

Session: Spring 2025, Mon/Wed 10:00am–11:50am
Section: 20702R
Location: ANN 406

Instructor: Michael J. Wissot, MBA, MIM
Office: ASC 333
Office Hours: appointment only (virtual / in-person)
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I. Course Description

This course examines the theory and practice of political campaign communication in the United States. A democracy has always depended on open and direct communication between its citizens and those who govern them. In the United States, this has been true since Colonial times. But with the advent of mass technologies, the range, depth, and importance of political communication practices have changed in revolutionary ways. Today, every White House administration, Congressional office, governor and issue advocacy group requires a sophisticated press office, dynamic field offices and robust advertising and digital media teams to build and sustain credible brands. The political arena itself has transformed into a financial hotbed for spin experts, pollsters, think tank leaders, investigative reporters, media handlers, advertising executives, and lobbyists — spanning the entire nation, perhaps even beyond its borders. Every participant within this arena contributes to the marketing of a candidate, public official, political party, ballot initiative, issue/cause or organization. They achieve these results through precise communication and marketing strategies that often prevail in the corporate realm. We will study these phenomena with due diligence and enthusiasm, and we will participate in these practices through challenging projects that promote practical application.

This is a “citizen’s course” that will challenge you to rethink your views of politics. Regardless of your political identification, this course will focus on the analytical aspects of effective campaign communication. You will never be penalized for respectfully advocating unique political perspectives nor for respectfully disagreeing with the readings or class discussions. Our primary goal in this class is to ask whether democracy is made better or worse, helped or hindered, by contemporary campaign communication practices and platforms. Students must be equipped to critically analyze and evaluate communication and marketing strategies that advance the goals of individuals and groups across the political spectrum. This course seeks to prepare students for such assessment, as well as season them to execute on their own.

The class will cover a variety of political campaign communication topics, allowing students to discover unique opportunities affecting political leaders and organizations of interest and to learn how to harness such knowledge. *All students will be evaluated using a Letter Grade scale. Lectures vary between PPT slides and discussions of reading material. Students must take notes (handwritten or typed). Audio/video recordings of lectures are not permitted.*

II. Student Learning Outcomes

This course will aim to achieve the following goals: **1)** To achieve excellence in constructing and executing political communication strategy; **2)** To acquire skills in managing platforms that affect campaign outcomes; **3)** To strengthen skills in developing concise and potent campaign messaging; **4)** To understand technique that can enhance a political brand and sell its value proposition to key stakeholders; **5)** To understand the strategic challenges facing political candidates, parties and special interest groups; **6)** To appreciate the unique dimensions and circumstances affecting presidential campaigns and elections.

We will demonstrate the highest attainable work ethic and discover within us that which is superior to circumstance. We will persevere this semester toward the most rewarding pursuit in higher education – the stimulation of thought, emotion, and soul. It is my duty to prepare you, as future leaders of the Free World, to integrate your communication skills into all fields of endeavor. As individuals and as a collective unit, we will dare to be great.

Required Preparation: N/A

Recommended Preparation: COMM 204, COMM 321, COMM 322

III. Course Attendance

Class will meet each Monday and Wednesday throughout the semester. You must complete ALL course requirements in order to earn a grade in this course. You are responsible for giving presentations on the dates when you are scheduled. You are required to participate in debates on the dates when you are scheduled. Since your participation in this course – both as a speaker and listener – is vital, any absences from class will affect your final grade. You are, therefore, required to notify me BEFORE missing class and provide corresponding documentation AFTERWARD. In the event that both of these criteria are satisfied, you will receive “make up” assignments/projects to suffice for time missed from class. Please note that I will record an unexcused absence if you miss any considerable portion of the class period (arriving late, leaving early) without my prior authorization.

