

Political Theory 4932: Political Comedies

Florida Atlantic University, Fall 2024

Course Credits: 3.000

Prerequisites/Corequisites: None

WF 11:00AM – 12:20PM, General Classroom South Boca 102

Instructor: Dr. Rebecca LeMoine

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Office Location: Social Science 384C

Office Hours: Tues. 10AM – 2PM,
or by appt.

Course Description

Why is politics often the subject matter of comedies? How can serious issues such as war, slavery, and inequality possibly be funny? Political comedies have existed since ancient times, which suggests there is something natural about approaching politics through the lens of comedy. In this course, we will explore what makes politics an especially ripe topic for provoking laughter, why comedy is one of the preferred platforms for engaging with political issues, and what role political comedies play in democratic life. By examining a selection of political comedies in various forms (including literature, film, and television) from different time periods and cultures, this course will illuminate the ways in which comedy has served as a tool both for promoting and for challenging the status quo (and, indeed, the sacred) in politics. It will provoke us to consider, among other questions, whether we should take political comedies seriously, whether comedy can go “too far” in pushing the boundaries, whether this genre lends itself more readily to the expression of certain political ideologies, whether political comedies have any effect whatsoever on politics, and, if they do, whether those effects are primarily positive or negative.

It perhaps goes without saying that at times the material assigned in this course will be seen as offensive, in poor taste, not funny at all— we will consider that as well, how what we define as “comedy,” what we find worthy of laughter, reveals much about our character and our upbringing in a particular household, society, and even time period.

Course Delivery Mode

This class is designated as an “**In-Person**” course. Attendance on campus is required.

Objectives

- 1) Become familiar with major questions, themes, and approaches in the study of political comedies and their application to contemporary political life.
- 2) Learn to read and interpret works in the genre of political comedy.
- 3) Improve ability to construct persuasive arguments, both verbal and written.
- 4) Practice a more contemplative and self-aware form of citizenship, and consider its effects on political life and personal fulfillment.

Classroom Expectations

To be successful in this course (i.e., to meet the course objectives and to receive a passing grade), you should:

1. **Regularly attend class.**

Regular attendance is vital for success in this course. As you will discover, political theory is a discursive enterprise. Simply put, it is a *conversation* about foundational questions relating to political life, such as the nature of justice and what the best form of government is. Since there are no easy-to-find, indisputable answers to these kinds of questions, political theorists must engage each other in persuasive argument. That means that a large part of what you can “gain” from this course happens through classroom discussions. Therefore, attendance will be taken promptly at the start of every class meeting. Arriving late, leaving early, or repeatedly leaving and re-entering the room is disruptive both to me and your peers; if you cannot regularly be present for the duration of the class, then you should reconsider your enrollment. Please note that if you are being too disruptive, you may be asked to leave.

2. Complete all assigned readings prior to the start of class.

This class aims to bring to life the art of Socratic conversation. Though I may stop at points to clarify some fundamental concepts with the help of a few PowerPoint slides, a video clip, a demonstration, etc., most of our class time will be spent working through the material *together*. Throughout each session, I will ask questions to help you all uncover the meaning of the text for yourselves. This questioning can take many forms. I may ask you to turn to a specific passage, read it aloud, and then explain what you think the author means. I may ask a more open-ended question (e.g., “What does the author say about x?”) and expect you to provide the textual evidence. I may break you up into small groups to discuss whether the argument is persuasive.

To prepare for this experience, you should come to class having completed the assigned readings listed on the syllabus for that day. I highly recommend that you also show up with copious notes/thoughts/questions about that day’s readings. If no one has done the readings, or only a few students have done the readings, then the class will not go very far. Such is the nature of Socratic inquiry: it depends heavily on student engagement. The purpose of this is to help you become a better reader and thinker. You and your classmates will get out of the class what you put in. Aim to be a good classroom citizen.

