

Political Tales We Tell Ourselves – Political Science #285 / 385

Illinois Wesleyan University
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Course description and requirements:

This course examines narratives that frame political discourse on issues including civil rights, pandemic responses, climate change, healthcare in Canada and the UK, and welfare dependency. We will learn a great deal about these five issues, but just as importantly, we will also become empowered to ask penetrating questions about the tales we tell ourselves, and each other, about politics and the roles those narratives play in shaping public opinion, policy making, and social movements. We will frequently work with primary materials including first-hand accounts in written and video form, documentary films, and TED Talks, in addition to scholarly treatments of the five major modules that make up the course. Students enrolled in PSCI 385 will co-lead several of our discussions. PSCI 385 students will also produce a more involved research paper and present it to class near the end of the term. PSCI 285 students will write a less involved paper and will not need to present it to class. All students will earn analysis of values credit under the shared curriculum. (Note: two course numbers appear in Banner: 285 and 385. Enroll in the level that suits your needs and appetite.)

Political narratives serve several purposes. They simplify complex issues to render them manageable (if not necessarily accurate) to non-expert citizens. They provide cognitive frameworks that lend themselves to particular, targeted underlying value sets. They discourage people from asking questions that would be at odds with the goals of opinion leaders. Because most citizens struggle cognitively to make sense of the welter of information – both accurate and not – that permeates our politics, most people rely on short-hand narratives to make sense of information and to defend their own ideological priors. The narratives, employing heuristics, metaphors, half-truths, and fanciful myths, are fundamental to how most non-expert citizens make sense of the world. We tell ourselves stories in order to avoid cognitive dissonance, to bolster our group identity, and to avoid awkward political and social circumstances. By studying how these narratives are constructed, employed, and challenged, students will not only come to understand some of the psychological phenomena at work, but they will also learn quite a lot about the substantive issue areas. In brief, this is a course strives to teach both information literacy and substantive public policy.

Our work will be structured mainly around five issue areas:

- Civil rights and how we interpret MLK
- Pandemic pandemonium and resistance
- Welfare use and dependency
- Healthcare in the UK and Canada
- Climate change

Each of these modules is approximately two weeks long. You will have a quiz over each of these modules. Other than very unusual and documented situations, I do not anticipate allowing make-up

opportunities in the event you are absent. In addition to these quizzes, everyone will take a mid-term exam, and write a research paper. Students enrolled in PSCI 385 will also deliver a verbal version of that paper near the end of the term, and they will help co-lead some of our class discussions.

About the materials and how to engage them:

The materials for this course include many first-hand accounts from political movement participants, documentary and non-documentary films, TED Talks, scholarly literature, popular press materials, and political advocacy materials. Some of the videos we will view together in class. Others you will view on your own time. The large majority of materials are either embedded in our LMS page or are linked from there. You will need to purchase a few books, listed below. In order to keep up on our class discussions, which make up most of our time together (this is not primarily a lecture course), you will need to work with the materials in a timely way. A variety of short assignments are designed to keep you up to date. Student-led discussions are an important part of the structure of the class, and you will need to come to class prepared for these discussions, since you will help co-lead some of them. Find ways to learn from your peers, not just from the instructor.

Some of the course material is difficult to confront. Students may find challenging the readings on battered women who kill their assailants, as well as some of the material on the civil rights movement. I encourage you to engage these materials as fully as you can, both intellectually and emotionally. Further, I encourage you to process your reactions to these readings with people you trust.

About grades:

Graded assignments will be weighted as follows:

	200-level students	300-level students
Mid-term exam	20%	20%
Quizzes (6 of them)	30%	30%
Participation in class	10%	10%
Turns at discussion co-leadership	n/a	10%
Research paper (the paper version)	20%	20%
Research presentation for 300-level students	n/a	10%
Final exam	20%	n/a

Final course grades will be assigned on the following basis: 90-100% = A/A-; 80-89% = B+/B/B-; 70-79% = C+/C/C-; 60-69% = D; below 60% = F. Plusses and minuses typically range approximately 3 percentage points around the deciles. Taking a grade of incomplete in this course is strongly discouraged. Under no circumstances will a student be granted a grade of incomplete without discussing the matter and securing my permission in advance of the end of the semester. See Canvas for assignment descriptions and grading rubrics.

