

Teaching Political Science with Pop Culture

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Political science is a discipline devoted to understanding how people behave within systems of power. However, many undergraduates have only studied politics in the context of courses that ask them to memorize a series of dates and events. Even engaged students can struggle to shift their perspective to the kind of analysis political scientists are used to. I propose an alternative tool for teaching complex political science concepts: pop culture, specifically blockbuster films. I highlight two examples: teaching about ethical AI with *Captain America: Winter Soldier* and teaching about descriptive representation with *Barbie*. The benefits of teaching with pop culture go beyond advertising. They give students an inroad for talking about complex ideas in a seminar setting, which builds camaraderie, develops students' confidence, and prepares them for a successful college career of learning.

I. Introduction

The job of a political science professor is not only to teach her students about political events, systems, and concepts. It is also to teach them about the conventions of the discipline. In a first year seminar, the professor's task is even more complex: to teach students the conventions of a college class more generally. In this paper, I propose pop culture, specifically blockbuster movies, as a tool for teaching these skills both explicitly and approachably.

Educators have long recognized the benefits of teaching politics with popular culture. Assigning novels, films, and even music as “texts” for students to read and discuss gives students approachable inroads to understanding complex political events (Dreyer 2011; Wilson 2020) and generates lively classroom discussions (Stump 2013, 297). This helps students of all levels, but especially first year students who may be unfamiliar with seminar classes and wary to contribute to the conversation.

In this paper, I add to our understanding of how pop culture helps us effectively teach political science concepts. As evidence, I describe two lessons from a first year seminar I taught in Fall 2024 called *What Can Pop Culture Teach us about Politics?* The first lesson uses the film *Captain America: Winter Soldier* (2014) to explore questions about the ethical use of AI. The second elucidates the concept of descriptive representation using the film *Barbie* (2023).

II. Literature Review

As a reflection of the interests, needs, and desires of citizens, pop culture can be a useful explanatory variable in social science. For example, content analyses have quantified how often films negatively depict government officials (Carnes 2023) or law enforcement (Pautz 2016), revealing information about the national mood that goes beyond what traditional public opinion polling captures. In the examples I describe in the forthcoming sections, however, pop culture

does not serve as a variable for analysis but as a mirror of our real-world political processes. Pop culture is an analytical tool through which students can learn about the political world around them (Nexon and Neumann 2006; Stump 2013).

Within this context of pop culture as a mirror, my course analyzes pop culture in two ways. The first is to treat fictional worlds and characters with the same analytical lens a political scientist would use on real people. The second is to analyze the real-world political impact of works of popular culture. This shows that citizens' responses to a nonpolitical work in fact reveal their political commitments. Both of these lenses are present in both of my lessons described below, though the *Captain America* lesson is more clearly indicative of the first category and the *Barbie* lesson of the second.

One of the great powers of popular culture in the classroom is the opportunity for works of fiction to help students build empathy and understanding for events they themselves have not experienced (Wilson 2020). For example, a professor might use movies about the Cold War when teaching students too young to have lived through it (Gokcek and Howard 2013). Other examples include watching *Survivor* to learn about alliance behavior and strategic voting (Dreyer 2011) and analyzing civilian control of superheroes in the Marvel universe (Saideman 2023).

The value of this kind of analysis lies in the fact that people consume more fictional media than they do the news (Baum 2002). Modern day fandom means that people often have an intricate understanding of the fictional worlds they love. In turn, their understanding of fictional worlds can influence their expectations for our own politics. Analyzing the politics of popular fictional worlds can help us understand what kinds of expectations citizens may have for their own politicians.

The second approach to analyzing pop culture and politics considers the role that popular culture has in shaping public opinion. There are multiple examples of the interplay between pop culture and politics. For example, celebrities are often part of campaigns, either through joint appearances with candidates (Harvey 2018), mildly partisan get out the vote messages,¹ or their own online activism. The issues raised in popular media often show up in political discourse. This happened, to some amount of derision, in 1992 when Vice President Dan Quayle delivered a speech attacking fictional TV character Murphy Brown. Something similar happened in 2015, when a brutal rape depicted on the TV show *Game of Thrones* became part of a parallel political conversation taking place about women's rights (Trolie 2015). Finally, government officials can try to capitalize on popular media's influence, as when the military sponsors action movies as part of their recruitment efforts (Secker and Alford 2017).