IV. Description and Assessment of Assignments

Jeffersonian-Madisonian Exchange	<p>With a partner, you will debate, via weekly e-mail correspondence, various political campaign topics – affecting presidential, gubernatorial, congressional or local elections – that you and your peer deem important.</p>
Political Advertising Project	<p>As a group, you will choose a political candidate, ballot initiative, political party or special interest group that has some stake in the 2022 midterm election cycle (local, state, national), develop a 60-second video ad spot (narration and B-roll footage) for a preferred social media platform, and then submit a 2-3 page written proposal to key decision-makers (of the targeted political brand) on a key challenge they’re facing, what they need to overcome that challenge and why this ad spot helps moving things in the right direction. You will direct this proposal to top decision-makers, depending on where it stands on the product lifecycle and its relevance to the voter segments that you wish to target. You will explain any relevant themes and messages, included in the ad spot, that will advance any specific outcomes/goals.</p>
Focus Group Project	<p>As a group, you will conduct qualitative research, via a Focus Group, on a particular 2022 election involving candidates or a ballot initiative. You will develop a Screener to determine the participants, a recruiting list, a Re-Screener to validate the correct participations, a Moderator’s Guide and an Analysis of Key Findings & Strategic Recommendations.</p>
Stump Speech	<p>You will deliver a 5-8 minute Stump Speech to advocate in support or opposition of a political candidate, ballot initiative, political party or special interest group that has some stake in the 2022 midterm election cycle (local, state, national). You will focus on how that individual/entity will better or worsen the interests of the affected constituency. You must use Monroe’s Motivated Sequence design (template on Blackboard). In addition to having the class listen to your stump speech, you will invite at least two USC students (one who you expect will agree and one you expect will disagree with your position) to listen to you rehearse your speech (virtually or in-person).</p>
Debate Analyses	<p>As a group, you will write a report on the debate strategies, tactics and outcomes of one Presidential Debate or Vice Presidential Debate (assigned) to demonstrate your analytical prowess. As individuals, you will all participate in an in-class discussion of each debate, analyzing the strategies, tactics and outcomes of all three debates. You will focus heavily on analyzing the effective and ineffective executions of both candidates in your in-class analyses. The assigned group will serve as the primary analysts while the remaining class members will serve on the general panel.</p>
Strategic Plan & SWOT Analysis	<p>You will write a report to the chief decision-makers of a political candidate, political party or special interest group, formally endorsing a plan to advance concrete political action on behalf of that individual/entity that will culminate via a future election. The purpose of this assignment is to demonstrate your understanding of the individual/entity itself, the value proposition to the targeted voters, and the impact of this victory on relevant stakeholders. You will write a 2-page executive summary, as well as a 4-8 page SWOT Analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) on the individual/entity’s behalf – including how the individual/entity is accurately perceived by targeted voters, what will make this individual/entity uniquely viable in the upcoming election cycle, which advertising mediums will be most effective, which branding challenges are most critical, which messages will resonate most, where voter interests/preferences are heading, and how the individual/entity will fare across the competitive landscape in meeting those interests/preferences.</p>

V. Grading

a. Breakdown of Grade

Assignment	Points	% of Grade
Participation / Attendance	50	10.00%
Jeffersonian-Madisonian Exchange	50	10.00%
Focus Group Project	100	20.00%
Political Advertising Project	50	10.00%
Stump Speech	100	20.00%
Debate Analyses (40 x 1, 5 x 2)	50	10.00%
Final Strategic Plan & Analysis	100	20.00%
TOTAL	500	100%

b. Grading Scale

95% to 100%: A	80% to 83%: B-	67% to 69%: D+
90% to 94%: A-	77% to 79%: C+	64% to 66%: D
87% to 89%: B+	74% to 76%: C	60% to 63%: D-
84% to 86%: B	70% to 73%: C-	0% to 59%: F

c. Grading Standards

A Level Grades	Demonstrates superior work performance and organizational skills, as well as mastery of subject matter and/or project requirements, including, but not limited to exceeding expectations in written/verbal communication, research methodologies, knowledge of material and practical application.
B Level Grades	Demonstrates commendable work performance and organizational skills, as well as a clear understanding of subject matter and/or project requirements, including, but not limited to reasonably meeting expectations in written/verbal communication, research methodologies, knowledge of material and practical application.
C Level Grades	Demonstrates basic level of work performance and organizational skills, as well as a basic understanding of subject matter and/or project requirements, including, but not limited to marginally meeting expectations in written/verbal communication, research methodologies, knowledge of material and practical application.
D Level Grades or Below	Demonstrates insufficient work performance and organizational skills, as well as an insufficient understanding of subject matter and/or project requirements; including a deficiency in fulfilling expectations in written/verbal communication, research methodologies, knowledge of material and practical application.

d. Grading Timeline

I make myself available to review any work, except exams and term papers, if student sends me a complete rough draft at least one week prior to the due date (or delivery date). Most projects are graded within one to two weeks of the assignment being completed by all students (note: presentations are not always delivered on the same date). I offer extensive feedback on my evaluation forms for presentations.

VI. Assignment Rubrics

Assignment rubrics are discussed individually during class.