3. Practice “close” reading.

The texts assigned in this class are incredibly rich and multi-layered. If you only read about the major plot points on Sparknotes or try to speedread through the assigned selection, you will be depriving yourself of the full reading experience. Instead, I would like you to work on cultivating the art of slow, “close” reading of the text. This means you should set aside ample time *before* class to read the material listed on the syllabus for that day, as you will likely find that you need to *re-read* parts of the text. You should also be an active reader. As you read, underline/highlight any phrases or passages that stand out to you, look up the definitions of unfamiliar words, look up literary allusions and references to people and places with which you’re unfamiliar, write down any questions or reactions you have in response to the text, etc.

4. Practice “sympathetic” reading.

While “critical thinking” is valuable, before we can think “critically” we need to ensure that we have understood the text properly and given it fair consideration. The practice of “sympathetic” reading, which entails approaching each text as though it were a friend, will

therefore be encouraged throughout the term. Each class session, I will push you to think “sympathetically” about the text by taking on the voice of the author in defense of the text. This means at times I will appear to adopt some unsavory positions. If you are uncomfortable with teachers who play “devil’s advocate,” or don’t like it when teachers sometimes withhold their own opinions in an effort to get you to think for yourself, then you probably will not enjoy this class.

5. Actively and respectfully participate in class discussions.

For a Socratic discussion to work, everyone must be present—not just physically, but psychologically. You cannot be present if you are checking email, texting, watching ESPN, etc. Accordingly, **electronic devices are strongly discouraged. If you choose to use an electronic device, be prepared for me to call on you.**

You should endeavor to contribute regularly to class discussions, whether by offering thoughtful reflections on the assigned readings, pointing us to relevant passages, or asking questions. The quantity of your contributions matters less to me than the quality (by which I mean genuine expressions of the desire to learn), but you should make a presence for yourself in this class. Please note that I expect you to treat your peers and me with respect. We may disagree, but we will do so cordially. That means being an attentive listener, raising your hand and waiting to be called on, and critiquing the argument rather than the person who made it.

6. Be pro-active with your education.

With many students and limited class time, not every question will be satisfactorily addressed for every student. If you find yourself confused about anything, first try re-reading the syllabus or assigned reading. If you are still lost, please don’t hesitate to reach out to me during office hours or via email.

Required Texts

The following books are available for purchase at the FAU Bookstore. **I highly recommend that you purchase hard copies of these exact editions.** Throughout each class session, you will be asked to turn to specific pages in the book. If you do not have the same edition or cannot easily turn to a given page, you will be lost and unable to contribute as effectively. Moreover, students often find it helpful to be able to write directly in the margins of the book. That said, the choice is yours. **If you choose to use an electronic device, be prepared for me to call on you.**

1. Aristophanes. *The Complete Plays*. Translated by Paul Roche. New American Library, 2005. ISBN: 9780451214096.
2. Carroll, Lewis. *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Classics Made Easy, 2020. ISBN: 9781734704150.
3. Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. Translated by Breon Mitchell. Schocken, 2012. ISBN: 9780805209990.
4. Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver’s Travels*. Oxford University Press, 2008. ISBN: 9780199536849.
5. Toole, John Kennedy. *A Confederacy of Dunces*. Grove Atlantic, 1994. ISBN: 9780802130204.

Instructor Availability

It is important to me to be accessible to students throughout the semester. Below are the ways you can contact me:

FAQ Discussion Board

You should ask general, course-related questions in the FAQ discussion board on Canvas, which will be active throughout the semester. If you have questions of a personal nature, you should email the instructor from your FAU email address or schedule an office hour appointment.

Email

Except for weekends and holidays, I will typically respond to email within 48 hours. **Please use your FAU email address rather than the Canvas inbox system.** Follow basic norms of professionalism (don't start an email with "hey"). If you have questions about what is appropriate, this is a helpful resource <http://www.wikihow.com/Email-a-Professor>

Office Hours

On Tuesdays from 10:00AM – 2:00PM, I will hold open office hours in my office, SO 384C. No appointment is necessary.