Instead of taking a final exam, all students will produce a paper on some of their learning near the end of the term. For students enrolled in PSCI 285, the projects will be closely related to the syllabus topics, though they should probe these topics in more depth than we have time to do as a large group in class. PSCI 385 students may choose to work on topics beyond those that make up the syllabus, and these

papers will go into greater depth than the shorter papers produced by the 200-level students. See Canvas for guidance documents. PSCI 385 students will also present their paper verbally in class, with slides.

Regular attendance is expected and necessary if you are to do well in this class. Each unexcused absence beyond the first will result in a 1 percentage point reduction in your overall grade. Excused absences, such as for illness and co-curricular activities, require timely documentation. In cases of illness, please provide a note from a healthcare professional, not merely an email telling me you are not feeling well. Taking a quiz or exam at a time other than that presented in the syllabus requires advance approval from me. Simply forgetting to take a quiz does not generate a make-up opportunity. During the first week of the semester, enter all the quiz and exam dates in your calendar.

If you have an ADA learning accommodation in place with the university, please speak with me about your needs. I look forward to working with you to help ensure a successful experience. If you believe you need such an accommodation but do not yet have one in place, I encourage you to visit with our Advising Center staff at your earliest convenience. IWU does not grant ADA learning accommodations retrospectively.

Academic integrity:

I am aware that academic dishonesty has become common at some institutions. While I am sure that very few, if any, Illinois Wesleyan students would cheat on class assignments, the university's policy and my policy on academic dishonesty bear repeating. Academic dishonesty fundamentally undermines the mission of the university and cheapens our collective enterprise. Students caught cheating on an exam or engaging in plagiarism on written assignments will receive a failing grade for the course. This includes working on quizzes or exams with others, which is not something you are permitted to do. In cases of academic dishonesty I will also file a formal complaint with the administration. Per the university's academic dishonesty policy, the administration will move to expel from the university any student who is the object of two such substantiated complaints. See the university catalog for further explanation.

Regarding artificial intelligence tools, I have come to think of them a bit like Wikipedia: they can be useful to generate ideas and to point you in potentially useful directions as to what you might want to read and what issues or questions you should think about. For instance, I sometimes find it useful to read the bibliographies of Wikipedia entries, even if I don't particularly trust the accuracy of the entries themselves. If you find AI tools useful as preliminary pointers, you may use them in this way. However, you may not submit written work generated by AI. The assignments in this course are designed to walk you through a specific learning process, step by step. Hence, by design, you will not find AI useful in crafting thoughtfully written sections of your paper. Given that current AI tools neither fact-check nor know how to holistically integrate the various parts of the text these tools generate, frankly, they make pretty lousy writing partners. I consider any submission of AI generated work – either text or numerical analysis – to be plagiarism.

Book to purchase:

Francesca Polletta, *It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 2006)

Dates, Topics & Materials

Read / watch each day's materials prior to coming to class

The Vocabulary of Storytelling

Tues: Introductions, syllabus review, setting our agenda, thinking about reason and emotion

- After class: listen to the podcast “On the Media” 12/16/22 – listen to the third part of this series
 - <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/otm/episodes/on-the-media-good-ol-days?tab=summary>
 - “Why We Argue about the Same Things Over and Over” (17 minutes)
- Watch this Youtube video on science, belief, and bias (13 minutes):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZdao-WakuQ>

Thurs: The vocabulary of storytelling and the power of narratives; defining ideology

- George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, 3rd edition (2016), excerpts from chapter 5 (pp. 65-80, 96-107), and chapter 6 (pp. 108-129)
- Francesca Polletta, *It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics* (2006), Chapter 1
- After class, view this 30-minute video on pro-life feminists
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVVAVE9JivY>
- Also listen to approx. 17 minutes of this podcast on stories as weapons (“On The Media”, 6/7/24): <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/otm/articles/a-former-disinformation-reporter-is-running-the-onion-plus-birds-are-real> (begin at 38:30)

