhancing Student Engagement and Learning in Political Science Courses." *Journal of Political Science Education* 1(3): 367–383.
- Drezner, Daniel. 2010. *Zombie Theory of International Relations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Elbow, Peter. 2009. "The Believing Game or Methodological Believing." *Journal for The Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning* 14: 1–11.
- Farley, Robert. 2010a. "Return of the Vampires." *Lawyers, Guns & Money*, 9 January. <<http://www.lawyersgunsmoneyblog.com/2010/01/return-of-the-vampires>> (February 19, 2013).
- Farley, Robert. 2010b. "Zombie Sim!" *Lawyers, Guns & Money*, 10 December. <<http://www.lawyersgunsmoneyblog.com/2010/12/zombie-sim>> (February 19, 2013).
- Fisher, Barbara. 2011. "In the Teeth of Evidence." *Inside Higher Ed*, 22 February. <[http://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/library\\_babel\\_fish/in\\_the\\_teeth\\_of\\_the\\_evidence](http://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/library_babel_fish/in_the_teeth_of_the_evidence)> (June 12, 2012).
- Franken, Al. 2000. *Why Not Me: The Inside Story of the Making and Unmaking of the Franken Presidency*. New York: Delta.
- Frederking, Brian. 2005. "Simulations and Student Learning." *Journal of Political Science Education* 1(3): 385–393.
- Gemmill, Maia A. and Daniel H. Nexon. 2006. "Children's Crusade: The Religious Politics of Harry Potter." In *Harry Potter and International Relations*, eds. Daniel H. Nexon and Iver Neumann. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Giglio, Ernest. 2010. *Here's Looking at You*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Goff, Patricia. 2006. "Producing Harry Potter: Why the Medium is Still the Message." In *Harry Potter and International Relations*, eds. Daniel H. Nexon and Iver Neumann. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Haas, Peter J. and Terry Christensen. 2005. *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films*. New York: M. E. Sharpe.
- Hopf, Ted. 2002. *Social Construction of International Politics: Identities and Foreign Policies, Moscow, 1955–1999*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Lametti, Daniel, Aisha Harris, Natasha Geiling, and Natalia Matthews-Ramo. 2012. "Which Pop Culture Property Do Academics Study the Most." *Slate*, 11 June. <[http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2012/06/11/pop\\_culture\\_studies\\_why\\_do\\_academics\\_study\\_buffy\\_the\\_vampire\\_slayer\\_more\\_than\\_the\\_wire\\_the\\_matrix\\_alien\\_and\\_the\\_simpsons\\_.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2012/06/11/pop_culture_studies_why_do_academics_study_buffy_the_vampire_slayer_more_than_the_wire_the_matrix_alien_and_the_simpsons_.html)> (June 12, 2012).



- Lewis, Sinclair. 2005. *It Can't Happen Here*. London: NAL Trade.
- Lipschutz, Ronnie D. 2001. *Cold War Fantasies: Film, Fiction, and Foreign Policy*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.
- Lipschutz, Ronnie D. 2010. *Political Economy, Capitalism, and Popular Culture*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- London, Jack. 2009. *The Iron Heel*. New York: Dover.
- McCarthy, Cormac. 2007. *The Road*. New York: Vintage.
- McKeachie, Wilbert J. and Marilla Svinicki. 2006. *McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Neumann, Iver. 2006. "Naturalizing Geography: Harry Potter and the Realms of Muggles, Magic Folks, and Giants." In *Harry Potter and International Relations*, eds. Daniel H. Nexon and Iver Neumann. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Neumann, Iver and Daniel H. Nexon, eds. 2006. *Harry Potter and International Relations*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Noyce, Philip. 2002. *Rabbit Proof Fence*. Burbank, CA: Miramax Home Entertainment.
- Omelicheva, Mariya Y. 2007. "Resolved: Academic Debate Should be a Part of Political Science Curricula." *Journal of Political Science Education* 3(2): 161–175.
- Oros, Andrew L. 2007. "Let's Debate: Active Learning Encourages Student Participation and Critical Thinking." *Journal of Political Science Education* 3(2): 293–311.
- Paik, Peter Y. 2010. *From Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and the Politics of Catastrophe*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Saideman, Steve. 2012. "The State of the Art in the Social Sciences of Pop Culture." *Duck of Minerva Blogspot*, 12 June. <<http://duckofminerva.blogspot.com/2012/06/state-of-art-in-social-science-of-pop.html>> (June 12, 2012).
- Shapiro, Michael J. 1992. *Reading the Postmodern Polity: Political Theory as Textual Practice*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Shone, Tom. 2012. "'Woman: The Other Alien in *Alien*': Why Are Academics so Obsessed with Ridley Scott's Movie and its Sequels?" *Slate*, 6 June. <[http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2012/06/prometheus\\_why\\_are\\_academics\\_so\\_obsessed\\_with\\_ridley\\_scott\\_s\\_alien\\_and\\_its\\_sequels\\_.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2012/06/prometheus_why_are_academics_so_obsessed_with_ridley_scott_s_alien_and_its_sequels_.html)> (June 12, 2012).
- Smith, L. Neil and Scott Bieser. 2004. *The Probability Broach: A Graphic Novel*. New York: BigHead Press.
- Sterling-Folker, Jennifer and Brian Folker. 2006. "Conflict and the Nation-State: Magical Mirrors of Muggles and Refracted Images." In *Harry Potter and International Relations*, eds. Daniel H. Nexon and Iver Neumann. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Stone, Oliver. 1986. *Platoon*. Culver City, CA: Hemdale Film Corporation.
- Stump, Jacob. 2012. "Classroom Observation." Unpublished. 17 February. Shepherd University.
- Suvin, Darko. 1979. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of Literary Genre*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Towns, Ann and Bahar Rumelili. 2006. "Foreign yet Familiar: International Politics and the Reception of Potter in Turkey and Sweden." In *Harry Potter and International Relations*, eds. Daniel H. Nexon and Iver Neumann. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Trudeau, Robert H. 2005. "Get Them to Read, Get Them to Talk: Using Discussion Forums to Enhance Student Learning." *Journal of Political Science Education* 1(3): 289–322.
- Van Belle, Douglas A. and Kenneth M. Mash. 2010. *A Novel Approach to Politics: Introducing Political Science through Books, Movies, and Popular Culture*. Washington, DC: CQ Press.
- Weber, Cynthia. 2006. *Imagining America at War*. New York: Routledge.
- Weldes, Jutta, ed. 2003. *To Seek Out New Worlds: Exploring Links between Science Fiction and World Politics*. New York: Palgrave.
- Weldes, Jutta. 2006. "High Politics and Low Data: Globalization Discourses and Popular Culture." In *Interpretation and Method*, eds., Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea. New York: M. E. Sharpe.

Copyright of Journal of Political Science Education is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.