I have a long-standing interest in both American history and oratory, so I was drawn to the idea of offering a course on “American Political Rhetoric.” In the age of the twenty-four hour news cycle and social media, students are exposed to a mega-dose of political rhetoric, most of which they accept or reject out of hand depending on the extent to which they agree with the sentiment expressed. I think it is extremely valuable for students to learn to identify rhetorical devices in ordinary situations, such as a Fox News broadcast. Students can benefit from understanding how our conceptions of any political issue hinge on evocative imagery, the strategic deployment of facts, and the subtle differences between, for example, “illegal” and “undocumented.”

I adapted the idea for “American Political Rhetoric” from a course called “Rhetoric of Political Belief” offered by B. Duncan Moench at the University of Texas at Austin (<http://www.utexas.edu/cola/depts/rhetoric/courses/>). Moench’s course explores the rhetorical construction of political ideologies. Moench asks students to write about various issues from four different perspective—liberal, conservative, socialist, and fascist. While I think that is a valuable exercise, I wanted students to write in a wider range of genres, rather than simply adopting four different ideological positions on a series of issues. A course I took at Candler, Ted Smith’s “Preaching Politics,” also contributed to my interest in this topic. We spent about one-third of the course analyzing examples of some of the tropes most frequently used by preachers. All of these tropes, such as the jeremiad, exodus narrative, or appeals to a “higher law,” exist in religious and secular variants. This kind of approach will help students recognize the underlying narratives in everything from tweets to the State of the Union.

The assignments for this course will help students think about audience and genre conventions, develop strong research skills, practice oral communication, and write informative, persuasive, and analytic documents. Students will first learn to analyze political rhetoric. Through class discussions and short writing assignments, students will gain the skills to interpret the arguments, imagery, and rhetorical devices used in political oratory. These skills will be transferable to other kinds of discourse, so students should leave the course feeling quite comfortable recognizing and analyzing almost any kind of persuasive discourse. Students will then gain experience writing policy memoranda, which will enable them to contrast persuasive texts with informative ones. Writing a policy memo will not only help students develop their research skills, but it will also help them make an argument using both quantitative and qualitative data. The policy memo assignment will also function as scaffolding for their policy address. Drawing on the proposal they made in their memos, students will write and deliver a persuasive speech advocating a policy of their choice. This will help students deploy some of the rhetorical strategies which they discovered in their Rhetorical Analysis, as well as transform the material from their Policy Memos for a different audience.

This course would be especially useful for social science majors, as it would give them opportunities to practice writing genres actually used by professionals in their fields. Such a course would fit best in a program with an emphasis on writing-across-the-curriculum.

**American Political Rhetoric**

**Course Description**

What do you think of when you hear “America”? Football? Apple pie? The wild frontier? We inhabit a nation constructed by rhetoric. Whether we consider ourselves a City on a Hill or a Global Policeman, whether we seek to offer a New Deal or create a Great Society, whether we declare a War on Drugs or a War on Terror, we do so through rhetoric. Certain phrases, from Lincoln’s “last full measure of devotion” to King’s “marvelous new militancy,” once uttered become part of our collective imagination.

In this course, we will explore the wide range of political rhetoric that has shaped our self-understanding as a nation. We will read speeches, policy proposals, and party platforms to uncover how our ideas about liberty, equality, and democracy are entangled in a complex web of earlier conversations about our national ideals. We will examine how recurring tropes, such as the jeremiad and the American Dream, morph in different contexts. Focusing our research on specific policy areas, we will join long-standing conversations about what it means to be American. We will write in a variety of analytic, informative, and persuasive genres, including data-oriented policy memos and speeches designed to promote specific reforms.

This is a writing and thinking intensive course: we will practice (re)writing a number of genres for different audiences and revising our work throughout the semester.

**Required Texts**

Our texts for the class will mainly consist of speeches and written documents by George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, Woodrow Wilson, Eugene V. Debs, William Jennings Bryan, Huey Long, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Eleanor Roosevelt, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Ronald Reagan, Jesse Jackson, Stokely Carmichael, Geraldine Ferraro, George W. Bush, Nancy Pelosi, and Barack Obama. We will also read selections from the Democratic and Republican Party platforms.

**Major Assignments**

**Rhetorical Analysis**

For this assignment you will analyze the structure, tone, and argument of one of the course texts. You will need to identify appeals to ethos, logos, and pathos, as well as discuss how the author uses various tropes from American political discourse, such as invocations of the American Dream, Manifest Destiny, or the “middle class,” to persuade his or her audience.

**Policy Memorandum**

You will choose a specific policy area, such as health care, immigration, gun control, energy policy, education, etc. to research. Using this information you will write a policy memorandum, which includes historical background, relevant data and statistics, and a proposal for new legislation. This piece should follow the conventions of a policy memo, rather than those of an academic essay.

**Policy Address**

Having performed some preliminary research into a policy area which interests you, you will write a speech advocating the policy you proposed in your memo. While this speech will draw on the data laid out in your memo, it must be persuasive, rather than simply informational. You will deliver your speech to the class.