Course Requirements

Participation:	20%	
Quizzes:	20%	
Oral Report:	10%	
Comedy Connection:	5%	
Final paper:	45%	(Proposal: 5%; Outline: 5%; Peer Draft/Edit: 5%; Paper: 30%)

Participation (20%)

Your participation grade will be comprised of two, equally weighted components: attendance and participation in class discussions/activities.

- Attendance: Attendance will be taken promptly at the start of each class meeting. Everyone is permitted *one unexcused absence* and *two excused absences*. **Excused absences require make up work, which is due within a week of the absence.** For an absence to be excused, you must clear it with me in advance or, in cases of illness or emergency, as soon as possible. The following generally count as *unexcused absences*: slept through alarm; need to study/work; need to finish an assignment; leaving early/arriving back late from vacation; bad hangover.

If you think you will miss more than three classes due to University-approved activities, please see me at the start of the semester. Please note I will abide by *FAU's official attendance policy*: "Students are expected to attend all of their scheduled University classes and to satisfy all academic objectives as outlined by the instructor. The effect of absences upon grades is determined by the instructor, and the University reserves the right to deal at any time with individual cases of non-attendance. Students are responsible for arranging to make up work missed because of legitimate class absence, such as illness, family emergencies, military obligation, court-imposed legal obligations or participation in University-approved activities. Examples of University-approved reasons for absences include participating on an athletic

or scholastic team, musical and theatrical performances and debate activities. It is the student's responsibility to give the instructor notice prior to any anticipated absences and within a reasonable amount of time after an unanticipated absence, ordinarily by the next scheduled class meeting. Instructors must allow each student who is absent for a University-approved reason the opportunity to make up work missed without any reduction in the student's final course grade as a direct result of such absence."

- **Participation:** Attendance makes up only half of your overall participation grade; the other half is based on your participation in class discussions/activities. This means **you cannot earn above a 50% for your participation grade if you never speak in class, even if you have perfect attendance.** Students who struggle with classroom participation should therefore schedule a meeting with me during the first week of class to discuss strategies for increasing classroom participation. It is also possible to supplement one's participation grade with office hour visits, emails demonstrating engagement with the material, Canvas discussion board posts, etc. If, on the other hand, you do not struggle with public speaking, note that speaking frequently does not guarantee you a good participation grade. **I value quality of contributions over quantity.** You must reference details from the readings and point the class to specific passages to earn a good participation grade.

Quizzes (20%)

A short quiz will be administered promptly at the beginning of class at least once per week. These quizzes will test how closely you read the text(s) assigned for that day. Please note: **if you do not do the reading, you will not pass the quiz.** As you will discover, the quizzes will ask about details not found on Sparknotes, Wikipedia, etc. It is therefore essential to do the readings in full. During the quiz, you may use notes you have handwritten on a separate sheet of paper or in a notebook created for this class. To ensure your grade is not adversely affected by a particularly difficult quiz, **I will drop your lowest three quiz scores.** There are **no make-up quizzes.** If you walk into class after the quiz has already been collected, you will not be able to take it.

Oral Report (10%)

As you can imagine, there is a wide body of scholarly literature on politics and comedy. Since I presume that you would prefer to read/watch political comedies rather than scholarly writings about them, I have decided to work this material into the course in ways other than by directly assigning it to the entire class. One such way is by having each student, once during the semester, deliver a brief (5-6 minute) oral report on a scholarly book chapter/article on politics and comedy. This will involve finding and reading a relevant scholarly book chapter/article, completing a worksheet on that book/article, and preparing some brief remarks to share with the class. Your goal is to bring the insights you learned from reading this book/article to bear on that day's discussion, and to raise questions for the class to consider. You will sign up for an oral report date early in the semester. Further instructions will be posted on Canvas and discussed in class.

