I: Introduction:

Political communication is, to quote Graber, “the lifeblood or mother’s milk of politics because communication is the essential activity that links the various parts of society together and allows them to function as an integrated whole.” Images are as crucial to political communication as words. They can change the nature of a political campaign, perhaps the direction of a war or they may spark a revolution.

This proposal outlines the justification and project plan to integrate art and curate an exhibition in my POLS130 Introduction to Comparative Politics Course in Fall 2015. This introductory course is the perfect vehicle through which to study the ways in which art constructs our political world.

II: Pedagogical Rationale:

i) Why use art to understand comparative politics?

Comparative politics is an introductory course that considers many of the enduring questions of the discipline writ large. We consider the political and economic development of states and the relationship between statehood and modern nations. We consider the process of development in post-colonial societies, how they can transform from rural agrarian economies to industrialized economies. We also consider political regimes. What makes a country democratic? How does a state undertake regime change and move away from authoritarianism to democracy? Is it gradual or sudden? We study the communist revolutions in China and Russia and the social and protest movements of apartheid South Africa. In the more established democracies of the United Kingdom and Japan we consider questions of political representation and participation. Why and how do people participate in the political process? What are the effects of identity politics on political participation?

I believe I can thread together this wide survey of topics and geographic regions in the world through the lens of political communication. If you believe that politics is constructed through language, symbols and imagery; then it is natural to extend our analysis of power and institutions to the actual images or perhaps art that drives these narratives.

Art can be used as a weapon of the powerful, as we seen in the Wright Museum’s collection of political propaganda posters. Art can be used as a weapon of the weak, as we see with the recent flourish of political art around the Arab spring. As Daanish Furuqi recently noted,

“Art's role [...] is to imagine the emancipatory politics of our impossibilities. To imagine
is not to chronicle in minute detail. The artists of the Arab Spring are tasked with simply igniting a spark, of reinjecting the radical imagination into Arab society, through envisioning the utopian possibility of hope and a better life, undergirded by the basic dignity of the Arab people as non-negotiable and sacrosanct. Their aesthetic impulses must lead our revolutionary politics [. . .] but as signposts, not as overt political manifestos."

Reading the revolution art of the Arab Spring as a set of “signposts” rather than “overt political manifests” requires serious and intensive engagement with the art. It pushes us to treat the art as texts that need to be read and dissected. Art has long been analysed for the ways in which it reflects social, economic and political changes already occurring. But I am arguing, and will present to my student the thesis that art helps us make political meaning, and “[is] the fountainhead from which political discourse, beliefs about politics, and consequent actions ultimately spring.”

One of the central concerns of the course is to link political and economic development. I think this could be one particularly fruit area within which to develop the exhibit. Thinking back to the early years of the industrial revolution in the United Kingdom, the paintings of John Constable romanticized the idyll of rural life, bringing our eye back to the countryside at a time when the attention was shifting to the cities. I’m wondering whether engagement with the street art of the British artist Banksy could be an entre in to discussion of the politics of anti-capitalism in the post-2008 global financial crash world? Can these works of art be catalysts to support political action?

At a functional level art can act as an information processing tool: to help persuade, to simplify or to stir an emotive response. But I wonder it all art is political art? The Chinese artist Ai Wei Wei challenges our conception of political art versus the political artist. As blogger Ann Jones recently wrote, “Though political issues are brought to the fore by Ai’s work, it is his words that pose the most direct challenge to the powers that be in China. Perhaps then the difference here is between a political artist and an artist who is also political.”

III: Institutional Rationale

i) Proposed course

POL130 Comparative Politics is one of the core introductory courses in both the Political Science and International Relations majors. It is offered every semester by either myself or John Rapp. The course attracts both a number of majors and non-majors fulfilling their breadth requirements. The course is a ‘C’ designated course. The fall version attracts a significant number of incoming freshman students who are experiencing both Beloit College and the Political Science program for the first time. This will be a terrific opportunity for new freshman to experience one of our signature institutions on campus – the Wright Museum. It will give them a lab-based experience while simultaneously allowing them to immerse themselves in a truly liberal arts experience – connecting a social scientific discipline with the arts and humanities.
ii) **Wright Museum**

The Museum’s mission statement clearly indicates the ways in which the institution engages with the community and the college. The Wright “[. . . ]endeavors to promote a critical reading of art as it shapes our cultural and intellectual history.” Considering the ways in which art reflects and shapes our political world is central to this concern. The breadth and generality of this introductory course allows significant scope for engage with a broad range of questions that intersect with many portions of the museum’s collection. It also encourages a critical reading of the material through taking art as texts that construct our political world and political meaning.

iii) **Linking Intro to Comparative Politics to the Wright Museum’s Collection**

While I’m not familiar with the entire collection at the Wright museum, I very much look forward to working closely with the Wright museum faculty and staff in exploring the collections and looking for connections and synthesis with my course content. The beauty of using my introductory comparative politics course is that it covers so much geographical and historical ground (see Appendix), that it can easily be adapted to fit with existing collections in the Museum.

I chose to teach my introductory comparative course through six paired country case studies focusing on the twentieth century:

- Advanced industrial democracies: Japan and the United Kingdom
- Post-Communist States: China and Russia
- Post-Colonial Developing States: Nigeria and South Africa

The key themes we explore include, but are not limited to:

- What is democracy and how is it achieved?
- Why are some states democratic while others remain authoritarian in nature?
- What is the relationship between democracy and capitalism?
- What is the impact of increasing inequality on democracy?
- Why do some social movements succeed and others don’t?
- Political representation of women
- Revolution and protest

While some obvious points of connection could lie in the collections of political Soviet and Chinese propaganda posters. I’d be interested in examining any twentieth century art from the countries we are studying; or perhaps pieces from the United States that could act as points of comparison.

As a counter to the political propaganda posters I’m interested in exploring election campaign posters. The now iconic Shepard Fairey Obama poster for example. Or perhaps South African artwork that expresses the first democratic election. Or exploring freedom of speech in democratic societies through the Jacob Zuma ‘Spear of the Nation’ controversy. I realize some of these themes may fall outside of the Wright museum’s current holdings. I would be interested in either borrowing or
acquiring a small number of pieces - particularly those related to Africa – to develop and enrich the exhibition.

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ii Art and the Arab Spring” Al Jazeera Daanish Furuqi, 10 January, 2012 http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/01/20121612493122450.html


iv https://www.google.com/search?q=banksy+anti-capitalism&client=safari&rls=en&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=pONbU_7CF6r4ygQGl-n4D4Bw&ved=0CCUQsAQ&biw=1220&bih=671#facrc=_&imgdii=_&imgrefurl=LWKGlPMmyhWTxM%253A%3Bm1ZanzNmhsB53sM%3Bhttp%253A%252F%252Fpolitics-bansky-political-tshirt-street-art-t-shirt.jpg%3Bhttp%253A%252F%252F4.bp.blogspot.com%252F2013%252F10%252Fpolitically-charged-t-shirts-have-you.html%3B985%3B1280


vi http://mg.co.za/article/2012-05-17-anc-irate-over-spear-of-the-nation-artwork