Framing and Heuristics

Tues: Introduction to framing and heuristics

- Before class, watch this 10-minute video on the functions of stories:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3oFTzER9P5U>
- Discussion of the pro-life feminist video
- Mintz et al., *Beyond Rationality: Behavioral Political Science in the 21st Century*, excerpts from chapter 3 (pp. 45-56, 63-64), and chapter 4 (pp. 65-79, 84-85)

Thurs: It's one thing or the other, but not both: court defense narratives of battered women who kill their abusers

- Before class, watch Kimberlé Crenshaw's video on framing and intersectionality:
https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality?subtitle=en (18 minutes)
- Francesca Polletta, chapter 5 (pp. 116-135)
- Wick et al., introduction to “Perception in Dynamic Scenes: What is Your Heider Capacity?” (*Journal of Experimental Psychology*, Feb. 2019)

- Optional: Justine van der Leun, “No Choice but to Do It: Why Women Go to Prison,” *New Republic*, December 17, 2020 -- [“No Choice but to Do It”: Why Women Go to Prison | The New Republic](https://www.newrepublic.com/article/justice/no-choice-but-to-do-it-why-women-go-to-prison)
- Optional: “Women Who Kill Their Abusers Go to Prison: So Why Did Rachel Walk Free?” *Elle* magazine, 11/23/21 -- <https://www.elle.com/culture/a38324294/domestic-violence-survivor-rachel-bellesen/>
- *Quiz over the material presented up to this point*

Civil Rights: Freedom Rides and Racial Segregation

Tues: 1961 Freedom Rides

- Before class, watch this 18-minute TED talk on Rosa Parks and history: https://www.ted.com/talks/david_ikard_the_real_story_of_rosa_parks_and_why_we_need_to_confront_myths_about_black_history?subtitle=en
- Watch in class: segment from the “Eyes on the Prize” series (1987): the relevant segment is volume 2, “Ain’t Scared of Your Jails.” (56 minutes) https://i-share-iwu.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/fulldisplay?docid=alma997849243505847&context=L&vid=01CARLI_IWU:CARLI_IWU&lang=en&search_scope=MyInstitution&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=LibraryCatalog&query=any,contains,eyes%20on%20the%20prize:%20ain%20t%20scared%20of%20your%20jails&mode=Basic
- James Peck, *Freedom Ride*, chapter 8 (10 pages)
- Summary of Freedom Rides, by the King Institute: <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/freedom-rides>
- Optional: Steven Levingston, *Kennedy and King: The President, the Pastor, and the Battle over Civil Rights* (2017), pp. 141-74
- Optional: John Lewis, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*, chapters 7, 8 & 9
- Optional: Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63*

Thurs: Racial segregation

- Before coming to class, watch this 12-minute video on James Baldwin: <https://illinois.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/fp18-lgbtq-baldwin/james-baldwin/>
- Baldwin essays from *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985* (1985)
 - “Nobody Knows My Name” (1959) (10 pages)
 - “The Dangerous Road before Martin Luther King” (1961) (17 pages)
 - “The Fire Next Time” excerpt (1962) (6 pages)
- Francesca Polletta, *It Was Like a Fever*, chapter 2

Civil Rights: Several Renditions of MLK

Tues: Reading King

- King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963)
 - https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/_assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf

- David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 237-251
- Michael Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.*, chapter 7 (17 pages)

Thurs: Reinterpreting King to Suit Our Contemporary Needs

- In class: Listen to King's 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech (17 minutes)
 - https://www.google.com/search?q=audio+of+king%27s+i+have+a+dream+speech&rlz=1C1GCEA_enUS979US979&oq=audio+of+king%27s+i+have+a+dream+speech&aqs=chrome..69i57j0i22i30j0i390i650i5.7112j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:3fed3d5e,vid:smEqnnklfYs
- David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, pp. 281-286 (6 pages)
- Michael Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You*, chapter 1 (18 pages)
- Francesca Polletta, *It Was Like a Fever*, chapter 6 (24 pages)
- Quiz over civil rights material