Comedy Connection (5%)

A class on political comedies could take many forms, as there exist tons of different examples across various times and cultures. Unfortunately, time constraints only allow us to cover so much and thus difficult choices had to be made about what to include on the syllabus. To help expand our repertoire of examples, and to allow you the opportunity to share what *you* find interesting, each student will be required once during the semester to post on the Canvas discussion board a link to a short video clip or visual that falls within the genre of "political comedy," along with a brief explanation of how it relates thematically to that day's readings. Your "connection" can be

from any medium: cartoon, meme, film, stand-up comedy act, television show (e.g., *The Daily Show*, *Last Week Tonight*, *Saturday Night Live*), music video, etc. Please note that I may incorporate some of these connections in class! Further instructions will be posted on Canvas and discussed in class.

Final Paper (45%)

The major course requirement is an 8-10 page (double-spaced) final paper. You have two options for this assignment: you can either write an 8-10 page research paper on a political comedy of your choice, or you can write an 8-10 page original political comedy (which could take the form of a short story or a script for a movie/TV show/play/stand-up comedy act, etc). Whichever path you choose, you will begin by writing a proposal, on which you will receive feedback from me. You will then write an outline, on which you will receive additional feedback. Finally, you will write a peer draft and participate in a peer editing exercise before submitting the final, revised version of your paper. Further instructions will be posted on Canvas and discussed in class.

Grading Policies

- *Quizzes*: There are no make up quizzes. If you miss a quiz for an unexcused absence, that quiz will count as one of your 3 dropped scores. If you miss a quiz for an excused absence, then the number of points for that quiz will be subtracted from the total number of quiz points when calculating your quiz grade. In other words, if you miss a quiz for an excused absence, then the quiz simply won't count for or against you.
- *Oral Report*: Unless you have a serious emergency for which I grant you an excused absence, you must give your report on the assigned day. If you miss class that day due to an unexcused absence, you will receive a 0 for the assignment.
- *Papers*: Papers are due to the relevant Canvas folder at the beginning of class on the date listed. Late papers will be penalized 5% if less than an hour late. Beyond an hour late (even by a single minute), papers will be penalized 10% per every 24-hour period late. This means that your paper will not be accepted for any credit if it is 10 or more days late. The best way to avoid a late penalty is to make sure to submit your work well ahead of the deadline. **Note that copy-editing and revision are integral parts of the writing process. Papers that show an unacceptably high level of error or carelessness (for instance, five or more errors in a paragraph) will be returned for you to proofread before resubmitting them. You will have five business days to edit the paper and to resubmit it with an automatic penalty of 10%. After five days, the grade on the paper will automatically drop to an F.**
- *Assignment Feedback Policy*: I will provide feedback on all submitted assignments within two weeks of the submission date. If an assignment requires a longer review period, I will communicate that to you. Participation will be assessed by the end of section II.
- *Graded Work*: I will not discuss grades on any assignments for 24 hours after they have been returned. If, after 24 hours reflection, you do not understand why you received a particular grade, send me a written memo via email and I will respond as soon as possible.
- *Extra Credit*: There will be an extra credit question on every quiz, allowing you to accumulate extra credit points throughout the semester. In addition, you can receive a 1% bump to your final course grade (which can mean the difference between an "A" and an "A-") by visiting me during office hours. To receive the extra credit, you must: (1) prepare a few questions or passages from the readings you want to discuss and (2) complete the visit **by the end of the final exam period (by 1:00PM on Dec. 11th)**. You can only receive the extra credit points once, though additional office hour visits can help to supplement your participation grade.

Grading Scale

A = 94-100	A- = 91-93.99	B+ = 87-90.99	B = 83-86.99
B- = 80-82.99	C+ = 77-79.99	C = 73-76.99	C- = 70-72.99
D+ = 67-69.99	D = 63-66.99	D- = 60-62.99	F = below 60

Please be aware that you can track grades for individual assignments on the Canvas 'gradebook' but do not rely on the Canvas reported grade. The percentages do not calculate correctly and many assignments cannot be inputted correctly into the interface. Throughout the semester if you have any concerns you can ask me for an update on your grade.