It is fashionable these days to claim to not be interested in politics. There are plenty of reasons to disengage, including a lack of knowledge about the political system (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996) and a distaste for the acrimonious tone of partisan politics (Mutz 2006; Sydnor 2019). But even people who don't follow electoral politics have opinions about culture and morality that are relevant to political life. Conversations about pop culture can reveal these beliefs. Pop culture is an accessible on-ramp to tough political discussion, though the political discussions that emerge in nonpolitical spaces often fall short of deliberative ideals (Chen and McCabe 2024). Instead, the talk that is found on nonpolitical online forums is often best categorized as everyday talk (Graham 2016; Mansbridge 1999a; Wright 2012; Yan, Sivakumar, and Xenos 2018). Pop culture has an important role in the deliberative system, serving as an impetus for valuable political talk.

¹ As in this 2016 message, which is anti-Trump without naming him or either party:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U4ENWSYhu68>

In this paper, I demonstrate how pop culture can serve a similar role in the classroom. The transition to college calls on students to quickly adapt to seminar style classes. In a seminar, students are on the spot to read the assigned text and drive the analysis of it in class with their contributions to the discussion. It takes experience for students to learn how best to prepare for a seminar conversation. They have to learn the rhythm of a successful conversation, and what kind of preparation works best for them personally. If the text they are reading and preparing to discuss is a blockbuster movie, they can focus on understanding the mechanics of a seminar class, as opposed to the effort of decoding a complicated text.

Students of political science have many facts and concepts to learn. Political science courses are often primarily oriented around teaching these facts and assessing how well students have learned them. However, students of political science also have to learn conventions of the discipline. How does one read a journal article efficiently? What kinds of methods are available to political scientists, and what is the discipline's view of these various approaches? Learning these conventions of the discipline simultaneously with the content being conveyed by them can be overwhelming to students. When both the topic and the form of an article are unfamiliar, students may be so overwhelmed by challenges that they do not know what to focus on. Teaching with pop culture can help by making only one thing hard at a time.

Consider, for example, the method of inquiry used by empirical political scientists, which often forms the basis for a political science methods class. This topic can be dry and even intimidating to students. Timothy Wyman McCarty counters this by drawing an analogy between the structure of a social science research project and an episode of *Law and Order* (2021). I do something similar with Nicholas Carnes' chapter *Government as the Bad Guy?* (Carnes 2023). The structure of the chapter is one that is typical for an article-length work of empirical political

science. Readers of political science journals will recognize the structure immediately: introduction, literature review, results, discussion, conclusion. The methods, too, are familiar – a content analysis of Marvel films. Two things make this article especially useful as a teaching tool. The first is that it uses approachable language and a very upfront description of the methods. Readers gain an extremely thorough understanding of not only the results, but exactly how the author arrived at those conclusions.

The process of watching movies and coding the emotions is extremely approachable for students. Students can easily understand what was done, particularly if they have seen the films (although it can be understood by anyone). This article can be used as an example for students to understand the structure of an empirical political science article. Since the topic and conclusions are familiar, students can focus on understanding how the argument is constructed and conveyed. Once they have figured out this structure, they'll be better prepared to read similarly structured articles that describe less familiar content.

In the remainder of this paper, I will describe two units from a recent first year seminar I taught using these theories about teaching politics through pop culture. These two units serve as case studies of the potential, and potential downsides, of this approach.

III. Ethical AI and *Captain America: Winter Soldier*

The first lesson uses the film *Captain America: Winter Soldier* as a framework for discussing surveillance and the ethics of artificial intelligence algorithms. A major subplot of *Winter Soldier* is the deployment of Project Insight, an AI algorithm that will take in apparently-unlimited amounts of data about all people on the planet. The model is to be uploaded to giant armed helicarriers that can monitor people's behavior from the sky, and preemptively eliminate

threats “a few million at a time. Hewing to the conventions of the genre, it is up to our heroes to stop this evil scheme.