Pandemic Pandemonium and Resistance

Tues: The 1918-1920 influenza pandemic

- Laura Spinney, *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed the World*, pp. 3-9, 89-112, 166-171
- Alfred Crosby, *America's Forgotten Pandemic*, chapter 6 on Philadelphia (17 pages)
- PBS summary of Americans' memories of the 1918 flu pandemic:
<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/have-americans-forgotten-the-history-of-this-deadly-flu>

Thurs: Vaccine hesitancy: polio; false claims about autism

- Before class, view 2 videos and read 1 news story:
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1wI4T9SKGA> (view all 16 minutes)
 - https://www.facebook.com/hoodmedicineinitiative/videos/the-panola-project-w-dorothy-oliver/1517480891983085/?locale=ms_MY (view first 40 minutes)
 - NPR story on anti-vax disinformation dozen:
<https://www.npr.org/2021/05/13/996570855/disinformation-dozen-test-facebooks-twitthers-ability-to-curb-vaccine-hoaxes> (May 2021)
- Seth Mnookin, *The Panic Virus* (2011), chapters 17 & 18
- Mark Largent, *Vaccine: The Debate in Modern America* (2012), conclusion (5 pages)
- Quiz over the first part of the pandemic material

Pandemic Pandemonium and Resistance: Water Fluoridation & Mask-wearing

Tues:

- Engebretsen and Baker, *Rethinking Evidence in the Time of Pandemics* (2022), chapter 3
- Seth Mnookin, *The Panic Virus* (2011), chapter 4
- Eleanor Murray, "I'm an epidemiologist. Here's what I got wrong about COVID," *The Washington Post*, April 20, 2021

Thurs: MID-TERM EXAM (covering all material to date)

Students need to declare their paper topics by the end of this week

Welfare Use & Dependency

Before coming to class on Tuesday, listen to this PBS News interview with Josh Levin (7 minutes)

<https://www.pbs.org/video/the-true-story-behind-the-welfare-queen-stereotype-1559408309/>

Tues: Stories of welfare moms and welfare queens during a time of welfare overhaul

- Josh Levin, *The Queen: The Forgotten Life behind an American Myth* (2020), pp. 25-30, 36-44, and 85-100
- Block et al., *The Mean Season: The Attack on the Welfare State* (1987), chapter 2 (pp. 45-72)
- Optional: David Zucchino, *Myth of the Welfare Queen* (1997)

Thurs: What do the facts say about welfare dependency?

- Kathryn Edin, “Surviving the Welfare System: How AFDC Recipients Make Ends Meet in Chicago” (*Social Problems*, 1991)
- Excerpt from the final report on the Seattle/Denver income maintenance experiments
 - [https://aspe.hhs.gov/reports/overview-final-report-seattle-denver-income-maintenance-experiment#:~:text=The%20Seattle%2DDenver%20Income%20Maintenance%20Experiment%20\(SIME%2FDIME\),of%20those%20eligible%20for%20them.](https://aspe.hhs.gov/reports/overview-final-report-seattle-denver-income-maintenance-experiment#:~:text=The%20Seattle%2DDenver%20Income%20Maintenance%20Experiment%20(SIME%2FDIME),of%20those%20eligible%20for%20them.)
 - Read pages 1-13, 17-19, 21-25, and 33-39

Welfare Use & Dependency

Tues: A contemporary perspective on welfare use

- In class watch the documentary “Work and Happiness: The Human Cost of Welfare” (2018) American Enterprise Institute (56 minutes) www.youtube.com/watch?v=3dh0Z0kLoKc

Thurs: The societal costs of childhood poverty

- McLaughlin and Rank, “Estimating the Economic Costs of Childhood Poverty in the United States,” *Social Work Research*, vol. 42, 2018 (8 pages)
- Optional: see Kathryn Neckerman’s work at Columbia’s Population Research Center: <https://cprc.columbia.edu/directory/kathryn-m-neckerman>
- *Quiz over the welfare material*

Mid-Semester Check-In

Tues: Storytelling in post-truth politics

- How do liberals and conservatives differ in how they search for information?
- Philip Seargeant, *The Art of Political Storytelling*, chapters 3 & 4 (40 pages)
- Optional but helpful and concise: Wilder Research, “Evaluating Personal Narrative Storytelling for Advocacy,” a literature review on storytelling technique (2019)

Thurs: Check-in on student projects

- You will need to explain your project to the class:
 - What's the question?
 - Why does this matter?
 - What kind of evidence will you rely on?