Honor Code Violations

Students at Florida Atlantic University are expected to maintain the highest ethical standards. Academic dishonesty is considered a serious breach of these ethical standards, because it interferes with the university mission to provide a high quality education in which no student enjoys an unfair advantage over any other. Academic dishonesty is also destructive of the university community, which is grounded in a system of mutual trust and places high value on personal integrity and individual responsibility. Harsh penalties are associated with academic dishonesty. For more information, see http://wise.fau.edu/regulations/chapter4/Reg_4.001_5-26-10_FINAL.pdf.

Please note that I take plagiarism very seriously. If I catch you plagiarizing on an assignment, you will receive an automatic "F" in the course and will be reported to the university, which will likely result in a permanent honor violation notation on your transcript. So that we are all on the same page, here is the university's definition of plagiarism (found in the document linked above):

- 1. The presentation of words from any other source or another person as one's own without proper quotation and citation.*
- 2. Putting someone else's ideas or facts into your own words (paraphrasing) without proper citation.*
- 3. Turning in someone else's work as one's own, including the buying and selling of term papers or assignments." (FAU Code of Academic Integrity, 2.B)*

Disabilities

In compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA), students who require reasonable accommodations due to a disability to properly execute coursework must register with Student Accessibility Services (SAS) and follow all SAS procedures. SAS has offices across three of FAU's campuses – Boca Raton, Davie and Jupiter – however disability services are available for students on all campuses. For more information, please visit the SAS website at www.fau.edu/sas/. If you require a special accommodation, please make an appointment at the beginning of the semester to discuss the accommodation with me.

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAP) Center

Life as a university student can be challenging physically, mentally and emotionally. Students who find stress negatively affecting their ability to achieve academic or personal goals may wish to consider utilizing FAU's Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) Center. CAPS provides

FAU students a range of services – individual counseling, support meetings, and psychiatric services, to name a few – offered to help improve and maintain emotional well-being. For more information, go to <http://www.fau.edu/counseling/>.

Policy on the Recording of Lectures

Students enrolled in this course may record video or audio of class lectures for their own personal educational use. A class lecture is defined as a formal or methodical oral presentation as part of a university course intended to present information or teach students about a particular subject. Recording class activities other than class lectures, including but not limited to student presentations (whether individually or as part of a group), class discussion (except when incidental to and incorporated within a class lecture), labs, clinical presentations such as patient history, academic exercises involving student participation, test or examination administrations, field trips, and private conversations between students in the class or between a student and the lecturer, is prohibited. Recordings may not be used as a substitute for class participation or class attendance and may not be published or shared without the written consent of the faculty member. Failure to adhere to these requirements may constitute a violation of the University’s Student Code of Conduct and/or the Code of Academic Integrity.

It should also be noted that one of the objectives of this course is to facilitate critical thinking and debate around topics, theories, and concepts where disagreement is not only anticipated, but encouraged. The ability to think critically, express your ideas clearly, and respond to the professor and other students civilly are the keystones of the academic experience. In this course, the professor will provide instruction in an objective manner and will remain open to a wide variety of viewpoints, so long as those viewpoints are evidence-based and presented in a respectful way. During class, the professor may take positions and make statements for the sole purpose of accomplishing an academic objective or enhancing the learning environment. Additionally, the adoption of class materials for this course does not imply an endorsement of the full content of those materials or the positions of the authors of those materials. Often the professor will provide materials as a point of departure for critical thinking and debate. Students should keep in mind that the ideas presented or discussed during class may not necessarily reflect the professor’s personal beliefs or opinions on the subject matter.