Armed flying vehicles larger than an aircraft carrier remain, for the moment, a science fiction exaggeration. Preventative assassination from the sky is not currently a risk in our world. The AI algorithm, however, is more grounded in reality. There are many situations in which we use algorithms to predict people’s future behavior based on their past, ranging from the relatively mundane (like recommendations from Spotify) to the deeply consequential, like evaluating the risk of recidivism (Angwin et al. 2016). The ethical stakes of data mining in order to recommend new music may be hard to spot. After all, these recommendations are likely something we want. And, if they are wrong, the gravest consequence is listening to something unpleasant for several minutes. When the stakes are literally life or death, the ethical issues can become more clear. The exaggerated stakes of a science fiction world can kickstart a conversation about the ethical uses of AI recommender algorithms (Stump 2013; Van Belle and Mash 2010). The stakes, for these characters, are literally life and death. Assessing the ethics in such an extreme environment can help students understand with more clarity the choices to be made in the lower-stakes situations they are likely to encounter.

In addition to providing a framework for discussing the ethics of using AI, this lesson gives students a chance to learn more about how the algorithms actually work. Students starting college in 2024 have been bombarded with thoughts about generative AI. Not only does the topic come up frequently in the news, but I have often seen this become the topic of speeches by university administrators at graduations and orientations. However, students’ ability to deploy tools such as ChatGPT often outpaces their understanding of the technical and ethical aspects of the models.

Users of a statistical model or piece of software do not necessarily need to know all the technical details of how it is implemented, of course. There is a reason why software developers design approachable, easy-to-use interfaces. However, it is important to understand enough about a model to know if it is appropriate to use it in a given scenario.

This lesson is designed to be approachable to students with little exposure to, and little interest in, computer science. Math phobia is a real concern for many students of political science.² In preparation for this class session, I assigned a reading that was a high-level overview of neural networks and training data (Kadiresan, Baweja, and Ogbanufe 2022). To underscore the ideas of the text, I show a clip from the film that gives an admirably accurate description of an AI algorithm's use of training data.

The scene takes place about an hour and ten minutes into the film. Jasper Sitwell, a bureaucrat in the evil Hydra organization, describes the model to a group of our heroes, including Captain America. "Zola's algorithm is a program for choosing Insight's targets... anybody who's a threat to Hydra now or in the future." Captain America then asks how the algorithm could know anything about the future. Sitwell replies, "The twenty-first century is a digital book. Zola taught Hydra how to read it. Your bank records, medical histories, voting patterns, emails, phone calls, your damn SAT scores. Zola's algorithm evaluates people's past, to predict their future" (Captain America: Winter Soldier 2014).

In the film, it is somewhat beside the point whether or not the audience understands this explanation. The important thing is that Captain America does, and he can proceed to drive the plot forward with the requisite urgency. By slowing down and parsing this high-energy description of alongside a much drier (but more complete) description of AI, students leave the

² This was revealed to me in a striking way when I showed my students the code used to compile the slides I show in class. More than one asked what classes teach that kind of coding, specifically so they could avoid taking them.

lesson with a solid understanding of what an AI algorithm does, even if they do not understand how, exactly, it does it. This arms them with the background knowledge they need to follow complex and consequential debates, such as whether to ban TikTok due to the national security concerns of the company's data collection policies.

In this lesson, students are asked to analyze the (un)ethical use of AI in the fictional world of *Captain America: Winter Soldier*. This world similar to our own, though, as a work of science fiction, the characters has virtually unlimited technology available to them, allowing students to consider real-world questions in a context of heightened stakes. In the next section, I consider a second lesson that shifts to a more meta style of analysis, asking students to consider the metaphorical parallels between events occurring in the realm of politics and popular culture.

IV. Descriptive Representation and *Barbie*

The second lesson pairs Jane Mansbridge's article on descriptive representation, *Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent "Yes"* (1999b), with the 2023 film *Barbie*. Representation in general, and descriptive representation in particular, are complicated concepts. I have often seen students unintentionally argue both sides of the issue. In one breath, they can complain about the demographics of Congressmembers and simultaneously avow the importance of voting for a candidate who fights for their interests, regardless of the candidate's social background. Many people have an innate sense that shared social backgrounds are important for representation, but cannot articulate why. Introductory students, in particular, can benefit from innovative experiential teaching techniques so to help them connect abstract theoretical concepts to tangible results (Hoffman 2009). In this case, I use a blockbuster film and the media's response to it to illuminate the ideas in a political theory text.