Make an appointment this week or next to discuss your progress on the paper

Healthcare in Canada

Tues: Overview of the healthcare systems, Canadian health care values, the creation of Medicare

- Evelyn Forget, "National Identity and the Challenge of Health Reform in Canada," *Review of Social Economy* (2002)
 - Before class, view this 11-minute video with Evelyn Forget:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4jCZ57IXokA>
- Danielle Martin et al., "Canada's Universal Health-Care System: Achieving Its Potential," *The Lancet* vol. 391: 1,718-35 (2018)
 - Before class, view this 7-minute video with Michelle Martin:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVX3vm7elHI>

Thurs: Canadian healthcare narratives

- Before class, view parts of this documentary on Canadian health care: (start – 8:00, 27:00-32:00, 37:30 - end):
 - <https://secondstreet.org/new-documentary-health-reform-now/>
- Read prior to class:
 - Greg Marchildon, "Douglas versus Manning: The Ideological Battle over Medicare in Post-War Canada" (2016)
- View in class:
 - Documentary on Canadian Medicare history: [\(235\) Looking Back, Tales from Saskatchewan: The Birth of Medicare - YouTube](#) (5 minutes)

Healthcare in the UK

Tues: British healthcare narratives

- Donald Light, "Universal health care: Lessons from the British experience" (AJPH, 2003)
- David Hunter, "At breaking point or already broken? The National Health Service in the United Kingdom" (NEJM, 2023)
- BBC story on the 2025 reforms: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/landmark-plan-to-rebuild-nhs-in-working-class-communities>

Thurs: Stepping back to consider social determinants: longevity in Scotland

- Before class, watch this video on Scottish life expectancy (7 minutes):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r0cJ7CX1ICA>
- *Quiz over healthcare material*

Climate Change

Tues: Establishing some facts

- Find good materials on carbon capture and the debate here
- Dessler and Parson, *The Science and Politics of Global Climate Change: A Guide to the Debate*, 3rd Edition (2020), chapter 3 (pp. 65-70, 73-86, 90-94, 98-112) (38 pages)

Thurs: Professional skeptics sowing doubt

- Oreskes and Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (2010), excerpts from chapter 6 (pp. 169-197, 212-215 (32 pages)

Students enrolled in PSCI 385 need to make an appointment this week to discuss progress on their papers

Climate Change

Tues: The carbon capture debate

- Optional: S. Fred Singer and Dennis Avery, *Unstoppable Global Warming: Every 1,500 Years* (2007)
- *Quiz on climate change material*

Thurs: The carbon capture debate

Summation

Tues: Some final thoughts on political storytelling

- Francesca Polletta, *It Was Like a Fever*, chapter 7, from beginning to page 179
- Mintz et al., *Beyond Rationality: Behavioral Political Science in the 21st Century* – chapter 8, pages 160-170, 173-176, 178-185

Thurs: Instead of meeting as a class this day, we will use this time for individual office appointments for students who need these consultations

- See the sign-up sheet next to my office door. Pick a 10-minute time slot
- See the assignment description and grading rubric in Canvas for your paper

Doing 6 presentations per meeting is not useful ... entirely too rushed.

Consider having only the 300-level students do presentations

Don't schedule more than 5 presentations per 75 minute session

Student Presentations

Tues: Student presentations (5 of them)

Thurs: Student presentations (5 of them)

Plan on presenting in 10-12 minutes. Practice your presentation ahead of time, and stick to the allotted time. Prepare a few slides to help organize things. Please share your slides with me before class so we can run them from our LMS. This will speed up moving from one presentation to the next.

Papers are due at 4pm on December _____. Provide me a paper copy, delivered to my office.

Final exam period – This class does not have a final exam. Instead, we will use part of this period for the last of the student presentations