VII. Assignment Submission Policy

All assignments are posted on Blackboard with detailed instructions and due dates. Students are expected to complete all assignments on time. Late work, if accepted, may be penalized. Typically, late submissions will result in 10% grade deduction per day late. Lacking prior discussion and agreement with me of any late assignment may result in the student receiving a grade of F for that late assignment. **Assignments must be submitted via e-mail with Word, PPT or PDF attachments** (not Google Drive, not Blackboard, not MAM).

VIII. Required Readings and Supplementary Materials

Denton, Robert (2019). *Political Campaign Communication: Principles and Practices, Ninth Edition*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Supplementary Materials (to be distributed):

Barone, Michael (1998). "It's a Wet, Wet, Wet World." *National Journal*, Dec 4, 1998, pp. 2836-2841.

Luntz, Frank (2007). *Words That Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear*. New York, NY: Hyperion.

Morris, Dick (1999). *The New Prince*. Los Angeles, CA: Renaissance Books.

Marietta, Morgan (2009). "The Absolutist Advantage: Sacred Rhetoric in Contemporary Presidential Debate." *Political Communication*, 26: 4, pp.388-411.

Shogan, Colleen J. (Dec 2009). "The Contemporary Presidency: The Political Utility of Empathy in Presidential Leadership." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 4, pp.859-877.

Todd, Chuck (2008). "The Power of Candidate Branding." *NBC News*, Jan 7, 2008.
<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/22541240>

West, Darrell (2009). *Air Wars: TV Advertising in Election Campaigns, 1952-2008*. Washington, DC: CQ Press.

Additional materials are available via e-mail and/or the university's Blackboard course site

IX. Laptop Policy

Students may not use laptops, tablets or phones to take notes during class. You are encouraged to take written notes as you see fit. Students requiring a waiver from this rule must discuss with professor and formally submit a request with supporting documentation to justify an exemption. However, there may be some in-class activities where students will be permitted to conduct research and/or work on shared documents with each other.

X. Add/Drop Dates

Spring Semester 2025 (15 weeks: 1/13/25 – 5/2/25)

Friday, January 31:	Last day to register and add classes
Friday, January 31:	Last day to drop a class without a mark of "W" and receive a refund
Friday, February 28:	Last day to drop a course without a mark of "W" on the transcript
Friday, February 28:	Last day to change pass/no pass to letter grade
Friday, April 11:	Last day to drop a class

XI. Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

Schedule is subject to change, based on class progress, news events, activities, guest speaker availability, etc.

	Daily Topics/Activities Covered in Class	Assigned Readings (Denton 9th ed)	Assign Dates / Due Dates
Week 1 January 13	Overview of Course		
January 15	Campaign Communication: Understanding the Players & the Game	Chapter 1	
Week 2 January 22	Functions of Political Campaigns	Chapters 2	Assign JM Exchange Partners
Week 3 January 27	Styles & Strategies of Political Campaigns	Chapter 3	
January 29	Comparison of 2020 & 2024 Presidential Campaigns	Chapter 14 “Wet World” (Barone)	
Week 4 February 3	Public Speaking in Campaigns	Chapter 7	Assign Stump Speech
February 5	Communication/Messaging Principles		
Week 5 February 10	Guest Speaker: John McConnell		Assign Focus Group Project
February 12	Polling, Focus Groups, Research	Luntz Readings	
Week 6 February 19	Guest Speaker: Laura Gross, Former White House Aide (Advance Team)		
Week 7 February 24	Political Debates Sacred Rhetoric	Chapter 9 Marietta article	Assign Debate Teams
February 26	Debate Workshop: Hugging Opponents & Dominating the Dialogue	Morris Readings	
Week 8 March 3	Political Advertising	Chapters 5 & 11	Assign Ad Project
March 5	Share & Discuss Political Ad Spots	Chapter 12	