Mansbridge's piece is exceedingly well-written, but the ideas are complex, the text small, and the piece is long. Students are often understandably intimidated by it. Care should be taken to prepare students for this reading so they do not surrender prematurely. With thoughtful scaffolding, this piece can be made accessible to a wide range of readers. One of the things that makes this piece such a good pedagogical tool is that it incorporates stories as part of its empirical evidence. I encourage my students to stick with it, but I also tell them if they are feeling overwhelmed, to focus on the story Mansbridge tells about Senator Carol Moseley Braun's objection to legislation that would allow the United Daughters of the Confederacy to trademark an image containing the confederate flag (Mansbridge 1999b, 646). Even if some of the vocabulary of the piece is beyond the students' comprehension, this example of descriptive representation in action provides a valuable starting point for discussion. Pairing this piece with an analysis of the public discourse around *Barbie* further underscores the power of Mansbridge's storytelling.

Barbie, or, more specifically, the media discourse that happened concurrently with the release of the film, serves a similar role in my course. The film was a serious contender for Oscar wins in eight categories, and won for Best Original Song. Most coverage of the Oscars race that year, though, centered on (or at least mentioned) the fact that Greta Gerwig was not nominated for Best Director. The 2023 awards season came after years of conversations about the lack of descriptive representation among Oscar nominations and winners. As of the 2023 Oscars, only nine women had ever been nominated for Best Director, and three had won. At the 2015 Oscars, Ava Duvernay was similarly snubbed in this category, giving rise to a campaign for greater diversity called #OscarsSoWhite. Gerwig's snub was the latest entry in a long line of controversies related to diversity and inclusion at the Oscars.

Barbie was, famously, released in theaters on the same day as *Oppenheimer*. The two films, so divergent in style and subject matter, dominated the awards conversations, both for their quality and the delightful coincidence of their release schedule. What stood out to me, however, was the divergence in how people talked about the two films. *Oppenheimer*'s subject matter is inherently political, yet the coverage was overwhelmingly focused on the artistic ambitions and achievements of director Christopher Nolan. *Barbie*, on the other hand, was ostensibly a movie about a toy. The coverage, however, was dominated by conversations about Gerwig's status as a high profile director who was also a woman. Before the Oscars, the conversation tended to focus on why only a woman could have made a film of this quality. After the Oscar nominations were announced, the conversation inevitably centered around the idea of a snub.

The power of this film, for this lesson, is in constructing a metaphor between elections and the Oscars. Both the winners of elections and the winners of the Oscars are viewed in American society as a kind of meritocracy. The winners are the most deserving. The structural barriers within society that practically preordain the success of certain kinds of people at the expense of others are only belatedly and incompletely addressed by society. The systemic forces at work in winnowing down who becomes a candidate in a political race are hard to observe firsthand. Notably, in order to study them, Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox had to devise an entirely unique sampling structure (Lawless and Fox 2010). Accessible news coverage analyzing the dynamics of an Oscars race is much easier to find than similar pieces about political races. Once students understand what is going on in the Academy, they will be better able to understand American politics.

V. Conclusion

As a student of mine once said, the characters in a movie might be aliens – but the people who wrote the movie are not. Pop culture serves as a mirror to the society in which it was created (Nexon and Neumann 2006). While this analytical lens is common in fields like literature and film studies, is it relatively uncommon in political science. I believe we should increase its use, especially in introductory political science classes.

In this paper I described two of my lessons. The first teaches about the ethical use of AI in conjunction with the film *Captain America: Winter Soldier*. The second explores descriptive representation through the Oscars discourse around *Barbie*. These were just two weeks in a 15-week course on pop culture and politics. There are myriad political issues that can be explained through pop culture. Instructors should look to their own interests in political science and entertainment when choosing classroom topics. Though, care should be taken to consider students' frame of reference. For 2024's college first years, for example, *Captain America: Winter Soldier* was already a historical document, while the *Barbie* controversy was still front of mind for them. There is value in both, but it is important to consider whether you want to emphasize the past or the present in your lesson. And, it is important to remember that your students' past may not be the same as yours.

There is one final benefit of teaching with pop culture. The hyperpolarized rhetoric and fast-changing precedents that characterize American politics in 2025 can make teaching political science emotionally taxing. In addition to all the benefits this teaching tool conveys on students, it can also make teaching a bright spot in a professor's day.

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