Course Schedule

(CV) = reading on Canvas

Section I: The Origins of Political Comedy

Date	Topic	Readings	Deadlines
21-Aug	Introduction		
23-Aug	Origins of Political Comedy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aristotle, <i>Poetics</i> excerpt and the “Tractatus Coislinianus” (CV) Sommerstein, “The Politics of Greek Comedy,” in <i>The Cambridge Companion to Greek Comedy</i> (CV) 	
28-Aug	An Ancient Comedy about Women and War	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aristophanes, <i>Lysistrata</i> 	

30-Aug	An Ancient Comedy about Women in Politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aristophanes, <i>Assemblywomen</i> 	
04-Sep	A Feminine Utopia?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch <i>Barbie</i> in class 	
06-Sep	A Feminine Utopia?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finish <i>Barbie</i> (Professor at APSA conference) 	
11-Sep	An Ancient Comedy about War	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aristophanes, <i>Acharnians</i> 	
13-Sep	An Ancient Comedy about Empire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aristophanes, <i>Birds</i> 	

Section II: Political Satire

Date	Topic	Readings	Deadlines
18-Sep	Voyage to Lilliput	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Swift, <i>Gulliver's Travels</i>, "Advertisement," "Letter from Capt. Gulliver," "Publisher to the Reader," Part I ch. 1-6 (pp. 5-59) 	
20-Sep	Voyage to Brobdingnag	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Swift, <i>Gulliver's Travels</i>, Part I ch. 7-8 and Part II ch. 1-5 (pp. 60-113) 	Paper Proposal
25-Sep	More Voyages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Swift, <i>Gulliver's Travels</i>, Part II ch. 6-8 and Part III ch. 1-4 (pp. 114-166) 	
27-Sep	More Voyages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Swift, <i>Gulliver's Travels</i>, Part III ch. 5-11 and Part IV ch. 1-3 (pp. 167-222) 	
02-Oct	Voyage to Land of Houyhnhnms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Swift, <i>Gulliver's Travels</i>, Part IV ch. 4-12 (pp. 223-277) 	
04-Oct	Contemporary Political Satire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch <i>Borat! Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan</i> in class 	

Section III: Comedy as a Weapon of the Marginalized

09-Oct	The American Dream?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Toole, <i>A Confederacy of Dunces</i>, Ch. 1-4 (pp. 1-103) 	
11-Oct	Politics as Sausage Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Toole, <i>A Confederacy of Dunces</i>, Ch. 5-8 (pp. 104-206) 	
16-Oct	Revolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Toole, <i>A Confederacy of Dunces</i>, Ch. 9-10 (pp. 207-260) 	
18-Oct	Abnormality & Invisibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Toole, <i>A Confederacy of Dunces</i>, Ch. 11-12 (pp. 261-335) 	
23-Oct	Poetic Justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Toole, <i>A Confederacy of Dunces</i>, Ch. 13-14 (pp. 336-394) 	

25-Oct	A Comedic Defense of Intellectuals?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch <i>Idiocracy</i> in class 	Outline
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Section IV: Politics as Nonsense

Date	Topic	Readings	Deadlines
30-Oct	Thrown into Absurdity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kafka, <i>The Trial</i>, “Arrest” through “Initial Inquiry” (pp. 3-53) 	
01-Nov	Absurdities of the Legal System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kafka, <i>The Trial</i>, “In the Empty Courtroom” through “The Uncle Leni” (pp. 54-110) 	
06-Nov	No Way Out	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kafka, <i>The Trial</i>, “Lawyer Manufacturer Painter” (pp. 111-165) 	
08-Nov	The Inhumanity of Politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kafka, <i>The Trial</i>, “Block” through “The End” (pp. 166-231); <i>optional</i>: read the fragments (pp. 235-266) 	
13-Nov	Down the Rabbit Hole	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carroll, <i>Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland</i>, ch. 1-7 (pp. 1-54) 	
15-Nov	A World with Strange Rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carroll, <i>Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland</i>, ch. 8-12 (pp. 55-96) 	
20-Nov	<i>The Wizard of Oz</i> : A Political Comedy?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch <i>The Wizard of Oz</i> in class 	Peer Draft
22-Nov	Nonsense Words, Nonsense Politics?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finish <i>The Wizard of Oz</i> • Dr. Seuss’s <i>The Sneetches</i>, <i>The Lorax</i>, <i>Yertle the Turtle</i>, and <i>Horton Hears a Who!</i> (CV) 	Peer Edit
11-Dec, 10:30AM-1:00PM	Concluding Remarks	Final Paper Due	Final Paper