Week 9 March 10	Branding of Candidates & Parties Interpersonal Communication	Todd, C. article Chapter 10	
March 12	The Media's Role in Campaigns: From Information to "Fake News"	Chapter 13	
March 17 & 19	NO CLASS: SPRING BREAK		
Week 10 March 24	Guest Speaker: TBD		Ad Project DUE
March 26	Deliver Stump Speech		Speeches DUE
Week 11 March 31	Guest Speaker: Sean Noble (Super PACs)		
April 2	POTUS-1 Debate Analysis (DT/JB)		Debate Report DUE
Week 12 April 7	POTUS-2 Debate Analysis (DT/KH)		Debate Report DUE
April 9	VPOTUS-3 Debate Analysis (JV/TW)		Debate Report DUE
Week 13 April 14	Social Media in Political Campaigns Journalism in Political Campaigns		
April 16	Media Training: Workshop		
Week 14 April 21	Guest Speaker: Mack McLarty, Former White House Chief of Staff		Focus Group Project DUE
April 23	Election Day Returns/Reactions/Spin		
Week 15 April 28	Guest Speaker: Mark Goffman (West Wing) Conducting a SWOT Analysis		JM Exchange DUE
April 30	Guest Speaker: Dr. Frank Luntz		
Exam Week May 12	Final Report		Final Report DUE 5/12/25 at 4:59PM

XII. Additional Class Policies and Procedures

a. Technology

Using any laptops, tablets, phones or other mobile devices to access the Internet and/or e-mail during class time to partake in non-class-related activity is not permitted. **Any violation of this policy may result in the loss of all participation points for the entire semester, as well as other measures under university policy.** However, there may be some in-class activities where students will be permitted to conduct research and/or work on shared documents with each other.

b. Late Submissions

Late submissions on assignments will result in a 10% grade deduction for every day late.

c. Student Conduct

Class behavior will be predicated on an environment of mutual respect. Any level of disruptive or threatening student behavior is unacceptable. We are here to learn from each other in a non-threatening environment. You are encouraged to formulate and share opinions with due discretion, as well as be comfortable in practicing communication techniques and debating ideas in a safe environment. However, any behavior that is deemed disrespectful by the instructor will affect your participation points.

d. Lecture Slides & Notes

Lecture slides are not posted, so students are encouraged to attend all classes and take thorough notes. Students may request a review of prior material, which often occurs periodically throughout the semester.

XIII. Communication

Please e-mail, text or call me with any questions or concerns about anything related to the class and/or career planning, especially if you are unable to meet during my office hours. I typically respond fastest via e-mail (within 24-48 hours), and I'm interested in helping you with anything on your mind.

XIV. Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Since creating, analytical, and critical thinking skills are part of the learning outcomes of this course, all assignments should be prepared by the student, working individually on individual assignments or working with assigned peers on group assignments. Students may not have another person or entity, including AI-generated tools or platforms (e.g. Chat GPT), complete any substantive portion of any assignment. Developing strong competencies in these areas will prepare you for a competitive workplace as you look to set yourself apart with your own ingenuity and analytical thinking. Therefore, using AI-generated tools or platforms on any graded assignments is prohibited in this course. Any use of AI-generated tools or platforms on any graded assignments will be identified as plagiarism and reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

XV. Course Content Distribution and Synchronous Session Recordings Policies

USC has policies that prohibit recording and distribution of any synchronous and asynchronous course content outside of the learning environment.

Recording a university class without the express permission of the instructor and announcement to the class, or unless conducted pursuant to an Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) accommodation, is prohibited. Recording can inhibit free discussion in the future, and thus infringe on the academic freedom of other students as well as the instructor. ([Living our Unifying Values: The USC Student Handbook](#), page 13).

Distribution or use of notes, recordings, exams, or other intellectual property, based on university classes or lectures without the express permission of the instructor for purposes other than individual or group study. This includes but is not limited to providing materials for distribution by services publishing course materials. This restriction on unauthorized use also applies to all information, which had been distributed to students or in any way had been displayed for use in relation to the class, whether obtained in class, via email, on the internet, or via any other media. Distributing course material without the instructor's permission will be presumed to be an intentional act to facilitate or enable academic dishonesty and is strictly prohibited. ([Living our Unifying Values: The USC Student Handbook](#), page 13).

XVI. Academic Conduct and Support Systems

a. Academic Integrity & Conduct

The Annenberg School for Communication is committed to upholding the University's academic integrity code as detailed in the *SCampus* guide. It is the policy of the School of Communication to report all violations of the code. Any serious violation or pattern of violations of the academic integrity code will result in the student's expulsion from the Communication major or minor. If you have any doubts about what is and is not an academic integrity violation, please check with me immediately. The University presumes that you are familiar with its standards and policies; should you be found to have committed a violation, ignorance of these standards and policies will not be accepted as an excuse.

Plagiarism – presenting someone else's ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Part B, Section 11, "Behavior Violating University Standards" policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct.

b. Students and Disability Accommodations

USC welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. [The Office of Student Accessibility Services](#) (OSAS) is responsible for the determination of appropriate accommodations for students who encounter disability-related barriers. Once a student has completed the OSAS process (registration, initial appointment, and submitted documentation) and accommodations are determined to be reasonable and appropriate, a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) will be available to generate for each course. The LOA must be given to each course instructor by the student and followed up with a discussion. This should be done as early in the semester as possible as accommodations are not retroactive. More information can be found at osas.usc.edu. You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at osasfrontdesk@usc.edu.

c. Student Financial Aid and Satisfactory Academic Progress

To be eligible for certain kinds of financial aid, students are required to maintain Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) toward their degree objectives. Visit the [Financial Aid Office webpage](#) for [undergraduate](#)- and [graduate-level](#) SAP eligibility requirements and the appeals process.

d. Support Systems:

[Annenberg Student Success Fund](#)

The Annenberg Student Success Fund is a donor-funded financial aid account available to USC Annenberg undergraduate and graduate students for non-tuition expenses related to extra- and co-curricular programs and opportunities.

[Annenberg Student Emergency Aid Fund](#)

Awards are distributed to students experiencing unforeseen circumstances and emergencies impacting their ability to pay tuition or cover everyday living expenses. These awards are not intended to cover full-tuition expenses, but rather serve as bridge funding to guarantee students' continued enrollment at USC until other resources, such as scholarships or loans, become available. Students are encouraged to provide as much information in their application, as well as contact their academic advisor directly with questions about additional resources available to them.

[Counseling and Mental Health](#) - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

[988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#) - 988 for both calls and text messages – 24/7 on call

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline) provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the United States. The Lifeline consists of a national network of over 200 local crisis centers, combining custom local care and resources with national standards and best practices. The new, shorter phone number makes it easier for people to remember and access mental health crisis services (though the previous 1 (800) 273-8255 number will continue to function indefinitely) and represents a continued commitment to those in crisis.

[Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services \(RSVP\)](#) - (213) 740-9355(WELL) – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender- and power-based harm (including sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and stalking).

[Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title IX \(EEO-TIX\)](#) - (213) 740-5086

Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants.

[Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment](#) - (213) 740-2500

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

[The Office of Student Accessibility Services \(OSAS\)](#) - (213) 740-0776

OSAS ensures equal access for students with disabilities through providing academic accommodations and auxiliary aids in accordance with federal laws and university policy.

[USC Campus Support and Intervention](#) - (213) 740-0411

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

COMM 489 – Wissot
Syllabus (cont.)

[Diversity, Equity and Inclusion](#) - (213) 740-2101

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

[USC Emergency](#) - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

[USC Department of Public Safety](#) - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-1200 – 24/7 on call

Non-emergency assistance or information.

[Office of the Ombuds](#) - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)

A safe and confidential place to share your USC-related issues with a University Ombuds who will work with you to explore options or paths to manage your concern.

[Occupational Therapy Faculty Practice](#) - (323) 442-2850 or otfp@med.usc.edu

Confidential Lifestyle Redesign services for USC students to support health promoting habits and routines that enhance quality of life and academic performance.

XV. About Your Professor: [Michael Wissot](#)

Michael Wissot has transformed political and corporate communication platforms in every major sector, serving as the choice expert for many Fortune 500 executives and top elected officials seeking strategic counsel. His expertise includes message development, crisis communication, market research, labor disputes, press conferences, political debates, speechwriting, branding and advertising. He has provided counsel for Coca-Cola, Kroger, Safeway, Pfizer, Miller Brewing, FOX Sports, Comcast, Thomson Reuters, News Corporation, Ameriquest Mortgage, Paramount Pictures, Universal, 20th Century FOX, MPAA, Wynn Las Vegas, MGM Mirage, Starwood Hotels, University of Phoenix, Los Angeles Dodgers, Milwaukee Brewers, San Francisco Giants, Baltimore Orioles, Arizona Diamondbacks, and National Football League. He has managed communication initiatives for Senator John McCain, President George W. Bush, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, Governor Luis Fortuño, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and other world leaders. He has served as a political analyst on national television and radio. He co-authored a popular business book, "The 10 People Who Suck: A Positive Prescription for Improving Communication in the Workplace." He has taught at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism since 2010 after serving seven years as an adjunct professor at Pepperdine University. He has served as Chief Operating Officer at Van Dyk Health Care since 2016. He earned a bachelor of arts degree from James Madison University, a master of business administration degree from The University of Arizona, and a master of international management degree from Thunderbird Graduate School of Global Management.